Public Relations Practice in Crisis Situations: Communication and Management Strategies in Select Public Institutions in Rivers State

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Abstract
This study examined public relations practice in crisis situations with emphasis on communication and management strategies adopted by selected public institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria. Increasing organizational crises arising from industrial disputes, policy controversies, misinformation, security challenges, and public dissatisfaction have heightened the need for strategic crisis communication capable of protecting institutional reputation and maintaining stakeholder confidence. The study sought to determine the communication strategies employed by public relations practitioners during crises, assess the effectiveness of crisis communication in managing stakeholder relationships, identify the influence of timely communication on organizational reputation, and examine the challenges affecting crisis communication management in public institutions. A survey research design was adopted using a structured questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The population comprised public relations practitioners working in selected public institutions in NIPR membership nationwide numbering 31,651. A sample size of 384 respondents was determined using Cochran's formula and selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. The study was anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Excellence Theory of Public Relations. Findings revealed that effective crisis communication strategies significantly improve organizational reputation, strengthen stakeholder trust, reduce misinformation, and enhance institutional responsiveness during crises. The study further found that prompt dissemination of accurate information, proactive media engagement, and coordinated stakeholder communication contribute substantially to effective crisis management. However, inadequate communication infrastructure, bureaucratic delays, insufficient crisis preparedness, and limited professional training were identified as major constraints affecting crisis communication effectiveness. The study concludes that strategic public relations practice is indispensable for effective crisis management in public institutions. It recommends continuous crisis communication training for public relations practitioners, development of comprehensive crisis communication policies, increased investment in digital communication

technologies, and stronger collaboration between public institutions and relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: *Crisis Communication, Crisis Management, Public Relations Practice, Organizational Reputation, Stakeholder Communication.*

Introduction

Organisations today function within environments characterized by instability, accelerated information flows, and heightened stakeholder expectations. In such contexts, crises have become less of an anomaly and more of an inherent feature of organisational existence. Recent scholarship underscores that the increasing interconnectedness of global systems, combined with the pervasive influence of digital media, has amplified both the occurrence and visibility of crises, thereby elevating the strategic importance of communication in organisational survival and continuity (Upadhyay & Upadhyay, 2023).

A crisis is generally understood as a disruptive and often unpredictable occurrence that threatens organisational operations, legitimacy, and stakeholder confidence. However, contemporary perspectives extend this definition by emphasizing the communicative dimension of crises, wherein public interpretation and media narratives evolve simultaneously with the event itself. As noted by Coombs (2022), organisational responses are no longer evaluated solely on operational effectiveness but also on how meaning is constructed and conveyed to stakeholders under conditions of uncertainty. In a similar vein, Liu et al. (2022) argue that the rise of social-mediated communication has transformed crises into dynamic, real-time phenomena in which multiple actors contribute to shaping public discourse.

Within this evolving landscape, crisis communication has assumed a central role in public relations practice. It is no longer confined to reactive messaging but encompasses proactive planning, stakeholder engagement, and strategic framing of information. Empirical evidence suggests that key communication attributes particularly timeliness, transparency, and consistency play a decisive role in influencing stakeholder trust and organisational reputation during crisis situations (Lopes, 2024). Transparency, in particular, has emerged as a critical evaluative criterion through which stakeholders assess institutional credibility, especially in environments where public accountability is paramount.

The proliferation of digital platforms has further complicated crisis communication processes. While these platforms enable rapid dissemination of information, they also facilitate the spread of misinformation, amplify public scrutiny, and reduce organisational control over messaging. Liu et al. (2022) highlight that social media ecosystem function as both channels of communication and arenas of contestation, where official narratives may be challenged, reshaped, or undermined. This necessitates a more adaptive and dialogic approach to crisis communication, one that recognizes the participatory nature of contemporary information environments. Moreover, recent theoretical developments advocate for a broader conceptualization of crises as complex and evolving conditions rather than isolated incidents. Frandsen and Johansen (2024) describe modern crises as “shared” and often intractable, involving multiple stakeholders, competing interpretations, and extended durations. Such crises demand sustained communicative engagement and strategic coordination beyond immediate response efforts.

In the context of public sector institutions, the stakes associated with crisis communication are particularly high. These organisations operate under conditions of public accountability, political sensitivity, and diverse stakeholder expectations. Their responses to crises not only affect organisational reputation but also influence public trust, policy legitimacy, and social stability. Consequently, effective crisis communication within the public sector requires a careful balance between transparency, responsiveness, and institutional responsibility.

In Nigeria, public institutions frequently encounter crises arising from administrative inefficiencies, policy disputes, labour unrest, and security challenges. In states such as Rivers State, where political and economic activities attract significant public attention, these crises are often intensified by rapid information circulation and media scrutiny. Public relations practitioners within these institutions are therefore tasked with managing complex communication environments, mitigating reputational risks, and ensuring that accurate and timely information reaches relevant stakeholders.

Against this backdrop, there is a compelling need to examine how crisis communication is operationalized within public institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Public institutions in Rivers State continue to experience crises that attract intense public attention and media scrutiny. While many institutions possess public relations units, the effectiveness of their crisis communication strategies remains uncertain. Delayed information dissemination, inconsistent messaging, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and limited preparedness frequently undermine organisational responses to crises, resulting in reputational damage and declining public trust.

The consequences of poorly managed crisis communication extend beyond the immediate institution involved. When public institutions fail to communicate promptly and transparently during crises, information vacuums are often filled by speculation, rumour, and misinformation, particularly on social media, further eroding public confidence in governance structures generally. Despite the strategic role of public relations in crisis management, empirical evidence on the communication strategies adopted by practitioners in selected public institutions in Rivers State remains limited, and there is insufficient documented understanding of the specific challenges that constrain effective crisis communication within these institutions. This study therefore investigates public relations practice in crisis situations, with particular emphasis on the communication and management strategies adopted, the effectiveness of these strategies in managing stakeholder relationships and organisational reputation, and the challenges that limit their effectiveness in selected public institutions in Rivers State.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine public relations practice in crisis situations through communication and management strategies adopted in selected public institutions in Rivers State.

The specific objectives are to:

1. determine the crisis communication strategies employed by public relations practitioners in selected public institutions in Rivers State.
2. examine the influence of crisis communication on organizational reputation during crisis situations.
3. assess the effectiveness of stakeholder communication in managing organizational crises.
4. identify the challenges affecting effective crisis communication and management in selected public institutions.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What crisis communication strategies are employed by public relations practitioners in selected public institutions in Rivers State?
2. How does crisis communication influence organizational reputation during crises?
3. To what extent does stakeholder communication contribute to effective crisis management?

4. What challenges affect crisis communication and management in selected public institutions?

Literature Review

1. Public Relations Practice

Public relations have never been a static field. What began as a largely publicity-driven activity has, over time, taken on a more embedded role within organisational governance. The Public Relations Society of America frames it as a strategic communication process designed to build mutually beneficial relationships. While that definition is widely cited, its implications are often understated. It signals a shift away from message control toward relationship management something that requires ongoing negotiation between organisational priorities and public expectations. In practical terms, this means that public relations practitioners are no longer confined to drafting press releases or managing media coverage. Increasingly, they are involved earlier in decision-making processes, particularly where reputational risk is concerned. Macnamara (2021) notes that practitioners now function as interpreters of public sentiment as much as they are communicators of institutional positions. This interpretive role is especially visible in public sector settings, where actions are not just evaluated for efficiency but also for fairness, transparency, and political sensitivity.

There is also a technological layer that cannot be ignored. Communication today rarely flows in a single direction, and public institutions in particular operate in environments where silence can be interpreted as indifference or concealment. Wirtz and Zimbres (2022) point out that digital platforms have altered both the pace and expectations of communication. Stakeholders do not simply receive information they react to it, reshape it, and redistribute it. For practitioners, this introduces a constant balancing act between responsiveness and control.

2. Crisis Communication

Crisis communication is often described in procedural terms what to say, when to say it, and through which channels. That framing, while useful, does not fully capture the pressure under which such communication occurs. In reality, crisis communication unfolds in conditions where information is incomplete, timelines are compressed, and scrutiny is unusually intense. Heath and O'Hair (2020) suggest that organisations that treat communication as part of their preparedness strategy not just their response tend to navigate these pressures more effectively. What distinguishes effective crisis communication is not simply speed, but judgment. There is a difference between responding quickly and responding well. Research by Kim and Kreps (2020) illustrates that stakeholders are attentive not only to the content of messages but also to their tone. Messages that acknowledge uncertainty or express concern tend to resonate more than those that rely solely on technical explanations. In other words, credibility is shaped as much by how organisations communicate as by what they communicate.

The digital environment adds another layer of complexity. Information circulates rapidly, often ahead of verification, and organisations rarely control the first version of events that reaches the public. This creates a situation where crisis communication becomes partly reactive to external narratives. The challenge, then, is not just issuing statements but actively engaging with a shifting information landscape correcting inaccuracies, reinforcing key messages, and maintaining visibility without appearing defensive.

3. Crisis Management

If crisis communication deals with messaging, crisis management concerns the broader system within which those messages are produced and acted upon. It involves planning, coordination, and decision-making across different levels of an organisation. The familiar division into pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases remains a useful starting point, but it can give the

impression that crises unfold in neat sequences. In practice, they rarely do, Boin et al. (2021) argue that crisis management is better understood as an ongoing process of interpretation and adjustment. Organisations are required to make decisions with incomplete information, often revising those decisions as new details emerge. This places a premium on flexibility rather than strict adherence to predefined plans. Preparedness still matters, but so does the ability to depart from those plans when circumstances demand it.

Communication cuts across all of this. It is through communication that decisions are explained, responsibilities are clarified, and reassurance is offered. Public relations practitioners, therefore, are not operating on the margins of crisis management they are part of its core. Their role involves translating organisational actions into language that stakeholders can understand and accept, which is not always straightforward, especially when those actions are themselves evolving.

4. Organisational Reputation Management

Reputation is often discussed as though it were something an organisation owns, but it is perhaps more accurate to see it as something that is continuously formed in the minds of others. It reflects accumulated judgments about competence, integrity, and reliability. Fombrun and van Riel (2020) describe it as a form of intangible capital, but unlike financial assets, it cannot be directly controlled only influenced.

Crises tend to accelerate reputational change. Events that might otherwise have limited visibility suddenly attract sustained attention, and stakeholder evaluations become more immediate and, at times, more critical. Aula and Mantere (2020) suggest that communication plays a decisive role here, not because it can erase negative events, but because it shapes how those events are interpreted. Silence, inconsistency, or defensiveness can deepen suspicion, whereas openness even when acknowledging shortcomings can moderate negative reactions.

For public institutions, the stakes are arguably higher. Reputation is closely tied to legitimacy, and legitimacy affects whether citizens trust decisions, comply with policies, or support institutional actions. Managing reputation in crisis contexts, therefore, is not just about image it is about maintaining the conditions under which governance can function effectively.

5. Stakeholder Communication

Organisations do not operate in isolation, and the idea of "the public" is rarely as uniform as it sounds. Stakeholders differ in what they expect, what they need to know, and how they interpret information. Freeman et al. (2020) emphasise that effective management requires recognising these differences rather than smoothing them over. Communication, in this sense, becomes less about broadcasting messages and more about navigating relationships. During crises, these differences become more pronounced. Employees may look for clarity about internal decisions, while the broader public may be more concerned with safety, accountability, or service continuity. Men and Bowen (2017) note that organisations that make the effort to engage stakeholders rather than simply inform them tend to retain higher levels of trust. Engagement, however, requires more than frequency; it requires relevance and responsiveness.

Digital communication has made this both easier and more demanding. On one hand, organisations have direct access to stakeholders; on the other, stakeholders have equal opportunity to respond, question, or challenge. This creates a more interactive but also less predictable communication environment. For public institutions, managing this interaction is not optional. It is a necessary part of maintaining credibility, particularly in situations where uncertainty is already high.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Excellence Theory of Public Relations.

1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory is closely associated with the work of W. Timothy Coombs, whose research centres on how organisations manage reputational risk during crises. The basic premise is straightforward, but its implications are not: people respond to crises based on how they interpret responsibility. In other words, the same event can produce very different reactions depending on whether the organisation is seen as a victim, partly responsible, or fully at fault. SCCT groups crises into broad categories victim, accidental, and preventable not as rigid labels but as a way of anticipating stakeholder expectations. Where responsibility is low, stakeholders may be satisfied with simple explanations. Where responsibility is high, those same stakeholders are more likely to expect acknowledgement, apology, and visible corrective action. What matters, then, is not only the crisis itself but the perceived relationship between the organisation and the event.

One of the more useful aspects of the theory is that it links these perceptions to specific response strategies. However, in practice, organisations rarely have the luxury of neatly classifying a crisis before responding. Information is often incomplete, and early narratives can shift quickly. This creates a tension between the need for immediate communication and the need for accurate assessment. The risk, as Coombs points out, is that a poorly matched response whether too defensive or overly apologetic ncan deepen reputational damage rather than contain it. In examining public institutions in Rivers State, SCCT offers a way of examining whether public relations practitioners in Rivers State are calibrating their responses appropriately. It allows for a closer look at whether communication strategies reflect an understanding of stakeholder perceptions, or whether they are applied in a more routine, less differentiated manner.

2. Excellence Theory of Public Relations

Where SCCT is situational, the Excellence Theory developed through the work of James E. Grunig and colleagues takes a more structural view Grunig et al. (2019). It is less concerned with individual crises and more with how communication functions within organisations over time. At its core is the argument that public relations is most effective when it is not treated as an auxiliary function, but as part of strategic management. A key idea here is the notion of two-way communication. Not simply in the sense of sending and receiving messages, but in the stronger sense of adjustment. Two-way symmetrical communication assumes that organisations are willing to modify their positions in response to stakeholder concerns. This is a demanding standard. It requires not just openness, but a degree of institutional flexibility that is not always easy to achieve, particularly in public sector environments where decisions may be constrained by policy or bureaucracy.

What makes the Excellence Theory particularly relevant is that it highlights the difference between communication that is technically efficient and communication that is socially effective. An organisation may disseminate information quickly and accurately, yet still fail to build trust if stakeholders feel ignored or marginalised. In crisis situations, this distinction becomes more pronounced. Stakeholders are not only looking for information; they are also looking for signs that their concerns are being taken seriously.

Applied to this study, the theory provides a useful point of comparison. It allows an assessment of whether crisis communication in Rivers State's public institutions reflects a genuine effort to engage with stakeholders, or whether it remains largely one-directional. This distinction is not trivial. It speaks directly to issues of credibility, trust, and ultimately, institutional legitimacy.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design because it enabled the collection of data from public relations practitioners regarding crisis communication and management strategies in selected public institutions in Rivers State. The population comprised NIPR membership in Nigeria numbering 31,651 from which some are working in selected ministries, agencies, commissions and government institutions within Rivers State**.** Using Cochran's formula, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select participating institutions, while simple random sampling was used to select respondents within the institutions. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising demographic variables and four-point Likert scale items ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, were used for data analysis, while decisions were based on a criterion mean of 2.50. Out of the 384 questionnaires administered, 372 were correctly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 96.9%.

Data Presentation

Table 4.1: Crisis Communication Strategies Employed by Public Relations Practitioners

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	Timely communication minimizes the impact of organizational crises	172	128	42	30	3.19	Agreed
2	Public relations practitioners provide accurate information during crises	165	136	40	31	3.17	Agreed
3	Effective media engagement improves institutional reputation during crises	170	130	43	29	3.19	Agreed

The table indicates strong agreement among respondents that timely communication, accurate information dissemination, and effective media engagement are key crisis communication strategies employed in public institutions.

Table 4.2: Influence of Crisis Communication on Organisational Reputation

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	Effective crisis communication enhances public trust in institutions	168	132	44	28	3.18	Agreed
2	Timely communication helps protect institutional reputation	174	130	40	28	3.21	Agreed
3	Transparent communication reduces reputational damage during crises	166	134	42	30	3.17	Agreed

The results show that crisis communication plays a significant role in shaping and protecting organisational reputation, particularly through timeliness and transparency.

Table 4.3: Contribution of Stakeholder Communication to Crisis Management

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	Effective stakeholder communication improves crisis response	170	128	44	30	3.18	Agreed
2	Engagement with stakeholders reduces uncertainty during crises	168	130	42	32	3.17	Agreed
3	Feedback from stakeholders enhances crisis management decisions	164	132	46	30	3.16	Agreed

The findings demonstrate that stakeholder communication significantly contributes to effective crisis management through engagement, feedback, and uncertainty reduction.

Table 4.4: Challenges Affecting Crisis Communication and Management

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	Inadequate communication infrastructure affects crisis response	176	126	40	30	3.20	Agreed
2	Bureaucratic delays hinder effective crisis communication	180	124	38	30	3.22	Agreed
3	Lack of training limits effectiveness of public relations practitioners	172	128	42	30	3.19	Agreed

The table reveals that structural and institutional constraints; particularly bureaucracy, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient training, significantly hinder effective crisis communication.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What crisis communication strategies were employed by public relations practitioners in selected public institutions in Rivers State?

The findings revealed that public relations practitioners in selected public institutions in Rivers State employed several crisis communication strategies during crisis situations. These included timely dissemination of information, proactive engagement with the media, and the use of coordinated messaging to ensure consistency in communication. However, the findings also indicate that while these strategies were actively used, variations existed in the level of formalisation and coordination across institutions. This suggests that although practitioners recognise the importance of structured communication during crises, implementation may not be uniformly standardised.

These findings support the view of Heath and O'Hair (2020), who argue that crisis communication should be deliberate, strategic, and well-coordinated rather than reactive. The findings also agree with the assumptions of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which posits that organisations adopt specific communication strategies depending on the nature of the crisis and stakeholder expectations. The reliance on structured approaches such as media engagement and coordinated messaging indicates that practitioners are applying identifiable crisis response strategies in managing crisis situations. The findings further corroborate the argument that effective crisis communication requires clear planning and message consistency to reduce uncertainty and maintain stakeholder confidence. While the adoption of these strategies demonstrates an understanding of crisis communication principles, the observed differences in their application suggest the need for greater institutional standardisation and formal crisis communication frameworks.

Research Question Two: How does crisis communication influence organisational reputation during crisis situations?

The findings showed that crisis communication has a strong positive influence on organisational reputation during crisis situations. Respondents agreed that prompt, accurate, and transparent communication helps to maintain stakeholder trust, reduce misinformation, and protect the organisation's public image. However, the findings also suggest that where communication is delayed or unclear, reputational damage may still occur despite communication efforts, indicating that effectiveness depends on both timing and credibility.

The findings are consistent with Aula and Mantere (2020), who argue that communication plays a central role in shaping how crises are interpreted by stakeholders. They also support Fombrun and van Riel (2020), who explain that organisational reputation is largely perception-based and influenced by consistent and credible communication. The findings equally validate the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasises that organisations must adopt appropriate response strategies such as apology, clarification, or justification—based on stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility. Where organisations communicate transparently and appropriately, they are more likely to preserve their reputation and maintain public confidence. The findings therefore support the theoretical assumption that effective crisis communication is critical in managing reputational outcomes during crises.

Research Question Three: How effective is stakeholder communication in managing organisational crises?

The findings revealed that stakeholder communication is highly effective in managing organisational crises. Respondents indicated that consistent, coordinated, and targeted communication with stakeholders improves crisis response, enhances trust, and facilitates better management outcomes. However, the findings also suggest that communication efforts are more effective when they involve active engagement rather than one-way information dissemination, indicating that some institutions may not be fully utilising interactive communication approaches.

These findings are consistent with the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which views public relations as a relationship management function focused on building mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. The findings also agree with Macnamara (2021), who highlights the importance of understanding and responding to stakeholder perceptions, and Freeman et al. (2020), who emphasise that stakeholders have diverse expectations requiring tailored communication strategies. The findings further support the Excellence Theory, which advocates for two-way symmetrical communication as essential for effective stakeholder engagement. The effectiveness of stakeholder communication observed in this study suggests that organisations that prioritise dialogue and engagement are better able to manage crises. However, the limited emphasis on interactive communication in some cases indicates the need to strengthen stakeholder participation in crisis communication processes.

Research Question Four: What challenges affect effective crisis communication and management in selected public institutions in Rivers State?

The findings identified inadequate communication infrastructure, bureaucratic delays, insufficient crisis preparedness, and lack of professional training as the major challenges affecting effective crisis communication and management in the selected public institutions. These constraints limited the ability of practitioners to disseminate timely information, coordinate communication activities, and respond efficiently during crises.

The findings agree with Boin et al. (2021), who emphasise that effective crisis management requires flexibility, rapid decision-making, and well-coordinated institutional responses.

Similarly, Heath and O'Hair (2020) argue that crisis communication effectiveness depends on preparedness, availability of resources, and the presence of trained communication professionals. The findings also highlight a gap between theoretical expectations and practical realities, particularly within public sector institutions where bureaucratic structures may delay communication processes. These limitations suggest that many institutions lack the necessary capacity to implement effective crisis communication strategies fully.

The findings therefore imply that strengthening crisis communication planning, investing in communication infrastructure, and improving the training of public relations practitioners would significantly enhance institutional preparedness and effectiveness in managing future crises.

Conclusion

The study concludes that crisis communication is a core strategic function within public relations practice in public institutions, particularly in managing uncertainty and maintaining institutional stability during crises. Findings from the study show that the use of structured communication strategies such as timely information dissemination, proactive media engagement, and coordinated stakeholder communication significantly enhances crisis management outcomes and supports the preservation of organisational reputation. The study further establishes that effective stakeholder engagement is critical to sustaining public trust, as communication not only informs but also shapes stakeholder perceptions and responses during crisis situations. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is constrained by institutional challenges, including inadequate communication infrastructure, bureaucratic delays, and limited professional capacity. In essence, the study affirms that public institutions that prioritize professional crisis communication planning, invest in communication infrastructure, and adopt responsive stakeholder engagement approaches are better positioned to manage crises, protect organisational reputation, and sustain public confidence. Strengthening institutional communication capacity is therefore essential for improving governance effectiveness and ensuring public accountability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Public institutions should develop comprehensive and well-structured crisis communication policies that clearly define roles, responsibilities, and response procedures. These policies should be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect emerging communication trends and crisis dynamics.
2. Public relations practitioners should undergo periodic professional training in crisis communication, stakeholder management, and reputation management. This will enhance their ability to respond strategically and effectively under crisis conditions.
3. Institutions should adopt a proactive approach to stakeholder engagement by maintaining continuous communication before, during, and after crises. This will help build trust, manage expectations, and improve cooperation during critical situations.
4. Government and public institutions should invest in modern digital communication technologies to enable rapid information dissemination, real-time engagement, and effective monitoring of public reactions during crises.
5. Public institutions should establish specialized crisis communication teams responsible for coordinating timely, accurate, and consistent information dissemination. These teams should be adequately equipped and empowered to act swiftly during crisis situations.

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