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AN ANALYTICAL EXPLORATION OF ORGANISATIONAL CONDUCT, CRISIS COMMUNICATION, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS.

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Abstract

In today's interconnected communication environment, organisations are increasingly assessed not only by their actions but also by their conduct and communication during periods of crisis. This study examines the interplay among organisational behaviour, crisis communication, and public perception within public relations practice. Grounded in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Reputation Management Theory, the research adopts a qualitative desk research approach, drawing on relevant literature from both global and Nigerian contexts. The findings reveal that ethical and consistent organisational behaviour plays a central role in shaping stakeholder trust and significantly influences how crisis communication is received. Effective crisis communication strategies, particularly those that are timely, transparent, and empathetic, are crucial in shaping public perception during crises. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is strongly shaped by an organisation's prior conduct. The study concludes that public perception is collectively constructed through the alignment between organisational behaviour and communication practices. It therefore highlights the importance of integrating ethical conduct with strategic communication to sustain organisational reputation and strengthen stakeholder relationships.

Keyword: Crisis Communication, Public Perception, Organisational Conduct, Organisational Reputation, Reputation Management Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid information flow and heightened public scrutiny, organisations are increasingly evaluated not only by their actions but also by their behaviour, responses, and communication during periods of uncertainty. A single ethical, communicative, or operational failure can quickly develop into reputational damage intensified by digital media and public engagement. This reality highlights the growing importance of understanding the relationship between organisational conduct, crisis communication, and public perception in contemporary public relations practice. As stakeholders continue to demand transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, public relations has continued to evolve beyond simple image management into a strategic function that aligns organisational values with stakeholder expectations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Coombs, 2015). Consequently, examining the interaction among organisational conduct, crisis communication, and public perception has become essential in understanding modern organisational communication.

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In today's hyperconnected communication landscape, maintaining public trust has become increasingly complex because organisational actions are constantly monitored and amplified across digital platforms in real time. Studies have shown that organisational legitimacy is influenced not only by performance but also by ethical behaviour and responsive communication, particularly during crises (Ki & Shin, 2021; Miller, Parsons, & Lacey, 2022). Stakeholders increasingly assess organisations based on transparency, accountability, and consistency, all of which significantly shape organisational reputation in both stable and crisis situations (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2023; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2021). Studies (Coombs, 2023; Huang & DiStaso, 2022) demonstrates that prompt, empathetic, and strategic communication can reduce reputational damage and sustain stakeholder trust during crises.

Despite scholarly contributions, much of the existing literature has examined organisational conduct and crisis communication separately. While studies on organisational behaviour have focused on ethical leadership and trust-building, crisis communication research has largely concentrated on message effectiveness and response strategies. Limited attention has been given to how organisational conduct and crisis communication interact to shape public perception and influence organisational recovery after reputational crises (Raimondo, Caracciolo, & Perna, 2021). Furthermore, while recent studies acknowledge the role of digital media in accelerating perception formation and increasing reputational volatility, there remains insufficient analysis of how the alignment or misalignment between organisational behaviour and crisis communication affects stakeholder interpretation in real time (Zhang & Yeo, 2023). This gap is particularly important in an environment characterised by misinformation, rapid information dissemination, and emotionally driven online engagement, all of which heighten reputational vulnerability.

Against this background, this study seeks to examine the relationship between organisational conduct, crisis communication, and public perception in public relations practice. Specifically, the study aims to examine the influence of organisational conduct on stakeholder trust and public perception; analyse the role of crisis communication strategies in shaping public perception during organisational crises; investigate the relationship between organisational conduct and the effectiveness of crisis communication in maintaining organisational reputation; and assess how the interaction between organisational conduct and crisis communication collectively influences stakeholder relationships and public perception in contemporary public relations practice.

This study adopts a qualitative desk research (desk review) methodology, relying on the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of existing scholarly literature, journal articles, books, and empirical studies relevant to organisational conduct, crisis communication, and public perception. The approach is appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth conceptual and theoretical examination of existing knowledge without the need for primary data collection. Sources were drawn from both global and Nigerian contexts to ensure a balanced understanding of the subject matter across different communication environments. The qualitative desk review enables the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and relationships among key concepts,

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particularly how organisational behaviour influences crisis communication effectiveness and public perception in public relations practice.

In terms of structure, the article is organised into distinct but interconnected sections. The study begins with the introductory section. This is followed by the conceptual review which examines key concepts including organisational conduct, crisis communication, public perception, and organisational reputation, as well as their interrelationships. The next section presents the Theoretical Framework, anchored on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Reputation Management Theory, which provide the conceptual lens for analysing the study. This is followed by the discussion of Findings, where insights from the literature are synthesized in relation to the research objectives. Finally, the article presents the Conclusion and Recommendations, which summarise the key findings and offer practical suggestions for improving organisational conduct and crisis communication practices in public relations.

Conceptual Review

- Organisational Conduct

Organisational conduct refers to the framework of values, ethical principles, and behavioural norms that guide an organisation's decisions and interactions with stakeholders (Adeyemi & Adebayo, 2022; Ogunyemi, 2021). It is closely connected to ethical behaviour, which serves as a foundation for credible public relations and the development of long-term stakeholder relationships because it communicates trustworthiness and institutional legitimacy (Fombrun, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Scholars such as Ogunyemi (2021), Adeyemi and Adebayo (2022), and Ekwueme (2023) emphasise that organisational conduct is strongly tied to public expectations concerning accountability and social responsibility, particularly in sectors where trust deficits are prevalent. Consequently, organisational conduct extends beyond internal operations and becomes a visible factor through which organisations are evaluated within the public sphere.

Beyond its ethical dimension, organisational conduct also reflects the consistency between what organisations claim and what they actually practise. Carroll and Brown (2018) argue that stakeholders increasingly judge organisations based on behavioural consistency, where the alignment between stated values and actual practices becomes an important indicator of authenticity. In media-driven environments, this consistency is continuously scrutinised as digital platforms expose discrepancies between organisational communication and actions. As a result, organisational conduct itself becomes a form of communication, shaping stakeholder trust either positively or negatively depending on the extent to which behaviour aligns with declared intentions.

Furthermore, organisational conduct is deeply rooted within the broader institutional and cultural context in which organisations operate. Okorie and Nwosu (2022) and Salawu (2023) observe that in developing societies such as Nigeria, organisational behaviour is often evaluated according to societal expectations of fairness, responsiveness, and communal accountability. This suggests that organisational conduct is influenced not only by internal organisational values but also by socio-cultural realities, as stakeholders interpret organisational actions through existing cultural expectations and norms. Organisations must therefore balance global ethical standards with local socio-cultural realities in order to sustain legitimacy and public acceptance.

This study conceptualises organisational conduct as the integrated expression of ethical intention, behavioural consistency, and socially responsible practices. It is viewed as the visible alignment between an organisation's declared values, actual practices, and stakeholder expectations within a specific socio-cultural environment. Organisational conduct therefore represents the practical demonstration of values, reflected not only through official policies but also through the daily decisions and actions that reveal an organisation's true character to its stakeholders.

- Crisis Communication

Crisis communication refers to the strategic management of information and stakeholder engagement before, during, and after a crisis with the aim of protecting organisational reputation and restoring public trust. It involves the timely dissemination of accurate and empathetic messages that address stakeholder concerns and reduce uncertainty. Benoit (1997), as well as Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011), describe crisis communication as a process of image restoration and meaning negotiation through which organisations attempt to shape stakeholder interpretations of crises.

In addition to its informational role, crisis communication functions as a relational and sense-making process through which organisations interact with stakeholders during periods of uncertainty. It goes beyond message dissemination to include listening, incorporating feedback, and adapting communication strategies to meet stakeholder expectations (Kim & Taylor, 2021; Seeger & Sellnow, 2020). Researchers further argue that effective crisis communication depends on consistency between organisational actions and communicated messages because contradictions between both can intensify reputational risks and weaken stakeholder trust (Aula & Heinonen, 2022; Coombs, 2021). Consequently, crisis communication is increasingly understood as a continuous and integrated process embedded within broader organisational communication systems rather than as a one-time reaction to disruption.

Studies also reveal that the effectiveness of crisis communication in Nigeria is increasingly influenced by digital responsiveness, cultural sensitivity, and message consistency within a media environment characterised by rapid information circulation (Okorie & Nwosu, 2022; Salawu, 2023; Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2024). These studies highlight the need for organisations to navigate complex communication environments where stakeholders actively shape narratives, particularly through social media platforms. In such contexts, crisis communication requires flexibility, transparency, and contextual awareness in order to effectively manage public perception and maintain credibility.

This study therefore views crisis communication as a strategic, relational, and adaptive process involving information management, stakeholder engagement, and the co-creation of meaning throughout all phases of a crisis. It is not limited to image repair but is regarded as a continuous negotiation of organisational identity, legitimacy, and public trust.

- Public Perception

Public perception refers to the collective attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgments that stakeholders develop about an organisation over time. These perceptions are shaped through both direct experiences and mediated representations, including narratives circulated through traditional and digital media. Within public relations scholarship, perception is regarded as a socially constructed reality shaped by factors such as credibility, reliability, and ethical responsibility (Fombrun, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Ojebuyi (2021), as well as Musa and Abdullahi (2024), further argue that in digitally mediated societies, public perception is highly fluid and vulnerable to rapid change, especially during crises when information flows intensify. This demonstrates that public perception is dynamic and requires continuous alignment between organisational behaviour and communication in order to sustain trust and legitimacy.

Public perception also serves as an important evaluative framework through which stakeholders interpret organisational intentions and assess performance. It shapes how organisational messages are understood, how actions are evaluated, and ultimately how trust is either strengthened or weakened (Bundy, Vogel & Zachary, 2018). In contemporary communication environments where audiences actively contribute to meaning-making processes, perception is constantly negotiated across multiple platforms. This participatory environment amplifies both positive and negative narratives, thereby reinforcing the need for organisations to communicate strategically, transparently, and responsively. Benoit (1997) notes that the framing of organisational responses during crises significantly influences stakeholder interpretation, while Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011) emphasise the role of social media in accelerating and shaping such perceptions.

Public perception is closely connected to broader concepts such as organisational reputation and legitimacy because it functions both as a precursor to and reflection of these outcomes. While reputation represents a relatively stable and cumulative assessment of organisational character, perception reflects immediate, fluid, and evolving stakeholder sentiments that continuously shape reputational evaluations (Fombrun, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Contemporary scholarship increasingly describes perception as a processual and socially constructed phenomenon continually shaped and redefined through communication, interaction, and lived experiences (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2021; Aula & Heinonen, 2022).

Building on these perspectives, this study conceptualises public perception as a dynamic evaluative process through which stakeholders interpret organisational behaviour and communication over time, especially during crises. Public perception is therefore not merely a passive outcome but an ongoing interpretive process that both shapes and is shaped by organisational actions, making it a critical determinant of trust, credibility, and long-term stakeholder relationships (Coombs, 2021; Schultz, Kastanakis, & Wierenga, 2020).

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- Organisational Reputation

Organisational reputation refers to the collective evaluation of an organisation's character, performance, and reliability as perceived by stakeholders over time. It represents a more enduring and consolidated form of public perception, often shaped by consistent patterns of organisational behaviour and communication. Foundational studies describe reputation as a valuable intangible asset that reflects stakeholders' overall trust in an organisation (Fombrun, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Contemporary research further highlights that reputation is increasingly co-created through ongoing interactions across digital platforms, where transparency, responsiveness, and ethical consistency serve as critical influencing factors (Asemah, Ekhareafo, & Olaniran, 2021; Nwabueze & Nwabueze, 2023; Yakubu & Bello, 2024). Consequently, organisational reputation functions both as a strategic asset and as a vulnerable outcome shaped significantly by organisational conduct and communication, especially during crises.

Beyond its descriptive role, organisational reputation also operates as a form of relational capital that influences legitimacy, stakeholder support, access to resources, and long-term sustainability. Organisations with strong reputations often enjoy greater stakeholder goodwill, stronger resilience during crises, and enhanced competitive advantage, whereas organisations with weak or damaged reputations experience increased scrutiny and declining trust. Coombs (2007) argues that an organisation's prior reputation significantly affects how stakeholders assign responsibility during crises, thereby influencing the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Similarly, recent Nigerian studies indicate that organisational reputation increasingly depends on the perceived consistency between stated organisational values and observable actions, particularly within digitally mediated communication environments where public evaluation occurs continuously and instantaneously (Salawu, 2023; Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2024). This reinforces the understanding that reputation is not permanently secured but is constantly negotiated through the alignment of communication and behaviour.

This study therefore conceptualises organisational reputation as a dynamic and socially co-created evaluative asset that emerges from the continuous interaction between organisational conduct, crisis communication, and stakeholder interpretation. This perspective combines traditional views of reputation as a stable indicator of organisational credibility with contemporary perspectives that emphasise its fluid, participatory, and media-driven nature. Organisational reputation is thus neither entirely controlled by organisations nor solely shaped by stakeholders; rather, it is continuously produced within a relational space where organisational actions, communication practices, and public perceptions intersect.

Theoretical Underpinning of Organisational Conduct, Crisis Communication, and Public Perception in Public Relations Practice

This study is anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Reputation Management Theory because both theories provide relevant explanations for the relationship between organisational conduct, crisis communication, public perception, and organisational reputation in contemporary public relations practice. Together, the theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how organisational behaviour and communication strategies influence stakeholder interpretation, trust, and reputational outcomes, particularly during crises.

- **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs, provides a systematic framework for understanding how organisations should communicate during crises in order to protect and restore their reputation. The theory is founded on the assumption that stakeholders' perceptions of crisis responsibility significantly influence reputational outcomes and the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. According to SCCT, crises are categorised based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organisation, ranging from victim crises to accidental and preventable crises, with each category requiring different communication responses such as denial, diminishment, rebuilding, or bolstering strategies (Coombs, 2019; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2023).

Contemporary studies continue to affirm the relevance of SCCT in explaining how responsibility attribution shapes stakeholder reactions and organisational credibility during crises (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2019). Recent scholarship further indicates that the theory has become increasingly significant in digitally mediated communication environments where information spreads rapidly and public interpretation of organisational actions evolves in real time (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2020). Within the context of this study, SCCT is particularly relevant to the discussion on the role of crisis communication strategies in shaping public perception during organisational crises. The theory explains how communication responses such as transparency, empathy, corrective action, and consistency influence stakeholder trust and perceptions of organisational accountability during periods of disruption.

- **Reputation Management Theory**

Reputation Management Theory conceptualises organisational reputation as a socially constructed and cumulative asset developed through consistent organisational behaviour, communication practices, and stakeholder interpretation over time. The theory suggests that organisational reputation is shaped by the extent to which stakeholders perceive alignment between organisational values, actions, and communication. Foundational and contemporary studies indicate that reputation is not static but rather a dynamic outcome influenced by continuous interactions between organisations and stakeholders within both physical and digital communication environments (Aula & Heinonen, 2022; Schultz, Kastanakis, & Wierenga, 2020).

Recent research further demonstrates that organisational reputation is increasingly co-created within digital spaces where transparency, responsiveness, accountability, and ethical consistency significantly shape public trust and legitimacy (Nwabueze & Nwabueze, 2023; Yakubu & Bello, 2024). In this regard, reputation functions both as a strategic organisational asset and as a vulnerable outcome requiring continuous management through ethical conduct and effective communication practices. The theory is therefore relevant to this study's discussion on the influence of organisational conduct on stakeholder trust and public perception, as well as the relationship between organisational conduct and the effectiveness of crisis communication in sustaining organisational reputation. It explains how long-term organisational behaviour contributes to stakeholder perceptions and reputational resilience beyond immediate crisis situations.

The integration of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Reputation Management Theory provides a broad explanatory framework for this study. SCCT explains how organisations should communicate during crises and how stakeholder perceptions are influenced by responsibility attribution and communication strategies (Coombs, 2019; Jin et al., 2021). However, although SCCT focuses strongly on situational communication responses during crises, it does not sufficiently explain how prior organisational behaviour influences the credibility and acceptance of crisis communication messages.

This limitation is addressed by Reputation Management Theory, which explains how consistent organisational behaviour and communication practices gradually strengthen or weaken organisational reputation over time (Aula & Heinonen, 2022). While SCCT focuses on immediate perception management during crises, Reputation Management Theory provides insight into the long-term development, maintenance, and resilience of organisational reputation through ethical conduct and stakeholder relationships.

The combination of both theories therefore aligns closely with the objectives of this study by providing a comprehensive understanding of how organisational conduct and crisis communication interact to shape public perception, stakeholder trust, and organisational reputation in contemporary public relations practice. Together, the theories support the argument that effective crisis communication is most successful when it is reinforced by consistent ethical organisational conduct and strong reputational foundations established before crises occur.

Influence of Organisational Conduct on Stakeholder Trust and Public Perception in Public Relations Practice

Organisational conduct has been widely recognised as a significant factor influencing stakeholder trust and public perception in contemporary public relations research. At its core, organisational conduct reflects the ethical principles, behavioural consistency, and accountability practices that shape how stakeholders evaluate institutional credibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2019; Fombrun, 1996; Schultz et al., 2020). Studies suggest that trust in organisations is largely built on the perceived integrity and alignment between organisational actions and declared values. For instance, Coombs and Holladay (2019) argue that stakeholders assess organisations not only by performance outcomes but also by the ethical nature of their behaviour during both stable and crisis situations. Similarly, Schultz, Kastanakis, and Wierenga (2020) maintain that ethical consistency strengthens emotional trust, which in turn contributes to long-term reputational development.

Scholars such as Ojebuyi (2021) further observe that in highly mediated environments, perceived integrity strongly shapes public judgement of organisations. In the same vein, Musa and Abdullahi (2024) note that inconsistencies between organisational promises and actual conduct often result in the rapid erosion of trust, especially across digital platforms where public scrutiny is immediate and widespread. This demonstrates that organisational conduct plays an essential role not only in shaping stakeholder confidence but also in determining how organisations are publicly perceived in increasingly interconnected communication environments.

Contemporary research has further deepened the understanding of organisational conduct by emphasising its role in communicating organisational legitimacy within transparent and digitally mediated societies. Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2020) argue that stakeholders now evaluate organisations in real time, where ethical failures or behavioural inconsistencies are quickly amplified through social media, accelerating both trust formation and trust erosion. Within this context, organisational conduct extends beyond internal governance structures to include publicly visible actions that are continuously observed, interpreted, and assessed by stakeholders. Likewise, Jin, Liu, and Austin (2023) emphasise that perceptions of authenticity and ethical intention significantly shape stakeholders' emotional responses to organisational behaviour, particularly during periods of uncertainty. This suggests that organisational conduct functions not only as a behavioural construct but also as a communicative signal capable of influencing both emotional and cognitive trust responses.

Research also indicates that organisational conduct interacts closely with corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in strengthening stakeholder trust and enhancing reputational resilience. Studies by Aula and Heinonen (2022), as well as Schultz, Kastanakis, and Wierenga (2020), reveal that organisations that demonstrate consistent ethical conduct and social responsiveness are more likely to sustain stakeholder confidence even during operational challenges or crises. This perspective positions organisational conduct as a strategic long-term asset through which organisations gradually accumulate reputational capital. Supporting this argument, Nigerian scholars such as Nwabueze and Nwabueze (2023) and Yakubu and Bello (2024) observe that organisations perceived as socially responsible and ethically consistent are more likely to maintain favourable public perception, even within unstable communication environments.

In crisis-prone situations, organisational conduct becomes even more critical. Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs (2017) argue that stakeholders are often more willing to forgive organisational failures when previous conduct demonstrates transparency, accountability, and social responsibility. This reinforces the understanding that organisational reputation is developed progressively through consistent behaviour rather than being determined solely by isolated events. Furthermore, Aula and Heinonen (2022) contend that organisations that consistently adopt socially responsible practices are more likely to experience stronger trust resilience, even in the face of reputational crises. Consequently, organisational conduct remains a central determinant of stakeholder trust, public perception, and the long-term sustainability of organisational reputation within public relations practice.

Role of Crisis Communication Strategies in Shaping Public Perception During Organisational Crises

Crisis communication has been widely studied as a strategic approach for managing stakeholder interpretations during organisational disruptions. Globally, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) remains one of the dominant frameworks explaining how communication strategies influence public perception during crises. Coombs (2019) argues that the effectiveness of crisis responses depends largely on stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility, with strategies such as apologies, compensation, and corrective actions significantly affecting reputational outcomes. Similarly, Jin, Liu, and Austin (2023) emphasise that emotional messaging, particularly expressions of empathy, plays a critical role in reducing negative stakeholder reactions during crises. These perspectives highlight that crisis communication is not limited to information dissemination but also involves managing emotional and reputational responses among stakeholders.

Research further demonstrates the growing importance of digital communication in crisis management. Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2020) observe that social media has transformed crisis communication into a real-time and participatory process in which public perceptions are constantly negotiated and reshaped. This argument is supported by Schultz, Kastanakis, and Wierenga (2020), who maintain that message consistency across multiple communication platforms is essential in preventing misinformation and minimising reputational damage. In the same regard, Liu-Lastres and Huang (2022) argue that the speed and transparency of organisational responses have become even more influential than message content itself in shaping stakeholder perception during crises. These findings indicate that contemporary crisis communication requires organisations to respond rapidly, transparently, and consistently in order to sustain credibility and public confidence.

Within the Nigerian context, studies on crisis communication reveal similar patterns. Okorie and Nwosu (2022) found that delays in organisational communication during crises often intensify public suspicion and negative sentiment. Likewise, Salawu (2023) contends that the credibility of crisis responses in Nigeria is strongly influenced by perceived sincerity, honesty, and cultural sensitivity. Ibrahim and Mohammed (2024) further observe that organisations that adopt proactive and dialogic communication strategies are more likely to maintain stakeholder trust during crisis situations. These viewpoints reinforce the understanding that crisis communication extends beyond reactive messaging to become a strategic perception-management tool that shapes how stakeholders interpret organisational behaviour during crises.

Beyond message timing and content, contemporary studies increasingly emphasise the significance of strategic framing and relational communication in influencing public perception. Research grounded in framing theory suggests that the way organisations construct and present crisis narratives significantly shapes stakeholder interpretations and emotional responses. Li and Xu (2021), for instance, argue that narratives framed around accountability, transparency, and corrective action generate higher levels of public acceptance than defensive or evasive communication strategies. Similarly, Zhang, Qiu, and Cameron (2022) demonstrate that crisis messages containing relational and humanising elements tend to reduce perceived organisational distance, thereby strengthening stakeholder empathy and minimising reputational harm. This perspective aligns with emerging scholarship which suggests that crisis communication serves not only an informational function but also a psychological and relational one, as

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stakeholders interpret organisational messages through emotional, social, and cultural lenses that influence trust formation.

Empirical studies also highlight the increasing importance of stakeholder engagement and dialogic communication during crises. Rather than relying solely on one-way dissemination of information, organisations are now expected to engage in interactive communication processes that encourage feedback, clarification, and stakeholder participation. Austin, Jin, and Liu (2023) observe that dialogic crisis communication enhances perceptions of transparency and promotes collaborative meaning-making between organisations and stakeholders. Similarly, Austin et al. (2023) maintain that organisations that actively involve stakeholders during crises are more likely to sustain relational stability and reduce reputational volatility. This participatory dimension is particularly evident within digital communication environments where audiences not only consume crisis information but also contribute to the creation and circulation of crisis narratives in real time.

Overall, crisis communication strategies play a crucial role in shaping public perception during organisational crises. Effective crisis communication requires not only timely and transparent messaging but also empathy, consistency, strategic framing, and active stakeholder engagement. These elements collectively influence how stakeholders interpret organisational actions, evaluate organisational credibility, and ultimately determine whether trust and reputation are strengthened or weakened during periods of crisis.

Relationship Between Organisational Conduct and the Effectiveness of Crisis Communication in Maintaining Organisational Reputation

The relationship between organisational conduct and the effectiveness of crisis communication has been widely examined within reputation management literature. Scholars argue that crisis communication does not function independently; rather, it is strongly influenced by an organisation's prior behaviour and ethical history. Coombs (2019) maintains that stakeholders' attribution of responsibility during crises is significantly shaped by an organisation's historical conduct. Similarly, Bundy et al. (2017) argue that ethical consistency before a crisis strengthens the credibility of crisis response strategies and consequently improves reputational recovery outcomes. Jin et al. (2021) further contends that organisations with strong ethical foundations tend to achieve more favourable crisis communication outcomes because stakeholders are generally more receptive to their messages. Aula and Heinonen (2022) also emphasise that organisational authenticity enhances message acceptance during crises, as stakeholders are more likely to regard communication as genuine when it aligns with previously observed organisational behaviour.

Within the Nigerian context, recent studies further highlight this interrelationship between organisational conduct and crisis communication. Ekwueme (2023) observes that organisations with poor ethical reputations often struggle to gain public acceptance of their crisis responses regardless of the quality of the messages communicated. Likewise, Yakubu and Bello (2024) argue that inconsistencies between organisational actions and communicated messages reduce the effectiveness of crisis response strategies.

Nwabueze and Nwabueze (2023) additionally note that reputational recovery occurs more rapidly when an organisation's pre-crisis behaviour reflects transparency, accountability, and social responsibility. These perspectives collectively suggest that the effectiveness of crisis communication is largely dependent on organisational conduct, making both elements central to the maintenance and protection of organisational reputation.

Recent scholarship further strengthens the argument that organisational conduct operates as a form of pre-crisis reputational capital that shapes the interpretive lens through which stakeholders evaluate crisis communication. Research in organisational trust and crisis communication demonstrates that stakeholders rarely assess crisis messages in isolation; instead, they interpret such messages through prior impressions formed from organisational behaviour (Coombs, 2021; Schultz, Kastanakis, & Wierenga, 2020). Schultz et al. (2020), for example, argue that trust developed through consistent ethical conduct increases message credibility during reputational threats, while Liu-Lastres and Huang (2022) observe that perceived organisational integrity significantly reduces stakeholder scepticism during crisis response. Similarly, Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2020) explain that in digitally mediated environments, historical organisational behaviour is quickly revisited and used by audiences to either validate or reject crisis narratives. This suggests that the effectiveness of crisis communication depends not only on message strategy but also on the accumulated behavioural legitimacy established before the crisis occurs.

Furthermore, empirical studies reveal that organisations with strong ethical cultures demonstrate greater capacity for reputational recovery because their crisis communication is perceived as consistent with established behavioural norms. Jin, Liu, and Austin (2023) argue that stakeholders' emotional acceptance of crisis messages is significantly strengthened when organisational actions correspond with the values communicated, thereby highlighting the importance of authenticity in message construction. In the same regard, Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs (2017) contend that reputational resilience is enhanced when organisations maintain behavioural consistency before, during, and after crises, since stakeholders interpret communication through the lens of long-term credibility. Salawu (2023), together with Ibrahim and Mohammed (2024), further notes that within Nigeria's highly sensitive media environment, inconsistencies between organisational conduct and communication are rapidly amplified, often undermining even carefully designed crisis response strategies.

Interplay Between Organisational Conduct and Crisis Communication in Influencing Public Perception and Stakeholder Relationships

Contemporary scholarship increasingly views organisational conduct and crisis communication as interconnected dimensions that jointly shape public perception and stakeholder relationships. Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs (2017) argue that organisational reputation is co-created through both organisational actions and communication practices, implying that neither factor independently determines stakeholder evaluation. Similarly, Coombs (2019) emphasises that crisis communication strategies are interpreted in relation to previous organisational behaviour, thereby reinforcing the idea that stakeholder perceptions develop relationally over time. Veil et al. (2020) further contend that within digital communication environments, public perception is shaped through continuous interaction between organisational conduct and communicative responses, making reputation a fluid and constantly evolving construct. Jin et al. (2021) additionally observe that emotional and ethical alignment between organisational actions and communication strengthens stakeholder trust, especially during crises characterised by uncertainty.

Within Nigeria, Salawu (2023) and Musa and Abdullahi (2024) maintain that stakeholders evaluate organisations holistically, meaning that inconsistencies between behaviour and communication can quickly damage stakeholder relationships. Ibrahim and Mohammed (2024) further argue that sustainable stakeholder relationships depend heavily on consistency between organisational actions and communicated messages, particularly in crisis-prone environments. Drawing from these perspectives, organisational conduct and crisis communication can therefore be understood as forming an integrated relational framework for shaping public perception, where both dimensions operate simultaneously to influence stakeholder interpretation. This implies that public perception and stakeholder relationships are not simply outcomes of communication alone but are continuously shaped through the alignment or misalignment between organisational conduct and communicative practices.

Recent empirical advancements further reinforce this integrated perspective by demonstrating that the relationship between organisational conduct and crisis communication functions as a continuous feedback process rather than a simple linear relationship. Schultz, Utz, and Göritz (2020) argue that stakeholders actively evaluate organisational actions alongside crisis responses in real time, particularly within digital media environments where information circulates rapidly and is subject to constant public scrutiny. This evaluative process suggests that crisis messages are not interpreted independently but are continuously compared with stakeholders' perceptions of historical organisational behaviour.

Similarly, Liu-Lastres and Yang (2022) found that organisations demonstrating ethical consistency before crises tend to receive more favourable responses to their crisis communication, even during severe crises, indicating that pre-crisis conduct significantly shapes message effectiveness. Zhang and Benoit (2021) also emphasise that communication credibility depends largely on behavioural authenticity, as stakeholders assess whether organisational responses reflect genuine accountability or merely strategic impression management. These findings underscore the strong interdependence between organisational conduct and communication in influencing stakeholder interpretation and reputational outcomes.

Expanding on this perspective, contemporary research also highlights the growing role of digital engagement and stakeholder co-creation in shaping the interaction between organisational conduct and crisis communication. Kriyantono and McKenna (2021) argue that within networked communication environments, stakeholders no longer passively receive crisis messages; rather, they actively reinterpret them through shared experiences, online discussions, and collective memories of organisational behaviour. This participatory dimension intensifies the interdependence between behaviour and communication because organisational actions are continually reassessed within changing crisis narratives. Likewise, Ki and Nekmat (2021) demonstrate that social media increases stakeholder expectations regarding consistency, transparency, and immediacy, thereby heightening reputational risks associated with any disconnect between organisational actions and communicated messages. In this context, stakeholder relationships are shaped not only by organisational outputs but also through ongoing interactive processes that combine behavioural history with communicative performance.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the reviewed literature on the influence of organisational conduct on stakeholder trust and public perception, the study found that organisational conduct plays a critical role in shaping both stakeholder trust and public perception, thereby aligning with the first research objective. Consistent ethical behaviour, transparency, and accountability were repeatedly identified as key determinants of organisational credibility (Fombrun, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2019). The synthesis of existing studies indicates that stakeholders often interpret organisational actions as reflections of integrity, particularly in digitally transparent environments where inconsistencies are quickly exposed. This finding is consistent with Reputation Management Theory, which explains that reputation develops through accumulated behavioural patterns over time. It is also supported by Musa and Abdullahi (2024), who argue that organisational conduct extends beyond operational activities and plays a significant role in shaping reputation by influencing public perceptions of legitimacy and trustworthiness.

In examining the role of crisis communication in shaping public perception, the findings confirm that crisis communication is essential in influencing public perception during organisational crises, thereby addressing the second research objective. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides strong theoretical support for this finding, as it explains how crisis response strategies such as apology, denial, and corrective action influence stakeholder attribution of responsibility and subsequent reputational outcomes (Coombs, 2019; Jin et al., 2021). The review indicates that timely, empathetic, and transparent communication helps to reduce uncertainty and strengthen public trust. In contrast, delayed or inconsistent communication tends to intensify negative perceptions, particularly within digitally driven communication environments (Veil et al., 2020). Salawu (2023) further supports this position by noting that the effectiveness of crisis communication depends largely on speed, sincerity, and cultural sensitivity. These findings align with SCCT's central assumption that public perception during crises is largely shaped by the nature and execution of communication strategies.

From the analysis of the relationship between organisational conduct and the effectiveness of crisis communication, the study reveals a significant interconnection between both variables, thereby addressing the third research objective. The findings suggest that crisis communication is more effective when it is preceded by consistent ethical organisational conduct, as stakeholders interpret crisis messages through the lens of prior organisational behaviour (Bundy et al., 2017). SCCT explains this relationship through the concepts of crisis history and reputational attribution, where past behaviour influences the credibility of crisis responses (Coombs, 2019). In addition, Reputation Management Theory reinforces this perspective by emphasising that organisational conduct serves as a foundation of trust that shapes how crisis messages are received and interpreted. Empirical evidence also shows that organisations with strong ethical reputations tend to experience more effective crisis recovery outcomes (Aula & Heinonen, 2022). Similarly, Yakubu and Bello (2024) observe that inconsistencies between organisational conduct and communication weaken the effectiveness of crisis responses. Overall, the findings support the view that organisational conduct plays a moderating role in determining the effectiveness of crisis communication.

With respect to the interaction between organisational conduct and crisis communication in shaping public perception and stakeholder relationships, the reviewed literature demonstrates that both elements function as an integrated system, thereby addressing the fourth research objective. Studies consistently show that stakeholders evaluate organisations holistically, combining historical behavioural patterns with current crisis communication (Bundy et al., 2017; Veil et al., 2020). SCCT explains the communication dimension of this interaction, while Reputation Management Theory accounts for the cumulative effect of organisational behaviour on interpretation and trust formation. The findings also reveal a continuous feedback process in which organisational conduct influences the credibility of crisis communication, while crisis communication either reinforces or weakens existing reputational perceptions. Ibrahim and Mohammed (2024) further confirm that inconsistencies between organisational behaviour and communication can rapidly undermine stakeholder trust and weaken crisis communication effectiveness.

Conclusion

The study concludes that organisational conduct and crisis communication are closely interdependent and mutually reinforcing elements in shaping public perception and stakeholder relationships. Organisational conduct provides the ethical and behavioural foundation upon which stakeholder trust is built, while crisis communication determines how effectively organisations manage and influence stakeholder interpretations during periods of disruption. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) explains the dynamics of crisis response, particularly how perceived responsibility and accountability influence the effectiveness of communication strategies. In contrast, Reputation Management Theory highlights the gradual development of trust and credibility through consistent organisational behaviour over time. The integration of both theories demonstrates that public perception is not shaped solely by crisis communication but is the outcome of an ongoing evaluative process influenced by both historical organisational conduct and immediate communication responses. Therefore, sustainable stakeholder relationships depend on the consistency and alignment between what organisations do and what they communicate, as any mismatch between behaviour and messaging can weaken trust and damage reputation.

Recommendations

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

1. Strengthening ethical organisational conduct: Organisations should institutionalise strong ethical governance structures that promote transparency, accountability, and consistency in decision-making processes. This will enhance stakeholder trust and contribute to long-term reputational stability.

2. Enhancing crisis communication capacity: Organisations should develop proactive crisis communication strategies that prioritise speed, empathy, clarity, and accuracy. These strategies should align with SCCT principles to ensure effective stakeholder engagement and trust preservation during crises.

3. Integrating conduct and communication strategies: Public relations practitioners should ensure strong alignment between organisational behaviour and communication outputs. Consistency between actions and messaging is essential, as discrepancies significantly weaken message credibility and stakeholder confidence.

4. Leveraging digital media responsibly: Organisations should adopt strategic and responsible digital communication practices that support real-time stakeholder engagement. This includes ensuring accurate and timely information dissemination, implementing monitoring systems to track public perception, and enabling early detection of reputational risks for prompt corrective communication.

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