

# Crisis Communication Revisited: Theoretical Evolution, Limitations, and Integrative Insights

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000796>

Received: 02 November 2025; Accepted: 10 November 2025; Published: 24 November 2025

## ABSTRACT

Crisis communication has emerged as a vital organizational function in an era characterized by elevated stakeholder expectations, digital interconnectedness, and reputational volatility. This paper provides a critical review and synthesis of contemporary crisis communication theories, including Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair Theory (IRT), Apologia Theory, Discourse of Renewal Theory, Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT), Stealing Thunder Theory, and the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC). While each theory offers valuable insights into rhetorical strategies, situational adaptability, and media-specific dynamics, none adequately addresses the complex, multidimensional nature of modern crises. Through a comparative and empirical critique, this review highlights significant theoretical gaps, including insufficient attention to stakeholder psychology, emotional engagement, source credibility, and cultural variability. The paper advocates for an integrated framework that combines strategic responsiveness, ethical renewal, and digital engagement. By rethinking traditional models and incorporating interdisciplinary insights, this study aims to establish a foundation for more resilient, adaptive, and context-sensitive crisis communication strategies that are suitable for today's organizational landscape.

**Keywords:** Theories in crisis communications, crisis communication, crisis communication theories, crisis communication theories, and limitations.

## Purpose

One critical debate amid the COVID-19 crisis is whether reputational damage during a crisis is more influenced by the strategy used or the credibility of the message source. This gap in connection with a real-world approach is very much understudied. This study aims to evaluate and synthesize key contemporary theories in crisis communication. Its goal is to enhance the understanding of how organizations can respond effectively to crises by integrating fragmented theoretical insights. Thus, every crisis communication theory prioritizes maintaining reputation.

## Aims

- To review and compare prominent crisis communication theories such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT), among others.
- To identify theoretical gaps, overlaps, and inconsistencies in the existing literature.
- To propose an integrated framework that more accurately reflects the complexity of modern crises, including cultural, digital, and reputational dimensions.

## Approach

The study employs a systematic literature review and thematic analysis of peer-reviewed academic articles, books, and theoretical contributions published between 2000 and 2023. It critically analyses the assumptions, applications, and evolution of key crisis communication theories, integrating them to propose a more cohesive theoretical model.

## Findings

While existing theories offer valuable insights, they often operate in silos and typically neglect cross-cultural and digital communication contexts. The review highlights an overreliance on Western-centric models and notes the underrepresentation of crisis communication in the public sector and non-Western contexts. The study proposes an integrated, multidimensional framework that includes considerations of stakeholder trust, media influence, organizational values, and cultural sensitivity.

## Limitations of the Study

The study is conceptual and does not include empirical validation of the proposed integrated framework. It relies on secondary data, which limits the ability to assess practical applications in real-time crises. Although the literature selection was systematic, it may still reflect some publication and language biases (e.g., reliance on English-only sources).

## Originality/Value

This study is one of the first to integrate multiple crisis communication theories into a single framework. It offers scholars and practitioners a more holistic understanding of how to manage crises in an era characterized by globalization, social media, and increased stakeholder scrutiny. Additionally, it lays the groundwork for future empirical research and the development of new theories.

## Novelty and Contributions

This study synthesizes contemporary crisis communication theories within today's evolving communication landscape. It critiques established models, including SCCT, IRT, Apologia, Discourse of Renewal, NCCT, Stealing Thunder, and SMCC, while highlighting their strengths and persistent shortcomings, such as neglecting stakeholder emotions, cultural contexts, and source credibility. What sets this review apart is its call for a hybrid framework that transcends individual theories. It advocates for a strategically responsive, ethically grounded, and digitally fluent approach, which is crucial given the increased scrutiny of stakeholders. By integrating insights from communication, psychology, ethics, and digital media, the paper provides a roadmap for developing crisis communication strategies that are resilient, adaptable, and culturally attuned, addressing a significant gap in the existing scholarship.

## INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication, which was once primarily focused on press releases and strategies for restoring an organization's image, now operates in a highly connected, real-time digital environment. The rise of social media has democratized information, transforming stakeholders from passive recipients into active participants in shaping meaning during a crisis. This changing landscape has challenged the fundamental assumptions of traditional theories. Crises are an unavoidable part of organizational life, and how they are managed has significant effects on reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder trust. Since the 1990s, research on crisis communication has aimed to explain how organizations can effectively respond to crises (Coombs, 1995; Benoit, 1995). However, the rapid changes in the media landscape, particularly the rise of social media and participatory communication, have disrupted traditional models (Austin, Jin, & Liu, 2012). This evolving environment necessitates the integration of theories that not only address rhetorical strategies and reputation repair but also consider interactivity, emotional engagement, response source credibility, and cultural dynamics, free from Western-centric approaches.

A crisis is a significant, unexpected event or situation that threatens to disrupt the normal functioning of an individual, organization, community, or society. It often creates uncertainty, risk, and urgency, requiring immediate decision-making and responses to minimize damage to reputation, operations, stakeholders, or public safety (Coombs, 2007; Dominic et al., 2022).

Crises are unexpected. They usually occur suddenly or escalate rapidly, posing serious threats to objectives, assets, health, reputation, or stability. They are known by time Pressure. Swift action is necessary due to the limited time and high stakes involved. crises create uncertainty. Information during a crisis is often incomplete,

evolving, or conflicting. They are high stakes. The outcomes can have long-term implications for credibility, survival, or public trust (Dominic et al., 2024; Jones, 2025). Crises can be categorized into different types, including Organizational crises (e.g., scandals, product recalls, financial fraud). Natural crises (e.g., earthquakes, pandemics). Technological crises (e.g., cyberattacks, system failures). Human-induced crises (e.g., terrorism, industrial accidents). Reputational crises (e.g., social media backlash, misinformation) (Coombs, 2022).

According to Lee, Hong, and Lee (2024), a crisis is "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome." Furthermore, Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance, generating negative outcomes."

Crisis communication theories offer frameworks to help organizations manage their communication during crises (Mizrak, 2024). These frameworks aim to protect or repair an organization's reputation, maintain stakeholder trust, and minimize harm. This review presents a comprehensive list of major crisis communication theories, outlining their key assumptions, applications, and significant shortcomings, along with empirical and logical critiques. Crisis Communication Theory serves as both an academic framework and a practical guide, enabling organizations to respond strategically and ethically to crisis events. It integrates principles from public relations, psychology, rhetoric, organizational behaviour, and media studies, assisting in managing public perception, promoting transparency, and facilitating recovery. What the organizations say during a crisis is crisis communication, and what they do is the response strategy (Arikawe et al., 2024; Dominic et al., 2024).

Crisis Communication Theory encompasses a collection of theories and models that illustrate how organizations can effectively communicate during a crisis. The primary goals are to protect their reputation, maintain stakeholder trust, minimize harm, and facilitate recovery after the crisis (Coombs, 2018). At its core, these theories guide what organizations should communicate, when they should communicate it, how to convey the message, and through which channels. This guidance is tailored to the specific type of crisis, the stakeholders involved, and the context in which the crises occur. The core objectives of crisis communication theories are to preserve or repair an organization's reputation by maintaining its image during a crisis. Maintain stakeholder confidence and trust by building and sustaining trust among stakeholders. To provide accurate and timely information by ensuring stakeholders receive correct information promptly. To minimize damage and restore normalcy by reducing negative impacts and returning to regular operations. To demonstrate accountability and ethical leadership by showing responsibility and upholding ethical standards during a crisis. (Carvache-Franco et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the key features of crisis communication theories include strategic message framing. These theories guide organizations in crafting messages that minimize blame, convey empathy, or commit to corrective actions. Another feature is audience orientation: Crisis theories help organizations consider the perspectives of different stakeholder groups (employees, customers, media, regulators) and how each group interprets messages differently. Another feature is crisis typologies: Some crisis theories, like Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), categorize crises (e.g., victim, accidental, preventable) to help align responses with public expectations. Another feature is Timing and Channel Choice: Crisis theories emphasize when and where to communicate, such as the importance of early disclosure and the choice between traditional and digital platforms. Lastly, Ethical Dimensions: Crisis communication theories, such as the Discourse of Renewal, emphasize the importance of honesty, learning from mistakes, and values-based communication in crises (Jechle et al., 2025).

## Comprehensive Crisis Communication Theories

Table 1. Foundational Theories

Theory	Founder(s)	Key Concepts / Use
Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)	W. Timothy Coombs, 2007	Explains how crisis type, responsibility attribution, and stakeholder perceptions shape the best response strategies and their effects on organizational reputation.

Image Restoration Theory (IRT)	William Benoit,1995	Provides rhetorical strategies for repairing image and reputation after crises.
Apologia Theory	Ware & Linkugel, 1973	Defensive strategies: denial, bolstering, differentiation, transcendence.
Attribution Theory	Heider, Weiner,1985	How stakeholders assign responsibility/blame in crises, influencing responses.
Inoculation Theory	McGuire, 1961	Pre-crisis communication to prepare stakeholders against potential threats.
Image Repair & Apologia Integration	Hearit, 1995-2006	Combines rhetorical and legitimacy approaches to corporate crisis responses.

Table 2. Contemporary & Applied Theories

Theory	Founder(s)	Key Concepts / Use
Discourse of Renewal Theory	Seeger & Ulmer,2007	Ethical communication, rebuilding trust, renewal, and organizational learning after crises.
Networked Crisis Communication (NCC) Model	Yan Jin, Claes de Vreese, 2014	Highlights how social media interactivity shapes stakeholder perceptions and outcomes.
Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model	Jin, Pang & Cameron, 2007	Maps public emotions (anger, fright, anxiety, sadness) to guide effective responses.
Stealing Thunder Theory	Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005	Proactive disclosure of crises leads to more favourable outcomes than reactive responses.
Legitimacy Theory	Suchman, 1995	Organizations seek approval by aligning actions with societal values/norms.
Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC)	Austin, Jin & Liu, 2012	Explains how different stakeholders consume and spread crisis messages via social media.
Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT)	Frandsen & Johansen, 2010	Crisis communication occurs in an interactive, multi-voiced “arena” of competing narratives.
Corporate Apology Theory	Kellerman, Coombs, 2006	Effectiveness of apology types (full, partial, denial) in restoring reputation.

Table 3. Emerging & Critical Perspectives

Theory	Founder(s)	Key Concepts / Use
Chaos Theory	Murphy, 1996	Crises are nonlinear, unpredictable, and require flexible and adaptive strategies.
Disaster & Risk Communication Theories	Various, 1992	Bridges public health, disaster management, and crisis (e.g., Protective Action Decision Model).
Framing Theory	Entman, 1993	How media and organizational framing influence crisis interpretation.

Stakeholder Theory	Freeman, 1984	Emphasizes balancing diverse stakeholder needs, power, and legitimacy.
Institutional & Organizational Legitimacy Theory	Suchman, 1995	Preserving legitimacy and trust when crises threaten societal approval.
Critical-Cultural Approaches to Crisis Communication	Frandsen & Johansen, 2007	Challenges Western-centric models, emphasizing cultural context, power, and marginalized voices.

### Critical review of crisis communication theories

Crisis communication theories provide various approaches for managing organizational communication during high-stakes, reputation-threatening events. Below is a synthesized summary and critical discussion of key theories:

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)** by W. Timothy Coombs (2007): SCCT suggests that response strategies (deny, diminish, rebuild, bolster) should align with the type of crisis and the organization's level of responsibility. While SCCT is widely applicable, it often oversimplifies complex crises by categorizing them too rigidly. Its strength lies in its adaptability to different situations, but it could benefit from more consideration of emotional nuances and stakeholder cultural diversity.

**Image Repair Theory (IRT)** by William Benoit (1995): IRT focuses on repairing an organization's image through rhetorical options like denial, corrective action, or mortification. While it provides strong rhetorical tools, it lacks situational guidance, assuming that audiences are rational and responsive to reasoned defences, which may not hold in emotional or politically charged crises.

**Apologia Theory** by Keith Michael Hearit (2006): This theory emphasizes rhetorical self-defence through denial, differentiation, or justification, particularly after reputational accusations. Apologia is useful in addressing individual or corporate scandals, but it is largely reactive and does not address broader strategic or ethical considerations.

**Rhetorical Arena Theory** by Frandsen & Johansen (2010): This theory highlights that crises involve multiple voices, media, stakeholders, and the public, not just the organization itself. It provides a realistic view of crisis complexity but lacks prescriptive strategies. It is most effective when combined with models like SCCT or SMCC that suggest practical responses.

**Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) Model** by Jin & Liu (2010): The SMCC model maps how information flows between organizations and digital publics, emphasizing source credibility and virality. In the digital age, it is crucial to understand how the public amplifies messages, but it often downplays the message content and emotional resonance.

**Organizational Crisis Communication (OCC) Theory**, as proposed by Matthew Seeger (2006), integrates internal and external communication, promoting consistency between what employees and the public hear. It excels in fostering employee engagement and organizational alignment but is less developed in terms of digital strategy or framing emotional responses.

**Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model** by Jin, Pang, & Cameron (2012): ICM categorizes crises based on public emotions (e.g., fear, anger) to tailor communication responses. While it offers valuable psychological insights, it is not widely utilized and lacks strategic breadth beyond emotional targeting (AO & Mak, 2021).

**Discourse of Renewal Theory** by Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger (2007): This theory advocates for a focus on learning, growth, and ethical responsibility rather than blame in post-crisis communication. It is ideal for long-term recovery, though it may be impractical in crises that require immediate damage control.



Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) by Charles Berger & Richard Calabrese (1975): URT is focused on reducing public panic through timely and transparent updates. It serves as a foundation for trust-building, though it is not specifically tailored for large-scale or social media-driven crises.

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) by the CDC (2002): CERC merges crisis response with risk communication, especially in public health threats. It is practical for government and health agencies, but it may be too directive and linear for the messy nature of corporate crises.

Karasek's Demand-Control Model (Adapted) by Robert Karasek (1979): Originally developed for occupational health, this model addresses employee stress during crises by balancing job demands with autonomy. While valuable for internal crisis communication, it has limitations in guiding external messaging.

Narrative Paradigm Theory by Walter Fisher (1984): Fisher's theory posits that stories, rather than just facts, shape how the public perceives crises. This approach is strong in humanizing organizations and building emotional connections, but it requires skilled narrative crafting and may not always conform to legal or technical constraints.

Contingency Theory of Accommodation by Cancel et al. (1997): This theory advocates for flexible, context-sensitive communication that balances public and organizational interests. It is one of the most adaptive and realistic models, although it can be challenging to operationalize without clear boundaries or principles.

These theories collectively offer a diverse set of tools for organizations navigating crisis situations. Some are strategic and prescriptive, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model. Others focus on rhetoric and adaptability, like Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Apologia. Additionally, some theories are more attuned to emotions and culture, including the Intimate Communication Model (ICM) and the Narrative Paradigm.

However, there are significant limitations that remain prevalent across these theories. Many places put too much emphasis on strategy or rhetoric, often neglecting the emotional and psychological responses of stakeholders. There is also a lack of integration between internal communication, media influence, and ethical renewal. Furthermore, there is insufficient guidance on managing misinformation, the amplification of messages through social media, and handling crises in cross-cultural contexts (Zhao, Zhan, & Wang, 2021; Dominic et al., 2023).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), proposed by W. Timothy Coombs, is a widely used framework that emphasizes how the appropriateness and effectiveness of a crisis response depend on two key factors: the type of crisis and the level of organizational responsibility perceived by stakeholders. SCCT categorizes crises into three types: victim, accidental, and preventable, and associates each with specific response strategies: deny, diminish, rebuild, or bolster. This theory is praised for its systematic, contingency-based approach and is backed by empirical research (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), making it a fundamental model for managing reputation strategically.

However, SCCT has notable limitations. One significant drawback is its neglect of source credibility; it assumes that stakeholder perception is homogeneous and fails to recognize that the trustworthiness of the communicator greatly affects message reception (Lim, Sung, & Lee, 2022; Lee, 2020; Dominic et al., 2023). Additionally, the theory lacks contextual flexibility, which limits its adaptability across different cultural and organizational settings (Zhao, Zhan, & Wang, 2021). Furthermore, SCCT does not adequately address the emotional and psychological dimensions of stakeholder responses, an aspect increasingly acknowledged as important in crisis psychology (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). The linear framework of SCCT also does not account for the evolving and recursive nature of crises. Empirical research by Claeys and Cauberghe (2012) highlights this limitation, showing that stakeholder perceptions of appropriateness often differ from SCCT's recommendations, especially in rapidly changing social media environments.

William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) provides a rhetorical framework for how organizations and individuals can respond to events that threaten their image. The theory outlines five broad strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification that can be tailored to

various crisis contexts. One of the strengths of IRT is its adaptability and detail, offering precise verbal tactics for defending reputational integrity. However, its focus on rhetoric and discursive repair can be limiting, as it does not adequately consider situational dynamics or the interactive nature of contemporary communication environments (Brinson & Benoit, 1999).

Moreover, IRT offers little guidance on timing and audience segmentation, which diminishes its practicality in multi-stakeholder crises. The theory is also inherently reactive, lacking tools for pre-crisis preparedness or post-crisis transformation. Empirical critiques further complicate its application; for instance, Kim and Cameron (2011) found that mortification, an apology strategy, did not always result in positive reputational outcomes, particularly when the perceived sincerity was low or when the organization lacked genuine accountability. Therefore, while IRT is rhetorically strong, it must be applied cautiously and alongside other strategic considerations.

Apologia Theory, one of the earliest rhetorical crisis communication frameworks, examines how entities defend themselves against accusations using strategies such as denial, differentiation, bolstering, and transcendence. Originally developed for individual speech acts, it highlights the persuasive power of rhetoric in managing blame and crafting defensive narratives. The theory excels in articulating public discourse mechanisms and is effective in individual or leadership-focused crises. However, its usefulness for organizations is limited due to its narrow focus. It overlooks non-verbal and behavioural aspects of crisis response and does not consider the complexity of organizations or the various communication channels now available. Additionally, the theory lacks a systematic crisis typology, providing less strategic direction compared to models like SCCT. In today's digital landscape, characterized by speed, interactivity, and rapid message dissemination, Apologia Theory's explanatory power diminishes. Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) argue that the theory struggles to maintain relevance on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, where stakeholders engage directly, share their interpretations swiftly, and can spread their reactions virally.

The Discourse of Renewal Theory shifts the focus of crisis communication from damage control to ethical learning, stakeholder empowerment, and organizational transformation. By emphasizing optimism, a future-oriented approach, and values-based leadership, this theory encourages post-crisis growth and the rebuilding of trust. It integrates ethical responsibility and proactive communication, providing a normative model that extends beyond short-term reputational concerns. However, its theoretical elegance is balanced by operational challenges. Critics, such as Frandsen and Johansen (2011), argue that the theory can be too abstract and idealistic, lacking specific guidelines for implementation, especially in high-stakes or rapidly unfolding crises.

Moreover, its core assumption that organizations are willing to engage ethically and transparently does not always align with actual corporate behaviour or legal constraints. Empirical challenges arise when the theory is applied superficially. For example, Ulmer et al. (2011) illustrate how BP's use of renewal rhetoric after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill failed to resonate with stakeholders due to a lack of substantive change, resulting in further reputational damage. Thus, while the theory has inspirational potential, successful application requires authenticity and accountability.

The Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT) examines how the type of media (traditional versus social) and crisis response strategy influence stakeholder perceptions. It posits that the communication platform can affect the effectiveness of a crisis message, providing insights into media-channel specificity. This theory is especially relevant in crises that unfold digitally, as it incorporates media richness and interactivity into its analysis. However, its strengths are mitigated by significant limitations. NCCT tends to overemphasize the medium, often at the expense of message content and organizational credibility. Additionally, it treats audiences as uniform entities, disregarding the diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations of stakeholders. The model mainly focuses on the early stages of crisis response and lacks robust mechanisms for long-term crisis management. Liu and Fraustino (2014) found that message reception varies significantly across platforms due to differing user norms, suggesting that NCCT must evolve to incorporate audience psychology and digital subcultures for broader relevance.

Stealing Thunder Theory advocates for the pre-emptive disclosure of potentially damaging information before it becomes public knowledge. This counterintuitive strategy can enhance perceived transparency and reduce

stakeholder backlash by framing the narrative before external exposure. Its primary strength lies in its ability to boost organizational credibility and control over the crisis narrative. However, it is a high-risk strategy. If the disclosed information is too severe or the timing is off, stakeholders may perceive the move as manipulative or panicked. Furthermore, it is inappropriate for legal or highly sensitive crises, where admission could lead to liability or regulatory penalties. Dean (2004) empirically validated that while early disclosures can enhance perceptions of honesty, they can also amplify negative evaluations if stakeholders feel blindsided or emotionally overwhelmed. Thus, Stealing Thunder is a double-edged sword that requires careful consideration of both the content and context of the disclosure.

The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) Model explores how various stakeholders (e.g., influencers, followers, and inactive publics) engage with crisis information through social media. It acknowledges that not all publics respond uniformly and that stakeholder behaviour varies based on involvement, influence, and digital behaviour. The model's strength lies in its nuanced understanding of the social media ecosystem, offering a more audience-centred approach to crisis messaging. However, SMCC also has several weaknesses. It prioritizes social media as the primary communication channel, potentially overlooking traditional or hybrid platforms that may be more suitable for certain demographics or types of crises.

Additionally, it assumes rational, linear behaviour from stakeholders and does not adequately address emotional contagion, misinformation, or the influence of bots and micro-influencers. Eriksson (2018) critiques SMCC's static categorization of stakeholder roles, arguing that digital behaviours are fluid, context-dependent, and continuously evolving. Therefore, while SMCC provides a valuable framework for online crisis communication, it must be regularly updated to keep pace with digital transformations.

Table 4. Comparative Critique and Synthesis

Comparative Critique and Synthesis			
Theory	Core Focus	Main Limitation	Applicability Today
SCCT	Matching response to responsibility	Ignores emotions, cultural nuance, and source credibility	High, with adaptation
IRT	Verbal image repair	Rhetorical & reactive	Moderate
Apologia	Defence rhetoric	Lacks organizational scalability	Low
Renewal	Ethical transformation	Idealistic	High, for values-based orgs
NCCT	Media type effects	Media > message	High, but partial
Stealing Thunder	Pre-emptive disclosure	Can backfire	Moderate
SMCC	Stakeholder-media dynamics	Platform bias, source credibility	High, but needs updating

The theoretical development in crisis communication has provided essential insights, but it must now evolve to meet the complexity of today's communication landscape. This evolution requires moving beyond siloed theories and adopting an interdisciplinary, empirically tested, and context-sensitive approach. Both scholars and practitioners should prioritize stakeholder psychology, platform dynamics, reputation management, and ethical renewal to create more resilient and adaptive crisis strategies.

Crisis communication has matured into a multidimensional field grounded in a variety of theories developed over the decades. While these theories differ in their approaches, whether rhetorical, strategic, or media-centric, they collectively aim to guide organizations in managing and mitigating crises through effective communication. However, evolving stakeholder expectations, the rise of digital media, and the increasing demand for transparency and ethics have revealed gaps in existing models (Dominic et al., 2021). This discussion



synthesizes, critiques, and contextualizes the theories presented earlier. Crisis communication theories have historically developed along two main paths: strategic and rhetorical.

This division reflects different foundational philosophies and highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in responding to organizational crises (Dominic et al., 2023). Strategic approaches, which include Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC), and Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT), focus on planning, contingency strategies, and effective messaging within organizational and media frameworks. On the other hand, rhetorical models such as Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Apologia Theory emphasize the use of language and moral arguments in defending reputations and addressing public accountability.

SCCT is perhaps the most widely referenced strategic framework. It employs a situational matching logic, where the type of crisis and the organization's level of responsibility dictate the most suitable communication strategy (Coombs, 2006). While it has significantly contributed to establishing standardized crisis responses, its effectiveness is limited by its prescriptive nature and a tendency to overlook stakeholder emotions, cultural differences, and platform-specific behaviours (Dominic, Mahamed & Ogodo, 2025). Although it serves as a foundation for reputation-focused planning, it operates under the assumption of a linear communication environment and uniform stakeholder perspectives, assumptions that are increasingly unrealistic in today's fragmented digital landscape.

Conversely, rhetorical approaches like IRT and Apologia Theory provide rich strategies for organizations managing blame and seeking to maintain legitimacy (Benoit, 1997). These theories concentrate on the content and construction of crisis messages, offering classifications of speech acts (e.g., denial, differentiation, mortification) that help frame narratives effectively. However, they tend to be conceptually narrow, failing to integrate with organizational dynamics, media frameworks, or the diversity of stakeholder perspectives. Additionally, their reactive nature limits strategic foresight and organizational learning, reducing their relevance in prolonged or evolving crises. While these models demonstrate rhetorical sophistication, they lack scalability in today's fast-paced, multi-platform crisis environments (Zhao, Zhan, & Liu, 2018).

The rise of social media and digital interactivity has led to models emphasizing networked dynamics, such as SMCC and NCCT (Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012). These models address a significant gap left by earlier frameworks by recognizing the nonlinear, participatory, and decentralized nature of modern crisis communication. SMCC is particularly noteworthy for acknowledging the varied roles of digital publics, ranging from influential figures to less active stakeholders, and how these groups influence the dissemination and reception of crisis messages. It redefines the crisis landscape as a dialogic, co-created space where authority is dispersed, and traditional message control is challenged (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). However, SMCC often places too much emphasis on platform mechanics (such as speed and interactivity) at the cost of content credibility and message authenticity, which increasingly shape stakeholder perceptions and behaviours.

Similarly, while NCCT adds to our understanding of how media richness and tone affect initial crisis perceptions, it frequently views digital platforms as monolithic entities, overlooking aspects like algorithmic filtering, platform culture, and behaviour specific to different affordances. These oversights are significant, given that message interpretation can vary considerably between, for example, the rapid public discourse on Twitter and the more personal, segmented interactions found on Facebook. Collectively, these models point to a paradigm shift from a hierarchical, organization-centred approach to a networked, multivocal narrative, but they require further refinement to adequately address content authenticity, emotional factors, and strategic ethics.

The Discourse of Renewal Theory addresses an aspect that is notably absent from most other models: the moral and transformational role of crisis. Instead of concentrating on blame deflection or managing reputational damage, it promotes values-based communication, stakeholder inclusion, and long-term learning. This approach aligns with the growing public expectations for organizational transparency, authenticity, and resilience. However, its practical application faces challenges due to its abstract idealism (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). The theory assumes that organizations are both capable and willing to engage in genuine ethical renewal, a premise that often does not hold true, especially in high-liability contexts or industries struggling with entrenched reputational issues. Empirical case studies, such as BP's response following the Deepwater Horizon disaster,

demonstrate how stakeholders can quickly recognize and dismiss performative ethics that are not backed by meaningful behavioral changes (Ulmer et al., 2011).

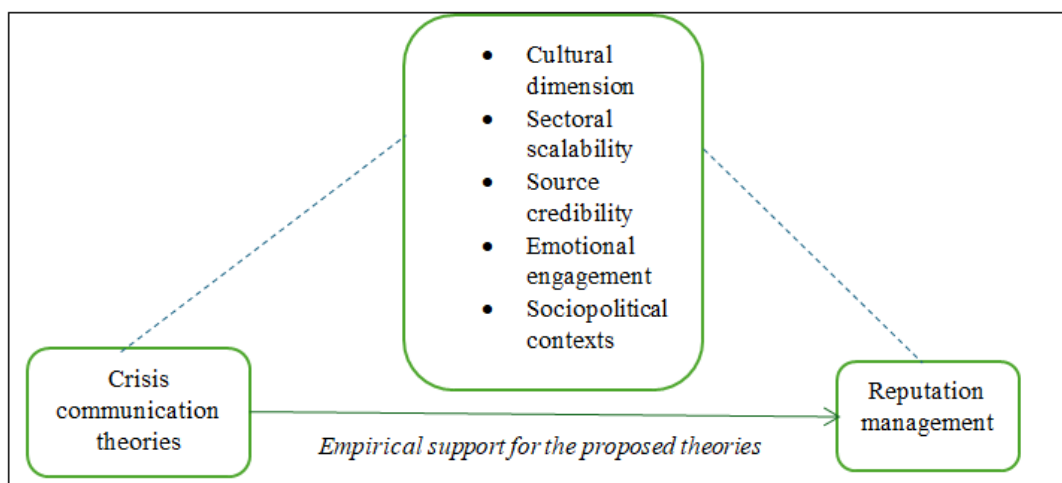
Similarly, Stealing Thunder Theory adopts a proactive stance by advocating for early, voluntary disclosure of negative information. Research has shown that this approach enhances transparency and reduces suspicion. However, it requires a careful balance between openness and strategic self-preservation. The application of this strategy must be weighed against legal, regulatory, and reputational risks, particularly in high-stakes or litigious environments. Thus, while the theory promotes strategic transparency, it lacks normative criteria for determining ethical timing, message framing, or stakeholder targeting, exposing the ethical ambiguity inherent in many crisis responses (Dean, 2004).

Despite their valuable contributions, no single theory provides a comprehensive solution to the complex nature of contemporary crises. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is adaptable but emotionally and culturally superficial. Rhetorical models like Image Restoration Theory (IRT) and Apologia provide communicative nuance but lack strategic depth. Media-centric theories, such as the Situational Media Communication Model (SMCC) and the Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT), acknowledge stakeholder interactivity but underemphasize the significance of internal organizational values and learning processes. Meanwhile, the Discourse of Renewal Theory offers a compelling ethical vision but lacks tactical specificity (Coombs, 2019).

This fragmented theoretical landscape calls for an integrated framework, one that combines the situational analysis of SCCT, the stakeholder interactivity of SMCC, and the ethical approach of the Discourse of Renewal Theory. Such a framework should embed source credibility as a core construct, recognizing that stakeholder trust increasingly hinges on who communicates, not just what is communicated (Dominic et al., 2024).

Additionally, crisis communication theories must account for cultural sensitivity, acknowledging that stakeholder expectations and risk perceptions are heavily influenced by local norms and sociopolitical contexts. Emotional engagement should also be a central focus, as affective responses, such as fear, anger, and empathy, often determine crisis salience and narrative engagement (Jin et al., 2012). Figure 1 below demonstrates the empirical support for the theories proposed.

Fig.1 proposed theoretical framework



## Mechanisms of Mediation and Interactive Strengthening

The five dimensions discussed do not function independently; they interact with one another. For instance, cultural norms can influence emotional expression, while sector-specific logics determine which sources are considered credible. Additionally, sociopolitical contexts can change the dynamics of networked emotions and source legitimacy (Pratt, 2012; Ketko-Ayali, Cohen, & Michaeli, 2025). Practically speaking, when the credibility of a response source (RSC) is high, it enhances the positive effects of well-suited strategies across diverse cultures and sectors. On the other hand, in politicized or low-trust environments, even high-quality

strategies may falter unless both source credibility and emotional engagement are addressed simultaneously. This layered mediation illustrates why relying solely on a single theory, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), often yields subpar results in varied, networked crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Dominic et al., 2024; Gierszewska, 2025; Capano & Toth, 2025).

Crisis response strategies are important, but their reputational benefits depend on various factors. Cultural norms, sector conditions, source credibility, emotional engagement, and sociopolitical contexts all mediate and either enhance or diminish the relationship between strategy and reputation. By incorporating these dimensions into crisis communication theory, placing emphasis on source credibility, we can establish a more realistic, testable, and actionable framework for both research and practice in an age characterized by digital interactivity and cultural complexity.

Future research should extend beyond isolated theories toward hybrid models that are strategically flexible, ethically grounded, and digitally agile. The field is at a turning point where theoretical frameworks must adapt to the complexity of the communicative landscape they aim to elucidate. In doing so, scholars and practitioners can better navigate the evolving demands of public scrutiny, stakeholder empowerment, and organizational accountability in an era where crises are a matter of when, not if.

Table 5. Recent debates in crisis communication theories scholarship

Debate Area	Key Issues / Questions	Recent Insights
Influencers & social media	Should frameworks integrate influencer roles?	Micro-influencers shape crisis narratives through trust and parasocial ties (e.g., TikTok in disasters).
Digital vs. Traditional Channels	How to balance immediacy vs. clarity?	Politician briefings can dilute trust; younger audiences require informal digital platforms.
Speed vs. Accuracy / Misinformation	Should organizations prioritize fast disclosure or verified accuracy?	Rapid responses reduce harm, but misinformation (esp. AI-driven) complicates strategies.
Cultural Context	Are theories too Western-centric?	Collectivist cultures (e.g., China) utilize ambiguity and harmony, challenging the universality of SCCT/IRT.
Strategic Flexibility	Is one “best” model possible?	Contingency Theory emphasizes adaptive, situational responses vs. universal Excellence Theory ideals.
Timing & Crisis Lifecycle	How does timing affect effectiveness?	Early responses during the issue stage are helpful, while delayed responses at peak may worsen the reputation.
Ethics & Technology	How to ensure fairness in AI-based crisis detection?	Machine learning enables early detection but raises bias/privacy concerns.
Data Breach Crisis Communication	What strategies align with regulatory expectations?	Best practice: early disclosure, apology, responsibility, authority notification—shaped by privacy laws.
Crisis response source credibility. Ongoing Debate	Not just what the theory says or how it functions, but by whom or who carried out the saying and functions?	Based on the recent debate in crisis communication amid COVID-19, whether reputational damage during a crisis is more influenced by the strategy used (SCCT) or the credibility of the message source. This debate is yet to be addressed.

## METHODOLOGY

This review employs a systematic literature review to analyse and integrate contemporary theories of crisis communication. The goal is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of existing theoretical frameworks in crisis communication, highlighting their evolution, applications, and limitations. The literature search involved an extensive exploration of academic articles, books, and other scholarly resources focused on crisis communication theory. Specific criteria were applied to select studies based on their relevance, quality, and theoretical rigor. Sources were identified through a combination of electronic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and the Social Science Research Network (SSRN). Only peer-reviewed articles were included to ensure the relevance and reliability of the theories discussed. The inclusion criteria for selecting articles were as follows: Relevance to crisis communication theory, Application to real-world crises or crisis management strategies, Theoretical depth and contribution to the field, and Empirical support for the proposed theories.

Table 6. The inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Eligibility	Exclusion
Literature type	Journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters	Short survey, erratum, and others
Language	English language	Non-English language
Indexes	Social sciences, crisis communication, decision-making, health sciences, medicine, and psychology; crisis communication theories, and reputation management.	Environmental science, engineering, and others
Countries	Africa, Asia, America, and European countries.	Others not included
Timeline	Articles from 2000-2024	Below 2000 & above 2024

After identifying the relevant literature, the studies were analysed using thematic coding to help authors identify recurring ideas, constructs, or arguments across studies, detect trends over time, and highlight gaps, contradictions, and underexplored areas, to uncover key themes and trends in the development of crisis communication theories. The analysis focused on understanding how different theories address the dynamics of communication during crises, the role of stakeholders, and factors influencing crisis communication strategies. Key theories, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair Theory (IRT), and Cultural Approaches to Crisis Communication, were critically examined. This thematic analysis was followed by a theoretical integration approach, where the key components of each theory were compared and synthesized. The aim was to create a more coherent and holistic understanding of crisis communication by identifying overlapping concepts, gaps in existing theories, and areas where integration could enhance theoretical development.

The review also involved a critical evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the current theories. Theoretical weaknesses, such as the lack of cultural considerations and the focus on a limited range of crisis types, were highlighted. Additionally, the review discussed the interdisciplinary nature of crisis communication theory and suggested potential areas for future research, such as the impact of digital media and the role of social networks in modern crises. The synthesis of various crisis communication theories provides a more integrated perspective on how organizations should manage crises in a globally interconnected and digitally mediated environment. By identifying gaps and inconsistencies in the existing literature, this review offers both practical implications for crisis managers and a theoretical framework for advancing crisis communication scholarship. This review makes a dual contribution: it provides a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary crisis communication theories and proposes an integrated theoretical framework for understanding the complexities of crisis communication across different organizational and cultural contexts.

## Critical Integration and Gaps

Despite the abundance of existing theories, several notable gaps persist:

1. **Fragmentation** – The field is characterized by theoretical silos, where rhetorical, psychological, and network perspectives often remain disconnected (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).
2. **Cultural Blind Spots** – Many models are predominantly Western-centric and lack the adaptability necessary for diverse cultural contexts (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).
3. **Digital Complexity** – The rise of algorithm-driven platforms and the spread of disinformation present significant challenges to current theoretical frameworks (Jin et al., 2014).
4. **Ethical Dimensions** – Theories frequently minimize the role of ethics and trust-building efforts, focusing primarily on reputation repair (Ulmer et al., 2007).

To effectively address these gaps, it is essential to develop an integrated framework that encompasses rhetorical, psychological, and digital-network perspectives, while also incorporating cultural and ethical considerations.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of contemporary crisis communication theories reveals a fragmented yet evolving theoretical landscape shaped by disciplinary divides, technological transformation, and shifting stakeholder expectations. While strategic models such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offer practical value through their contingency logic, they often fall short in capturing the psychological, emotional, and cultural complexities of crisis contexts. Rhetorical theories like Image Restoration Theory (IRT) and Apologia provide valuable linguistic tools; however, their lack of integration with organizational behaviour and digital interactivity renders them increasingly inadequate in the face of fast-moving, media-saturated crises. Media-centric models such as the Social Media Crisis Communication Theory (SMCC) and the Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT) respond to the realities of networked communication but risk overemphasizing platforms at the expense of content credibility, stakeholder trust, and ethical considerations. The Discourse of Renewal Theory and Stealing Thunder Theory highlight the importance of ethics and transparency, yet they often remain idealistic and operationally underdeveloped in high-risk environments.

From this critical analysis emerges a theoretical gap: no existing model fully captures the multidimensional, dynamic, and ethically charged nature of modern crises. The strategic-rhetorical divide, while analytically useful, obscures the need for interdisciplinary integration. Factors such as emotional salience, cultural nuance, stakeholder agency, and digital interactivity are not peripheral concerns; they are central to how crises are experienced, interpreted, and resolved. Thus, the field must evolve toward a more holistic framework that integrates situational responsiveness, digital stakeholder dynamics, and ethical imperatives. This model should guide message construction and media selection while also accounting for source credibility, trust repair, and organizational learning. It must remain sensitive to platform-specific features, algorithmic influences, and nonlinear narrative flows; all hallmarks of the contemporary crisis landscape.

This study is highly relevant to the academic and practical fields of crisis management, public relations, and strategic communication. For instance:

### 1. Comprehensive Theoretical Review

**Purpose:** The study critically examines and synthesizes existing crisis communication theories, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Restoration Theory (IRT), and Chaos Theory.

**Relevance:** It highlights the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in these theories, helping scholars understand where current models fall short in explaining or managing modern crises.

### 2. Integration of Diverse Theoretical Perspectives



**Purpose:** Rather than treating each theory in isolation, the study integrates various perspectives, including rhetorical, social constructivist, and organizational perspectives.

**Relevance:** This offers a more holistic and nuanced framework for understanding how crises unfold and how communication strategies should be adapted.

### 3. Emphasis on Critical and Constructivist Approaches

**Purpose:** The author challenges dominant paradigms that view crisis communication as linear or purely reactive.

**Relevance:** This shifts the focus from “what to say after a crisis” to “how social, cultural, source credibility, and power structures shape crisis narratives.” This perspective is particularly beneficial in today’s social media age, where crises can be rapidly constructed and deconstructed online.

### 4. Practical Implications for Organizations

**Purpose:** The study provides insights into how organizations can better prepare for, respond to, and learn from crises.

**Relevance:** It encourages proactive and context-sensitive communication, moving beyond generic strategies to more culturally and situationally appropriate responses.

### 5. Applicability to Contemporary Crisis Scenarios

**Purpose:** The study takes into account evolving types of crises, such as misinformation, cyberattacks, pandemics, and climate-related disasters.

**Relevance:** This makes the study especially timely and useful for navigating complex and fast-changing communication environments.

## Justification for the study

This study is important because it:

- Bridges the gap between academic theory and real-world practice.
- Promotes critical thinking and reflexivity in how crises are communicated.
- Encourages the development of adaptive, inclusive, and multidimensional crisis strategies.

While crisis communication theories like Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) provide useful structured response strategies, they face significant challenges in addressing the complexities of modern crises. Issues such as misinformation, cultural variability, and the rapid pace of digital media require more adaptable, context-sensitive, and critically reflective approaches.

To tackle these challenges, scholars recommend integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, developing more dynamic and culturally adaptive frameworks, and utilizing real-time digital engagement strategies that align with the evolving nature of crises in today’s society. In summary, crisis communication theory stands at a crossroads. To remain relevant and robust, it must move away from rigid silos and instead embrace complexity, hybridity, and moral accountability. Only through such integrative efforts can the field adequately support organizations in navigating the reputational, social, and ethical challenges of crises in an age of perpetual scrutiny and public empowerment.

A critical and significant gap persists in the contemporary crisis communication literature. One notable gap or debate amid the COVID-19 crisis is whether reputational damage during a crisis is more influenced by the strategy used or the credibility of the message source. This gap in connection with a real-world approach is very

much understudied. Although recent perspectives (2020–2023) have championed algorithmic and AI-driven models (e.g., Bowen & Stohl, 2020; Valentini, 2022), including sophisticated digital frameworks for combating misinformation and health models tailored to COVID-19, their purported universality is a fallacy. This limitation constitutes a major impediment to the field, as these advanced models lack the necessary adaptability for cross-cultural and cross-contextual application, leaving organizations vulnerable when crises deviate from the specific parameters for which these tools were designed. Crisis communication has moved beyond linear, one-dimensional models toward complex, stakeholder-driven, and digital-centric frameworks. Foundational theories remain essential, but they require integration with contemporary perspectives to address today's challenges. The future lies in adaptive, ethically grounded, and culturally sensitive models that not only mitigate crises but also strengthen resilience and stakeholder trust.

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