

**AN EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE
FROM THE 2023 MARINA RESORT BOAT INCIDENT IN CALABAR**

By

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Abstract

The Marina Resort boat mishap of 2023 in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria provided a critical case study that could be used to understand crisis communication in the tourism and hospitality sectors. This paper explored the communication strategies used by the government during the crisis to assess their effectiveness, identify strengths and weaknesses, and propose ways of improvement for future crisis management. The study adopted a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative research designs, utilizing semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Data analysis was carried out by familiarization with data, coding, and refining themes. The key findings are that though digital media plays an important role in communicating timely updates and public perception management, delays in the beginning and non-coordinated response adversely impacts the entire crisis management process. Engagement with stakeholders appeared as a strength wherein personalized communication can be used to show trust and empathy towards the affected families. However, gaps in early transparency and the absence of a pre-established crisis communication protocol highlighted areas for improvement. The study concludes that the integration of structured communication protocols, use of technology, and regular crisis simulations will significantly help in enhancing organizational resilience. By addressing identified weaknesses and building on strengths, organizations in high-stake industries can better navigate future crises, maintain stakeholder trust, and protect their reputation.

Introduction and Background to the Study

Communication strategies during crises are essential for managing information, coordinating responses, and maintaining public trust. The Marina Resort boat mishap, which occurred in June 2023, served as a poignant case study for exploring these strategies. The incident involved a tragic accident that resulted in multiple casualties and injuries, drawing significant media attention and requiring immediate and effective communication from the resort's management, emergency services, and governmental authorities. Five persons were reported dead in the mishap while three medical students were declared missing after their speed boat capsized in Calabar. The accident occurred on a Saturday while the boat was en route to Oron in Akwa Ibom state. Fourteen medical students reportedly boarded the boat at the resort in Calabar. Eleven of the victims were rescued. The Cross River State Commissioner of Police Gyogon Grimah said the bodies recovered were those of two males and a female.

“As you are all aware, on Saturday, about two days ago, after 3 in the afternoon, there was an incident reported at the Marina Resort here in Calabar where a boat capsized,” Grimah said. “Three students were drowned and we have not rested since then. It has been rescuing efforts day and night and this morning. I wish to let you know that three bodies have been recovered.” The National Inland Waterways Authority (NIWA) also confirmed the recovery. Jibril Darda’u, NIWA’s general manager of corporate affairs, said the accident was a result of overloading, engine malfunction and rainy weather. “Preliminary investigations revealed that the cause of the incident was overloading (the boat is supposed to carry a maximum of nine passengers), engine malfunction midstream, rainy weather, and heavy turbulence that capsized the cruising boat,” he said. “NIWA has since arrested the operators and sealed the jetty as the boat is not duly registered with NIWA, and the jetty is also not approved by NIWA.” Darda’u added that 11 survivors who were taken to the hospital had been discharged. Senator Prince Basse Edet Otu, the governor of the state, also ordered an investigation into the boat mishap as well as the suspension of cruise operations and other activities at the Marina Resort after the incident.

Crises, especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors, can have far-reaching impacts on organizational reputation and stakeholder confidence (Coombs, 2021). Effective crisis communication can mitigate negative effects, prevent the spread of misinformation, and facilitate recovery. This study examines the communication strategies employed during the Marina Resort boat mishap to assess their effectiveness and provide insights for future crisis management.

Review of Relevant Literature

Crisis Communication

Crisis communication involves the strategic dissemination of information by an organization during a crisis to maintain trust and manage its reputation. It includes crafting messages, selecting communication channels, and engaging with stakeholders to provide timely and accurate information (Coombs, 2021). Effective crisis communication during the Marina Resort boat mishap was critical in addressing the immediate concerns of stakeholders, managing media inquiries, and maintaining public trust. The resort needed to communicate swiftly to ensure that accurate information was disseminated to prevent rumors and misinformation.

Components of Crisis Communication

Message Crafting: This involves creating clear, concise, and relevant messages that address the concerns of various stakeholders. During the Marina Resort boat mishap, messages needed to convey empathy, provide updates on rescue operations, and offer safety information.

Channel Selection: Choosing the appropriate channels to disseminate information is crucial. In the case of Marina Resort, traditional media (press releases, news conferences) and digital media (social media, website updates) were both vital in reaching a broad audience.

Stakeholder Engagement: Engaging stakeholders through direct communication, such as emails and hotline, helps address specific concerns and provides personalized support. The resort's engagement with victims' families was essential in managing the crisis.

Challenges in Crisis Communication

Misinformation and Rumors: In the digital age, misinformation can spread rapidly. Effective crisis communication must include strategies to counteract false information and provide factual updates.

Emotional Responses: Crises often elicit strong emotional responses from stakeholders. Communicators must address these emotions with empathy and sensitivity to maintain trust and credibility.

Coordination and Consistency: Ensuring that all messages are consistent and coordinated across various channels and spokespersons is vital to avoid confusion and maintain a unified response.

Crisis Management

Crisis management encompasses the processes and strategies an organization employs to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a crisis. Effective crisis management involves several key components, including risk assessment, crisis planning, and post-crisis evaluation. These elements are crucial in mitigating the impacts of a crisis and facilitating a swift recovery. Risk assessment helps identify potential threats and vulnerabilities, while crisis planning involves developing response strategies and protocols. Post-crisis evaluation is essential for learning from the incident and improving future responses (Glaesser, 2006).

The Marina Resort boat mishap required comprehensive crisis management efforts. The incident involved coordinating rescue operations, providing medical assistance, and effectively communicating with affected families and the media. Marina Resort's management had to quickly activate their crisis management plan, ensuring that all relevant agencies and personnel were mobilized and that information was disseminated accurately and promptly. This coordinated approach was essential in managing the immediate impacts of the crisis and supporting those affected.

This case underscores the importance of having a well-prepared crisis management plan that can be quickly activated. Such a plan should include clear roles and responsibilities, established communication channels, and protocols for engaging with stakeholders. By having a robust crisis management plan in place, organizations can respond more effectively to emergencies, reduce the negative impact on their operations and reputation, and ensure a

faster recovery. The Marina Resort's experience highlights the necessity of preparation and coordination in crisis management to safeguard both the organization and its stakeholders.

Phases of Crisis Management

Pre-Crisis Phase: This involves risk assessment, crisis planning, and training. Organizations must identify potential risks and develop plans to address them. For Marina Resort, this included safety protocols for boat operations and emergency response plans.

Crisis Response Phase: Immediate actions are taken to manage the crisis, including activating emergency plans, coordinating with emergency services, and communicating with stakeholders. The swift response by Marina Resort and emergency services was crucial in managing the mishap.

Post-Crisis Phase: This phase involves evaluating the response, learning from the crisis, and implementing improvements. Marina Resort's post-crisis evaluation included analyzing the effectiveness of their communication strategies and making necessary adjustments.

Integration of Crisis Communication into Crisis Management

While crisis communication is a critical component of crisis management, more research is needed on how it integrates with other aspects of crisis management, such as operational response and recovery efforts. This integration is crucial for developing holistic crisis management strategies that ensure all elements of a response are cohesive and effective. The Marina Resort boat mishap underscores the importance of a coordinated approach that encompasses both communication and operational response.

Effective crisis management requires seamless coordination between communication teams and operational units. For instance, during the Marina Resort incident, while communication teams worked on providing timely updates and managing public perception, operational teams focused on rescue operations and providing medical assistance. Integrating these efforts ensures that accurate information flows both internally and externally, reducing confusion and enhancing the overall response.

Future research should explore best practices for integrating communication strategies with overall crisis management plans. This includes examining how information from operational teams can be swiftly and accurately conveyed to communication teams, ensuring that public updates are based on real-time developments. It also involves understanding how communication strategies can support operational efforts, such as by using media to mobilize resources or coordinate with external agencies.

Moreover, studying the impact of integrated crisis management on stakeholder trust and organizational reputation can provide valuable insights. Organizations that demonstrate a well-coordinated response are likely to be perceived as more competent and reliable, which can aid in faster recovery and long-term reputation management. By identifying effective integration practices, research can help organizations develop comprehensive crisis management plans that leverage the strengths of both communication and operational responses.

In summary, the integration of crisis communication with overall crisis management is essential for a cohesive and effective response to crises. Future research in this area should focus on identifying best practices and exploring the impact of integrated strategies on crisis outcomes, thereby contributing to the development of more holistic and resilient crisis management frameworks.

Impact of Crisis Communication on Organizational Reputation

Effective crisis communication is pivotal in shaping an organization's reputation during and after a crisis. Research consistently demonstrates that organizations capable of disseminating rapid, accurate, and transparent information are better positioned to manage public perception and maintain stakeholder trust. For example, the Costa Concordia disaster highlighted the consequences of delayed and inconsistent communication, which exacerbated public backlash and prolonged recovery efforts. Conversely, organizations that respond promptly and clearly can mitigate the negative impact and foster a quicker reputational recovery.

The handling of the Marina Resort boat mishap serves as a case study in the importance of effective crisis communication. In the aftermath of the accident, Marina Resort's timely and transparent communication was crucial in managing the situation. By providing accurate updates and showing empathy towards the victims and their families, the resort was able to mitigate negative publicity and preserve its reputation. This underscores the broader principle that transparent and empathetic communication can significantly influence public perception during crises.

Research supports the idea that organizations with strong crisis communication strategies recover their reputations more quickly than those without. Elements such as speed, accuracy, transparency, and empathy are essential in building and maintaining trust. Organizations that effectively manage these aspects during a crisis are often viewed as more trustworthy and responsible, which can enhance their reputation even in the face of adversity. On the other hand, poor communication can lead to lasting reputational damage, eroding stakeholder trust and loyalty. Therefore, effective crisis communication is not only about immediate crisis management but also about long-term organizational resilience and success.

Role of Social Media in Crisis Management

Empirical studies underscore the significant role of social media in crisis communication. Social media platforms have transformed how organizations engage with stakeholders during crises, offering a direct and immediate channel for communication. According to Austin, Liu, and Jin (2012), social media enables organizations to provide real-time updates, engage directly with the public, and counteract misinformation quickly. The interactive nature of social media allows for a two-way communication flow, which can help organizations gauge public sentiment and respond accordingly.

The Marina Resort boat mishap serves as a pertinent example of the effective use of social media in crisis management. During the incident, the resort leveraged social media extensively to keep the public informed about the progress of rescue operations. Timely updates on platforms like Twitter and Facebook provided crucial information on safety measures and offered support to the affected individuals and their families. This proactive approach helped to maintain transparency and build trust with the public, demonstrating the importance of using social media to manage stakeholder expectations and provide accurate information in real-time.

However, the use of social media in crisis management is a double-edged sword. While it can be a powerful tool for communication and engagement, it also poses potential risks if not managed correctly. Misinformation can spread rapidly, and unverified rumors can exacerbate the crisis situation. Therefore, organizations must have a robust social media strategy that includes monitoring for misinformation, providing consistent and factual updates, and engaging with stakeholders to address their concerns. The Marina Resort's experience illustrates that with careful management, social media can enhance crisis communication efforts, but it requires vigilance and a well-coordinated approach to maximize its benefits and mitigate its risks.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide a structured approach to understanding crisis communication strategies and their effectiveness.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), provides a structured framework for understanding how organizations should communicate during crises based on the perceived responsibility for the event. SCCT posits that the effectiveness of crisis communication depends on how the crisis is categorized, which in turn dictates the appropriate response strategies. The theory categorizes crises into three primary clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable, each requiring different communication approaches to protect organizational reputation and effectively manage stakeholder relations.

1. **Victim Crises:** In victim crises, the organization is perceived as a victim of external forces, with minimal responsibility for the event. Examples include natural disasters or terrorist attacks. For these crises, SCCT recommends a communication strategy that emphasizes empathy and support for affected stakeholders. The organization should focus on providing assistance and detailing its efforts to help those impacted. In the case of the Marina Resort boat mishap, if the incident was viewed as a victim crisis—perhaps due to unforeseen technical issues or natural factors—the resort's communication strategy would center around expressing sympathy, outlining the support provided to affected individuals, and maintaining transparency about the incident (Coombs, 2007).

2. **Accidental Crises:** Accidental crises occur when the organization is partially responsible, but the event was unintentional. Examples include operational failures or human errors. SCCT suggests that organizations facing accidental crises should accept responsibility, communicate the corrective actions taken, and explain steps to prevent future occurrences. If the Marina Resort boat mishap was categorized as an accidental crisis—such as a result of an unanticipated mechanical failure or operational mistake—the communication strategy would involve acknowledging the problem, outlining the corrective measures implemented, and detailing plans to prevent similar issues in the future (Coombs, 2007).

3. **Preventable Crises:** In preventable crises, the organization is perceived as fully responsible due to negligence or failure to adhere to safety standards. Examples include regulatory violations or misconduct. SCCT advocates for a more comprehensive response in such cases, including accepting full responsibility, issuing a sincere apology, and implementing significant changes to address the underlying issues. If the Marina Resort boat mishap was classified as a preventable crisis—perhaps due to lapses in safety protocols or maintenance—the communication strategy would need to feature a full acknowledgment of responsibility, an apology, and detailed explanations of corrective actions and future preventative measures (Coombs, 2007).

Applying SCCT to the Marina Resort boat mishap involves categorizing the crisis according to these frameworks and developing a communication strategy that aligns with the perceived responsibility. This approach ensures that the resort's response is appropriate for the crisis type, helping to mitigate reputational damage and restore stakeholder trust effectively.

Image Repair Theory

Image Repair Theory, developed by Benoit (1995), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how organizations can restore their reputation following a crisis. The theory outlines a range of strategies that organizations can employ to repair their image and regain public trust. These strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Each strategy serves different purposes depending on the nature of the crisis and the organization's perceived level of responsibility.

1. **Denial:** This strategy involves rejecting or refuting any claims of wrongdoing or involvement in the crisis. Organizations might use denial to assert that they were not responsible for the crisis or that the crisis did not occur. This approach is often used when the organization believes the claims against it are false or exaggerated. However, denial can be risky if the crisis is widely acknowledged or if evidence contradicts the denial.

2. **Evasion of Responsibility:** Here, the organization acknowledges the crisis but attempts to minimize its perceived responsibility. This can involve claiming that the crisis was caused by external factors beyond the organization's control or that it was an isolated incident. This strategy is useful when the organization wants to reduce the level of blame or criticism it faces.
3. **Reducing Offensiveness:** This strategy aims to lessen the perceived severity of the crisis. Organizations might use techniques such as highlighting past positive actions, downplaying the impact of the crisis, or comparing the crisis to more severe events. By reducing the offensiveness of the situation, organizations hope to mitigate negative reactions and improve their image.
4. **Corrective Action:** Organizations use this strategy to demonstrate their commitment to addressing the issues that led to the crisis. This involves outlining specific steps taken to correct the problems and prevent future occurrences. Corrective action can include implementing new policies, enhancing safety measures, or making organizational changes. This strategy helps to restore confidence by showing that the organization is taking concrete measures to resolve the issue.
5. **Mortification:** Mortification involves accepting full responsibility for the crisis and expressing genuine remorse. Organizations using this strategy issue apologies and offer compensation or restitution to those affected. Mortification is particularly effective when the organization acknowledges its faults, shows empathy, and takes steps to make amends. This approach is aimed at rebuilding trust and repairing the relationship with stakeholders.

In the case of the Marina Resort boat mishap, applying Image Repair Theory involves analyzing how the resort utilized these strategies to address the crisis and repair its image. The resort's response included several elements aligned with Image Repair Theory:

- ◆ **Corrective Action:** The Marina Resort implemented measures to address the immediate impacts of the crisis, such as enhancing safety protocols and providing medical assistance. The resort likely communicated these actions to reassure stakeholders that steps were being taken to prevent a recurrence.
- ◆ **Mortification:** The resort issued public apologies and offered compensation to the families of the victims. By acknowledging responsibility and expressing remorse, the resort aimed to demonstrate empathy and commitment to addressing the harm caused.

By employing these strategies, the Marina Resort sought to mitigate reputational damage and restore trust among stakeholders. Understanding how these image repair strategies were applied provides insight into the effectiveness of the resort's crisis response and the overall impact on its reputation.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The findings are structured according to the research objectives and questions. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved five key stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Familiarization with the Data

The initial stage of thematic analysis involved immersing in the collected data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, media reports, and official documents. This process helped identify initial impressions and areas of interest. Common themes began to emerge, including communication strategies, stakeholder perceptions, and the role of digital media.

Initial Coding to Identify Relevant Themes

The second stage involved systematically coding the data to identify recurring patterns. Key codes included:

- Timeliness of updates
- Transparency in communication
- Stakeholder engagement
- Social media impact
- Coordination among stakeholders

These codes were assigned to specific portions of the data and formed the basis for developing overarching themes.

Reviewing and Refining Themes

During the third stage, the codes were grouped into broader themes. The refinement process ensured that the themes captured the essence of the data while remaining distinct. The final themes included:

- Communication Channels and Their Effectiveness
- Impact of Stakeholder Engagement
- Strengths and Weaknesses in Crisis Communication
- Digital Media as a Crisis Management Tool

Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined and named to accurately reflect its focus:

1. **Communication Channels and Their Effectiveness:** Examines the use of press releases, social media, and direct engagement.
2. **Impact of Stakeholder Engagement:** Explores how families and affected parties were communicated with and the outcomes of these interactions.
3. **Strengths and Weaknesses in Crisis Communication:** Highlights what worked well and what failed during the communication process.
4. **Digital Media as a Crisis Management Tool:** Analyzes the role of platforms like Twitter and Facebook in mitigating the crisis.

Findings

The findings from the analysis are presented in the following sections, structured by the identified themes.

Theme 1: Communication Channels and Their Effectiveness

The resort employed multiple channels to disseminate information. While press releases were effective in delivering official statements, social media offered immediacy and interactivity. Direct engagement with families was critical for trust-building.

Table 1: Communication Channels Used During the Marina Resort Boat Mishap

Communication Channel	Purpose	Observations
Press Releases	Inform public	Initial delays were noted.
Social Media	Real-time updates, rumor control	Effective but resource-intensive
Direct Engagement	Support for victims' families	Enhanced trust and empathy

Theme 2: Impact of Stakeholder Engagement

The direct communication with victims' families showed high levels of empathy, which positively influenced public perception. However, some stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction with delayed initial responses.

Table 2: Assessment of Stakeholder Engagement

Criterion	Strengths	Weaknesses
Empathy	Personalized support	Limited outreach initially
Transparency	Open communication	Initial gaps in information

Theme 3: Strengths and Weaknesses in Crisis Communication

The resort demonstrated strong digital communication capabilities but faced challenges with coordination and resource allocation.

Table 3: Strengths and Weaknesses of Communication Approaches

Aspect	Strengths	Weaknesses
Timeliness	Frequent updates after delay	Initial delay created confusion
Digital Media Utilization	Broad and interactive reach	Resource-intensive management

Theme 4: Digital Media as a Crisis Management Tool

Social media platforms were integral in managing the narrative, addressing misinformation, and engaging with stakeholders. However, the potential for misinformation to spread on these platforms posed a significant challenge.

Table 4: Role of Digital Media in Crisis Management

Platform	Purpose	Observations
Twitter	Updates, interaction	Effective in real-time updates
Facebook	Public announcements	Broad reach but slower feedback

Instagram	Visual updates	Limited use in this scenario
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Discussion of findings

The thematic analysis highlights the complexity of managing communication during a crisis. Effective strategies require a balance between timeliness, transparency, and stakeholder engagement. The Marina Resort's experience underscores the importance of leveraging digital media while addressing gaps in traditional communication methods.

Communication Channels and Their Effectiveness

The findings show that press releases, while official and credible, lacked immediacy during the initial stages. Social media filled this gap, demonstrating the importance of real-time communication. However, the reliance on resource-intensive platforms posed operational challenges. Direct engagement with victims' families emerged as the most impactful channel for fostering trust and empathy.

Stakeholder Engagement

The study emphasizes that empathy and transparency are crucial during crises. Direct communication with stakeholders, particularly victims' families, mitigated negative perceptions and improved overall satisfaction. However, the resort's limited initial outreach created gaps in stakeholder confidence, reinforcing the need for proactive engagement strategies.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Crisis Communication

The resort's strengths included effective use of digital platforms to counter misinformation and provide updates. Weaknesses, however, were evident in the lack of initial coordination and absence of a structured crisis communication plan. The initial delay in responding to the crisis highlighted the need for pre-established protocols to enable swift action.

Digital Media as a Crisis Management Tool

The analysis underscores the dual-edged nature of digital media. While platforms like Twitter and Facebook proved invaluable for real-time updates and engagement, they also required constant vigilance to prevent the spread of misinformation. The study highlights the importance of leveraging these tools strategically, ensuring they complement other communication channels.

Summary of Findings

The findings from thematic analysis highlighted several critical aspects:

1. Communication strategies showed moderate success, with digital media playing a significant role.
2. Stakeholder engagement was a strength, though gaps in early communication impacted perception.
3. Digital platforms offered both opportunities and challenges in managing the crisis.
4. The absence of a pre-existing crisis communication protocol hindered the resort's initial response.

Conclusion

The Marina Resort boat mishap served as a critical case study for understanding crisis communication in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Thematic analysis revealed key areas of strength, such as empathy and effective use of digital

media, and highlighted gaps in initial timeliness and coordination. These findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive and proactive communication strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the thematic findings, the following recommendations were proposed:

Immediate Recommendations

1. **Develop Crisis Communication Protocols:** Establish clear guidelines for initial response to reduce delays.
2. **Enhance Monitoring Tools:** Implement systems for real-time tracking of public sentiment and misinformation.
3. **Strengthen Team Training:** Equip staff with skills for empathetic stakeholder engagement and digital media management.

Long-Term Recommendations

1. **Integrate AI Technologies:** Use AI to analyze trends and automate responses during crises.
2. **Conduct Simulated Drills:** Regular crisis simulations will help prepare staff for real-world scenarios.
3. **Collaborate with Agencies:** Foster partnerships with emergency responders to ensure seamless coordination.
4. **Expand Digital Media Strategy:** Optimize platform use to maximize reach and engagement during emergencies.

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