

Course: SKOM12
Term: Spring 2022
Supervisor: Marlene Wiggill
Examiner

Context in Crisis Communication: Exploring Cultural and Political Influence on Crisis Communication in Liberia

ANTOINETTE YAH SENDOLO

Lund University
Department of strategic communication
Master's thesis



Abstract

Understanding context is paramount to the practice of crisis communication. In this thesis, I explore how cultural and political contexts influence crisis communication using Liberia as the area of study. However, the scope is narrowed to understanding the research phenomenon from the perspective of communicators in public sector organizations. Using a qualitative, interpretive research approach and semi-structured interviews as the research method, the thesis analyzes communicators' subjective experiences and interpretations.

The findings revealed the following themes as influencing factors for how crisis communication is planned in Liberia, specifically by public sector organizations: a culture of Collectivism, a Culture of Individualism, a Culture of Distrust and Disbelief, and finally, Authority and Government Propaganda. However, all these contextual elements influence crisis communication at different levels based on the crisis setting, the specific public sector organization managing the crisis, proximity to government, and the organizations' and public's interest in the political system.

A significant discovery in this thesis is the cultural divide between rural and urban settings that shape how crisis communication messages are disseminated and understood. The findings revealed that rural areas practice a culture of Collectivism while urban settings are more individualistic in how they react to crisis information. These findings imply that people in rural communities will respond positively to information about a crisis that threatens the members or values of their shared groups or communities regardless of the impact on them as individuals. In contrast, urban dwellers will have a positive action mostly when the information is about how a particular crisis affects them as individuals. The results further suggest that authority and government's propaganda play a significant role in framing crisis communication in public sector organizations. Additionally, due to the strong unquestioning culture in rural areas, public sector communicators in Liberia first try to communicate crisis related-information to the traditional leaders rather than sending information directly to an entire community.

Key Words: Crisis Communication, Culture, Politics, Crisis Response, Government, Propaganda

1.0 Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and extend special gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Marlene Wiggill, for her guidance. She has been an inspiration throughout this journey, providing pieces of advice and words of encouragement. Her patience, support, and accessibility were helpful during the process.

Additionally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family and loved ones for the moral support that kept me emotionally strong during these past few months.

Table of Contents

2.0 Introduction	6
2.1 Problem Statement	8
2.2 Aim of the Study	10
2.3 Research Questions	11
2.4 Motivation for Choosing Liberia’s Public Organizations	12
3.0 Literature Review	14
3.1 Crisis Communication in an International Setting	14
3.2 Crisis communication management	16
3.3 Culture and crisis communication	19
3.4 Political Impact on crisis communication	22
4.0 Theory	24
4.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory	24
4.2 Key concepts of SCCT	25
4.3 Crisis Response strategies	28
4.4 Reflection	30
5.0 Methodology	31
5.1 Research approach	31
5.2 Research Design	32
5.3 Qualitative Interview Proceedings	33
5.4 Selection of Participants	34
5.5 Process of Analysis	35
6.0 Analysis	37
6.1 Strategic Approach to Crisis Communication	38
6.2 Context in Crisis Communication	41
6.3 Crisis Communication and Cultural Context	43
6.3.1 Culture of Individualism	43
6.3.2 Collectivism and shared values in traditional settings	46

6.3.3 Culture of Distrust and Disbelief	50
6.4 Crisis Communication and Political Context	52
6.4.1 Authority and Government Propaganda	53
7.0 Discussion and Conclusion	58
7.1 Contributions and Implications for Research and Practice	61
7.2 Suggestions for Future Research	62
7.3 Concluding Statement	63
Limitation	63
References	64
Appendix	71

2.0 Introduction

In recent decades, the importance of context in crisis communication has become an area of interest for many researchers. However, the focus has mainly been directed towards understanding the crisis stage, crisis system, crisis stakeholders, and crisis type as a basis for determining what response strategy works appropriately with a particular crisis (Cancel et al., 1997). This poses a risk of overlooking the impact of other contextual factors like cultural control, societal influence, and political structure. This can cause difficulties in responding to a crisis appropriately because the effectiveness of crisis communication management depends on how well the personnel handling crisis situations understand the environment and the context in which they operate to channel and tailor their communication appropriately (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Another important aspect of context that has been researched in crisis communication is prioritizing and acknowledging the psychological and emotional dimension of the public and those affected or involved with the crisis (Kovoor-Misra et al., 2000; Weick, 2010). However, there are significant contextual concerns and questions about the time and settings of crises and how the process of investigation and evaluation are understood (Zhao, 2021).

Even though there are several different definitions of context, this study forms its foundation using Zhao's (2021 p. 518) explanation that context is the "situational settings in which crisis phenomena occurs." Based on that, it can be argued that the concept of context is essential in crisis communication because the factors that shape people's perceptions, understanding, acceptance, and how they communicate or consume crisis-related information may differ significantly across different cultures and political systems (Dykeman, 2005). Organizations rely on their involvement, interactions, and relationships with relevant stakeholders before, during, and after crises to protect and maintain their image and reputation (Benoit, 1995). Moreover, the way people interact or the level at which they get involved with other people or activities can be based on whether they are from what Hall (1976) categorized as a high or low context cultural orientation. A high context culture is discussed as a setting where members are engaged and involved with one another,

developing strong relationships. In contrast, members of low context culture are often individualized and have limited involvement and engagement with members of the society. Accordingly, this cultural context is characterized by limited social hierarchies and little or no communication (Hall, 1976). Therefore, the issue of context in crisis communication needs to be extensively explored from different dimensions going beyond just understanding crisis type or nature.

Because of the importance of context, many scholars (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Haruta & Hallahan, 2003; Huang & Bedford, 2009) have raised concerns over the skewed direction of research in crisis communication and have highlighted the need for more studies that incorporate both the cultural and social characteristics of crisis communication. Additionally, analyses of existing literature on crisis communication highlight the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by Coombs (2007) and the image repair theory (Benoit, 1995) as the two theoretical frameworks usually used in crisis communication research (Avery et al., 2010; Ha & Boynton, 2013; Ha & Riffe, 2015). Nevertheless, both theories focus mainly on the different strategies used by organizations or individuals during a crisis to disseminate instructing and adjusting information and actions that seek to avoid or repair reputational damage, respectively (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007).

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that, even though both theories do consider context to a certain extent, the frameworks have been entirely developed from a Western standpoint, and sometimes they may not map well the disparity that exists between Western and non-Western contexts. Consequently, they overlook other relevant factors influencing how organizations manage crises and how the public consumes and reacts to crisis-related information (Hu & Pang, 2016), especially in a non-Western culture. That is why Lee (2005) pointed out that the exclusion and limitation of understanding different cultures as part of the context in crisis literature must be strongly revisited because crisis communicators can only better understand how different stakeholders interpret crisis-related information if they (communicators) fully understand and acknowledge the cultural lens used in each crisis setting.

Considering that existing pieces of literature on crisis communication appear to be primarily one-sided with a focus on the Western point of view, as well as the limited outlook of the SCCT and

image repair frameworks, the field of strategic crisis communication presents some of the most difficult communication challenges in the global marketplace (Taylor, 2000). Additionally, understanding and examining the efficacy and defining characteristics of crisis communication strategies and practices have been a normative research focus for several scholars (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Brown & White, 2010; Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, et al., 1997; Kim & Sung, 2014).

With no intention of overlooking the essential contributions of previous research to the field of crisis communication, it is, however, critical to point out the limited attention being paid to understanding how the SCCT can be used from a non-Western perspective considering the issue of cultural orientation and political structure among other contexts. The SCCT and image repair theories seem limited when contextualizing different parameters or patterns that influence certain habits during crises. They are more concerned with providing guidelines for presenting crisis-related information to stakeholders and dealing with image and reputational threats (Huang et al., 2016). Such neglect is troublesome because understanding the role of culture and politics is of high significance to ensuring that communication or responses are appropriately channeled.

Furthermore, crisis organizations risk losing control of their communication and collaborations with essential stakeholders when there is limited knowledge or misunderstanding of the culture and political system (Yeo et al., 2018). Therefore, beyond the limited scope of current literature and the narrow focus of the SCCT and image repair theories, this study uses public organizations in Liberia as a frame to advance understanding of the effectiveness of context, particularly cultural and political influence in crisis communication in non-western environments. For the purposes of this thesis, public organizations refer to all parastatals or state-owned entities such as the National Public Health Institute (NPHIL), Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs & Tourism, and the Liberia Broadcasting System, etc.

2.1 Problem Statement

Context in the study of crisis communication has become an important area of interest. However, there still exists the problem of understanding the level at which people across different cultures can appropriately and comfortably digest crisis-related messages to reduce their risk exposure (Harro-Loit et al., 2012). The problem to be explored in this study is that literature on understanding

how cultural and political context influence crisis communication in non-Western settings, particularly Liberia, is limited. Such a limitation leads to a research gap in understanding how factors like cultural and political contexts of crisis communication in places like Liberia can be addressed. Thus, exploring such a phenomenon is relevant to the field as meaning ascribed to any crisis event is highly influenced by past experiences, cultural orientation, political structure, or affiliation of those seeking to understand why or how a crisis happened (Harro-Loit et al., 2012). Even though there are several contexts to consider in crisis communication, the scope of this thesis is narrowed to cultural and political contexts because most research in the field of crisis communication has been shaped by Western cultural assumptions. Such assumptions need to be revisited to incorporate other non-Western cultural assumptions since culture plays a vital role in shaping how people react to crisis communication (Huang et al., 2016).

On the other hand, political context can be a significant factor in public sector organizational crisis communication since public sector organizations predominantly function under political jurisdiction. In essence, political systems impose several impediments on them. Thus, it is critical to understand how these constraints manifest themselves during a crisis.

Organizations are exposed to several categories or types of crises that threaten their smooth functioning and reputation, ranging from disease outbreaks, terrorism, internal organizational crisis, and those caused by natural disasters (Arokiasamy et al., 2019). Moreover, the negative impact of such crises goes beyond threatening their brand image and reputation, which eventually leaves them vulnerable to the point of collapse (Ulmer et al., 2015). So, given that the way organizations handle crises provides a unique opportunity for them to maintain a good connection with stakeholders (Choi & Cameron, 2005; Negandhi, 1980), it is therefore critical for strategic communication professionals to study and understand which and how context influences the public's diverse opinions and responses to help shape their communication in a more significant manner (Harro-Loit et al., 2012).

The problem with how research has been conducted in crisis communication is that there seems to be a skewed presentation of context, thus focusing exclusively on organization-centric approaches. Thus, limiting the global applicability of crisis communication (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2018). In addition to this, the current narrow view of context subjects crisis communication to only an

organizational environment thereby overlooking other external factors (Zhao, 2021). Building on this, exploring how social contexts such as cultural and political structure influence the way in which strategic communication professionals communicate during a crisis will provide insight into the context of crisis communication from a Liberian perspective. Even more than that, it could present an opportunity to develop a crisis management framework that highlights cultural and political contexts without the inherent assumptions and biases of a western perspective, which can eventually be used as a tool for managing communication during crises in Liberia as well as in other countries with similar political and cultural contexts.

2.2 Aim of the Study

The study aims to explore and understand the influence of culture and politics on how communicators provide crisis-related information and protect the image and reputation of their organizations during crises in a non-Western culture. The study uses Liberia, which is typically a non-Western setting to understand the research phenomenon since most crisis communication literature and theories have been developed from a Western point of view. As strategic communication is concerned with organizations' purposeful use of communication to achieve their goals (Zerfass et al., 2018), this thesis recognizes the importance of environmental scanning in crisis communication, particularly in non-western crisis settings. Most importantly, the purpose of the study is not to exclusively solve the problem identified but instead seeks to contribute to the current body of knowledge on context in crisis communication. The study presents new insights and empirical views on how communicators in public organizations in Liberia approach and manage communication during a crisis while considering relevant contextual factors that could influence the public's perception and reaction to crisis-related information and how their approach differs from other cultural settings.

Therefore, findings from the study are based on the selected practitioners' perceptions of how context (cultural and political) influences crisis communication management. In doing so, the research provides answers to the below-listed question as a foundation for understanding the phenomenon under study.

2.3 Research Questions

The aim of the study is to advance understanding of the cultural and political context that influence or impact crisis communication in public organizations in Liberia. To fill the existing research gaps mentioned earlier, this paper asks the following question.

RQ: How does the cultural and political context in Liberia shape the practice of crisis communication in public organizations?

This study recognizes the complexities of crisis management, and the apparent challenges practitioners are likely to face during crises to achieve the aims mentioned earlier. Moreover, recognizing these apparent challenges sets the basis for contextualizing the study using several theoretical frameworks.

Based on findings and answers to the research question, the study will generate new insights into strategic communication research and serve as a substantial effort to add to the existing literature on context, particularly cultural and political contexts in crisis communication management. The study will potentially supply a perspective on strategic communication that is diverse from the more commonly considered Western point of view.

2.4 Motivation for Choosing Liberia's Public Organizations

Liberia is a small West African country with a population of about 5 million people (World Bank, 2020). The country is still recovering from the ashes of a brutal civil war that lasted from December 1989 through August 2003. The country has had its fair share of crises including not only the 14-year civil war but also the Ebola crisis of 2014 and the current COVID-19 pandemic. Even though this study seeks to explore and understand crisis communication in non-Western environments, the scope of the study has been narrowed to focus on a specific sector, public organizations, rather than other sectors like private organizations.

Like other organizations, public organizations in Liberia may be exposed to and challenged with managing various crises. For example, the country was one of the hardest hits in West Africa by the Ebola virus outbreak in 2014 (Nyenswah et al., 2016), and that crisis was managed by the two foremost institutions responsible for public health - the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL). Additionally, several crisis events have also been managed by the same institutions, including the recent Covid-19 crisis.

Also, studies on crisis management in Liberia reveal that the flow of communication is not always a smooth process for some public organizations. For example, Moon et al. (2015) and Figueroa (2017) mentioned that communication during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Liberia was slow during the initial stage due to a lack of an effective crisis communication strategy, thus leading to a delayed and inadequate development of risk and crisis communication, which eventually affected the first phase (Pre-crisis) of the crisis.

However, one unique context that stands out in existing literature on Liberia's crisis communication during these periods is the involvement of local communities and the sharing of crisis communication responsibility between different local, thematic groups, including county teams, front-line health workers, and other stakeholders. The inclusion of leadership at different levels in the communication process ranges from community to government and is not limited to formal leadership (Nyenswah et al., 2016). Such action is an indication that crisis communication

is not a linear process or one that follows an intervention strategy that works across every culture and system. In essence, crisis response strategies that are successful in one setting may not be workable in another (Taylor, 2000).

Although there have been several crisis events in Liberia, there is a gap in research that seeks to understand crisis communication through the lens of cultural and political contexts particularly, from the perspective of public organizations. Such a gap is an indication that more studies need to be conducted to advance additional knowledge in the context of crisis communication. On the same issue of context in crisis communication, Olsson (2014) presented a critical argument that for communication professionals to understand and align response strategy to a crisis type fully, it is essential to evaluate the cultural context that is always present in any situation regardless of whether it focuses on a global or national dimension. Based on this, Zhao (2021) suggests that the complexity of situational knowledge in crisis communication should not be underestimated, as this will help broaden the appeal of the practice.

In that respect, the study uses public organizations to understand the research phenomenon because public organizations usually function in open systems that can be easily affected and influenced by external events (Boyne, 2002). The perception that citizens are indirectly owners of, and significant stakeholders in public organizations sets the basis for them to raise their expectations and question the functioning of those organizations (Andrews & Walle, 2013). This places the responsibility on public managers to ensure public protection and that services are tailored to meet their stakeholders' needs (Boyne, 2002). With such responsibility placed on public organizations and expectations from the public and stakeholders, I perceive that such entities may often be exposed to image and reputational threats and crises; thus, it is vital to understand how crisis communication is influenced by politics and culture from their perspective.

3.0 Literature Review

Due to the impact of crises on organizational reputation, crisis communication has become an exciting research field in strategic communication (Ahmad & Idid, 2020). It is no exception in public organizations in Liberia and other non-Western countries. Several incidents can be considered common causes of organizational crises, including product defects, company rationalization, ethics and integrity issues, and business misconduct (Ahmad & Idid, 2020). However, approaching a crisis may require the consideration of different factors, including cultural and political contexts, which, to a more considerable extent, influence how communication practitioners decide on crisis response strategies and how the public responds to it.

In what follows, previous studies on crisis communication that are essential to understanding the phenomenon under study will be presented. This will be achieved by identifying, defining, and discussing essential concepts of crisis communication as well as how it is influenced by cultural and political contexts. Other vital concepts reviewed in this section are as follows: Crisis Communication in an International Setting, Crisis Communication Management, Culture and Crisis Communication, as well as a review of Political Impact on Crisis Communication.

3.1 Crisis Communication in an International Setting

Even though crisis communication is an exciting area of research regarding its international compass (Schwarz et al., 2016), researchers struggle to aim for ‘comparative studies’ that are developed from observation and experiment rather than theories. International crisis communication is yet to be thoroughly examined as there are still limited concepts that can be studied and used across different cultures, and there is also a need to develop procedures or measures that are workable across national cultures (Coombs, 2016). Also, there are two categories of challenges confronting the area of international crisis communication identified in existing research, namely the process of research and the criteria for evaluation, thus reducing the amount of crisis communication research that can be applicable in an international context (Coombs, 2016).

The limited studies in international crisis communication reveal that some countries are vulnerable to specific crisis types, which means the notion of a ‘one size fits all’ approach to crisis communication cannot be applicable due to the different factors that frame or confront each culture. For example, a study on international crisis management indicates that the middle eastern countries may be exposed to political disruption; Australia, Columbia, and India to natural disasters; and Nigeria and Russia to political and social crises (Seeger et al., 2016). Just as countries’ crisis vulnerability differs from one country to another, their approach to crisis communication and crisis response also varies from culture to culture. Using Nigeria, which is considered a typical non-western country as an example, research in international crisis communication reveals that the country’s crisis communication and management strategy is highly influenced by its culture because it is often considered in decision-making at national, local and organization level in the country (George, 2016).

On the other hand, research on crisis communication in South Africa, a country still considered a ‘traditional society,’ shows that providing crisis-related information is the responsibility of the government, particularly for national-level crises; however, the South African authority have often been condemned by the public for being reactive in their crisis communication approach (Wasserman & Hyde-Clarke, 2016). There are several research conducted on South African crisis communication (Wasserman & Hyde-Clarke, 2016). Nevertheless, these findings from current international crisis communication research point to the understanding that crisis communication is becoming international and can be influenced by different prevailing factors and circumstances (Coombs et al., 2010) such as culture, politics, religions, and other contemporary interferences.

3.2 Crisis communication management

Crisis communication is defined as the 'collection, processing, and dissemination of information necessary for addressing a crisis (Coombs, 2010). A crisis can be described as any significant, unpredictable event that can threaten and harm an organization and its stakeholders. Furthermore, even though crisis events are unpredictable, they are not necessarily unexpected to organizations (Coombs, 1999). However, there are two crisis stages identified by Coombs (2010) to help communicators to communicate strategically during a crisis. The two crisis stages are the pre-crisis phase and the post-crisis phase. In the pre-crisis stage, communicators are expected to collect and provide necessary information that seeks to help the crisis team understand the potential risk, prepare for decision-making, and provide training for those who may be tasked with the crisis management process. This process is referred to as environmental scanning in strategic communication literature.

On the other hand, the post-crisis phase focuses on communicators examining the organizations' efforts in managing the crisis, providing stakeholders information on adjustments made by the organization, and follow-up messages when needed. Based on the two stages of a crisis, Sturges (1994) identifies three objectives crisis communication seeks to achieve. The first objective identified by Sturges (1994) is providing instructing information to help stakeholders physically protect themselves from any harm presented by the crisis. The second aim is to provide adjusting information updating the public about the different crisis resolution efforts made by the organization. The third objective of crisis communication is to repair the organization's reputation and communicate information that aims at reducing the reputational threat posed by the crisis.

Organizational reputation is defined as "observers' collective judgment of an organization based on assessments of the financial, social and environmental impacts attributed to it over time" (Barnett et al., 2006, p. 34). Therefore, it is impossible for an organization to succeed, particularly during a crisis, without meeting the expectations of those stakeholders who are essential to the organization's operations (Maden et al., 2012) as an organization's actions and how it interacts with

relevant stakeholders influence its reputation (Rindova & Martins, 2012). Therefore, Khodarahmi (2009) argues that it is crucial for communicators to prioritize analyzing their organization's environment, the crisis context and type, and other factors as part of their crisis communication strategy to impact both stakeholders and the public positively. In agreement with Khodarahmi's (2009) argument, Chong (2004) further argues that for organizations to maintain their image and reputation while managing crises, considering the interest of key stakeholders and the context of the crisis are significant factors in ensuring that messages are appropriately channeled across.

Managing a crisis involves shaping the perception of relevant stakeholders by maintaining interaction with them to help prevent, resolve, and learn from a crisis (Jankelová & Mišún, 2021). Therefore, crisis communication serves as an essential aspect of crisis management that is intended to help organizations circumvent crises or control the occurrence of crisis events (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crisis communication management focuses on maintaining interactions between relevant organizational actors and how those interactions challenge their judgment and experience (Fasth et al., 2021). Therefore, how an organization manages its communication during a crisis becomes critical to restoring control, repairing its reputation, and regaining stakeholders' trust (Marsen, 2020).

Moreover, a continuous evaluation of communication and the general performance of the organization's crisis communication plan helps practitioners identify and improve inconsistencies, enabling organizations to have control over a crisis. Along the same line, Khodarahmi (2009) reinforces the argument that effective crisis communication management requires paying keen attention to tailoring crisis-related information and analyzing it based on the crisis settings to reach a more satisfactory conclusion or resolution. Importantly, understanding when, how, with whom, and what to communicate is significant for crisis management, and communicating strategically with key actors within the organization and the public is even more critical (King, 2002).

Discussing the importance of effective communication in crisis management, Heath (1998) highlights that the communication provided by organizations during a crisis must show that the organization is in control of the crisis. Doing so may help influence stakeholders' actions, psychological responses, and impression of the organization. Organizations managing crises rely on communication because a single negative impact on the reputation or established goodwill of

the organization will compromise its operations and chance of successfully resolving a crisis (Ashcroft, 1997). Therefore, for organizations to succeed with crisis management, they must be willing to integrate their daily operations, planning, and the crisis management structure, most importantly, communicating and understanding the context and situation (Heath, 1998). Understanding the context of the situation helps contextualize the nature of the crisis because a crisis is likely to fluctuate based on the type, the context, organizational liability, prevailing reputation, and the degree to which stakeholders are affected.

Therefore, the approach used by the affected organization to deal with risk is critical for effective crisis management (Marsen, 2020). Since several factors influence an organization's ability to manage a crisis adequately, Khodarahmi (2009) suggests that practitioners objectively consider every available crisis communication model to gain insights when developing a crisis communication plan that would allow meaningful flexibility and adaptability to communication practitioners in their decision-making process. That being the case, communication professionals have an essential role during a crisis to ensure relevant stakeholders and the public understand the situation and are informed about reacting to the crisis (Sturges, 1994).

The role of communication in crisis management is significant because public perception of a crisis and the affected organization can be shaped based on the organization's communication strategy and tactics (Pasquier & Fivat, 2012). However, Ahmad and Idid (2020) argue that even though communicating effectively with stakeholders helps reduce the crisis's negative impact on an organization, it is equally significant for communication practitioners to guide the organization's CEOs and managers on engaging media during a crisis event. They further argue that communication practitioners should be prepared to provide necessary advice to management on the issue that can potentially affect the organization's reputation and stakeholders during a crisis. Communicating effectively during an organizational crisis can help influence the development of a crisis to become beneficial to an organization and its constituents (Jong, 2021).

Therefore, practitioners must be involved in the strategic decision-making process to increase the organization's effectiveness during crisis management (Ahmad & Idid, 2020). The quality of how an organization handles a crisis can be measured based on how the organization responds to the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Making a communication decision during a crisis can be

complex due to paradoxes, including deciding quickly and the dilemma of balancing short-term against long-term impact. However, a key competence for effective crisis management is the ability of an organization to make quickly sound decisions under pressure (Fasth et al., 2021).

According to Sturges (1994), to communicate effectively during a crisis, communication practitioners must ensure that message content is customized based on the kind of information desired by the organization's stakeholders and based on the stage of the crisis. Due to the uncertainties created by the crisis, communication practitioners may be obligated to provide a flow of information because a lack of reliable and relevant information often lead to assumptions and multiple interpretations by the public that may increase the threat to the organization's reputation (Ahmad & Idid, 2020). The ever-changing dynamics in public opinion during a crisis signifies the importance of customizing communication content to improve an organization's opportunity of obtaining a positive balance among the public and its stakeholders. Therefore, communication professionals need to understand and recognize the different components and contexts of the crisis and develop a communication policy that seeks to address it appropriately (Sturges, 1994).

3.3 Culture and crisis communication

Cultural difference is a phenomenon that has been studied for some time now, and there is limited agreement on what culture is. Further research, including Hofstede (1983), and Taylor (2000) have provided arguments and discussions on how culture can shape people's perceptions and interpretations of the world. One definition of *culture* describes it as a mutual organization of the mind of a specific group of people that sets them apart from others who are not considered members of said group (Hofstede, 1984). Avruch and Black (2001) also describe culture as the 'lens' that frames the perception of a particular group of people and influences how they see, think, and feel about things that occur around them. Generally, culture sets the basis for how particular individuals or groups act, and it provides instructions on the fundamental values and norms that they are expected to live up to. Thus, it is a part of human existence even though it is often unrecognizable. Nevertheless, cultures are usually manifested through the subcultures of individuals and social groups (Kesetovic et al., 2014). In essence, culture cannot only refer to a specific ethnical group, but also to more “informal” groups such as city dwellers and people living in rural areas.

Because culture is highly linked with characteristics like norms, values, and actions, it is most likely that individuals who are members of similar cultural backgrounds will freely interact and trust each other. Those with different cultural experiences may have a challenge relating to people from other cultures, hence the importance of understanding culture in crisis communication (Mileti, 1999 as cited in Yeo et al., 2017). Based on the complexities of crisis and the importance of culture, Bergeron (2015) argues that understanding cultural differences are essential to achieving crisis resolution because it helps communicators tailor their messages to meet the different needs of their public. Nevertheless, when the role of culture is ignored, communicating with diverse public can be obstructed, and there is a high chance of escalating the already existing crisis. In that respect, An et al. (2010) argue that in order to successfully develop what may be considered an appropriate crisis response strategy, organizations in crisis need to have an in-depth understanding of the cultural norms of their public. In essence, crisis communicators must assess and evaluate the difference in cultures (meaning making) and strive to be aware of the perception, traditions, language, and other factors that frame the realities of the setting in which the crisis occurred (Kesetovic et al., 2014)

Considering that many different factors may shape public perception, Pearson and Clair (1998) explain that it is unhealthy for organizations to only focus on assessing and measuring the negative impact on their reputation without considering factors that uphold the environment in which they (organizations) operate and what affects and triggers public interpretations and interactions. Regardless of the complexities of crisis, culture tends to have a significant role in shaping and framing both crisis organizations and stakeholders' interpretation of a crisis (Pedersen, 1987), as well as how meaning is ascribed to the situation and how individual and community reacts or responds (Yeo et al., 2017).

Usually, culture defines people's behavior in times of crisis, particularly when they perceive that a crisis threatens their most basic values and survival. Any crisis communication that disregards the difference in culture poses a severe challenge to the overall management of a crisis (Kesetovic et al., 2014). Culture sets the basis for how meanings are created in a specific situation, so managing the perception of a particular target group about the crisis is especially important since meanings assigned to a crisis are not just prescribed but instead established through sharing of information between the organizations and the target group, those at the receiving end. Therefore, it is

particularly paramount for crisis communication practitioners to be aware and knowledgeable about the culture of their environment by investing time in understanding culture and building trusting relationships with their stakeholders (Kesetovic et al., 2014). During a crisis, culture affects the smooth flow of communication among relevant stakeholders, limiting their ability to coordinate their actions or strategies effectively. Additionally, culture influences what crisis information or response strategy is workable in a particular setting. For example, using a form of response that does not correspond with the cultural pattern of the crisis setting may jeopardize crisis resolution and increase resistance (Kesetovic et al., 2014). Consequently, if not adequately addressed, the interference of culture may produce an unfavorable result in crisis management (Yeo et al., 2017). On this matter, Pearson, and Clair (1998) argue that effective communication during a crisis must carefully consider tailored and customized messages that appeal to the needs of a specific target group or, in general, at every developmental phase of a crisis.

Going beyond just seeing culture as what shapes people's understanding of the world, Weick (1988) puts forth the argument that in crisis communication, making sense of crises can be a challenge for organizations when they do not fully assess the culture of their stakeholders. Consequently, when care is not taken, communication or crisis-related information meant to help direct the process of decision-making in crisis management may become what intensifies the crisis. Furthermore, such difficulty is explained from the point of view that people's interpretation of and reactions to a crisis are firmly based on the system or culture that shapes their realities. However, research in crisis communication usually explores the extrinsic proportion of crisis communication, which is the response strategy developed and applied by organizations during and after a crisis as a way of maintaining, restoring, and protecting their reputations among their stakeholders (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999; Frandsen & Johansen, 2007). Thereby neglecting the reality that communicating and relating to the public during crises is contingent on evaluating cultural and traditional control factors to contemporary constraints and opportunities. To a more significant extent, all these potential elements determine the level at which a particular practice succeeds and how effective and ethically correct an organization will be when dealing with crises (Cancel, Cameron, SalJot, et al., 1997).

3.4 Political Impact on crisis communication

In crisis communication, seeking political presence and relevance presents a limited line between crisis communication and political leadership crisis (Podar & Voina, 2022). This happens often because political leaders or actors use rhetorics that are geared towards prioritizing the impact of the economic and political context created due to the occurrence of the crisis, especially in government settings (Bernard et al., 2021). Based on that, Podar and Voina (2022, p. 44) argue that the quest to have a balance between the governance system, power structure, and the political control and context of a particular crisis is vitally essential to ensuring that the way organizations respond to crises goes beyond the common 'instrumental and technocratic one.' Since the social constructs of crises are usually formed through competing political interests (Boin et al., 2009), political actors have a unique role in crisis communication to set up and preserve authority during a crisis (Zhao, 2018). In essence, when public organizations are faced with a crisis, there is an increase in public concern and expectation, which may substantially differ from how they question private organizations (Falkheimer, 2009).

On the other hand, Podar and Voina (2022) assert that the idea of state governance and the way political authority is invoked during a crisis is a significant factor in contextualizing the process of effectively communicating information clearly and rapidly while responding to stakeholders and the public. However, there is frequently an increasing expectation placed on government organizations that are different from how they expect other organizations to behave during a crisis (Falkheimer, 2009). Such action emphasizes the influential role of the political system or structure in crisis communication as the public relies on those in authority for information that would help them minimize their risk and exposure when a crisis erupts (Downs et al., 2009).

The impact of the political system on crisis communication cannot be overlooked. Research on political influence in crisis communication speaks to evaluating the political history of a crisis setting as a metric for understanding why and how a crisis erupts (Rauh, 2021; Zhao, 2021). Rauh (2021) also debated that the understanding that a particular crisis is 'existentially' intimidating depends on how well it can be attributed to fundamental characteristics of the relevant political system. Such assertion is evidence in the current literature on how political context can affect crisis communication, whether it is discussed from a western or non-western perspective. Furthermore,

Zhao (2021) suggests that considering the political system, history, and ideology as a political context during a crisis forms the basis for complex and all-inclusive knowledge of the political context of crisis communication.

However, from the perspective of the contingency theory of strategic conflict management, the political context of a crisis provides the opportunity to adequately comprehend the position and responses of organizations in a crisis event (Pang et al., 2010). However, the political system can negatively shape crisis communication and the perception and trust of the public (Podar & Voina, 2022). Such influence is often manifested through the struggle for political representation and how power is operationalized during a crisis (Podar & Voina, 2022).

4.0 Theory

In this section, the framework used as the theoretical foundation of the study will be discussed, beginning with a presentation of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The discussion of the SCCT focuses on the fundamental concepts of the theory and its proposed crisis response strategies. The SCCT will be used as the primary theory for the upcoming analysis of the research findings. After the theory is presented and discussed in this section, I will reflect on how it will guide the theoretical understanding of the study.

4.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The SCCT is a theoretical framework that seeks to help crisis communicators and managers to pinpoint appropriate response strategies to assist organizations in handling a crisis. The theory is concerned with understanding the level at which an organization's reputation is threatened as well as who and what is responsible for the occurrence of a crisis. According to Coombs (2007), the nature of the SCCT is to understand how the public perceives an organization during a crisis event and seeks to maintain and re-establish a positive reputation for organizations. The theory also highlights the level of crisis responsibility stakeholders attribute to the affected organizations (Coombs, 2007).

In the knowledge of the SCCT, there are two types of information needed generally in crisis response. The first type of information is instructing information geared toward educating stakeholders on how to protect themselves physically during a crisis. The second type of information required by the SCCT is referred to as adjusting information. Adjusting information helps stakeholders cope with the crisis psychologically. It also provides explanations about 'what, when, where, why, and how the crisis happened (Coombs, 2017). The SCCT guides finding the link between crisis types and appropriate crisis responses (Coombs, 2007).

Most importantly, the Theory prioritizes communication as a significant factor in influencing stakeholders' and public perception of the affected organization during a crisis event (Coombs, 2006); as such, sharing of information is vital to be carried out throughout the crisis management process (Carroll, 2013). Communication in the logic of the SCCT can be carried out in two broad categories: (1) managing information and (2) managing meaning. According to Coombs and Holladay (2009), managing information in crisis management is collecting and analyzing crisis information and disseminating the knowledge developed from the crisis analysis, while managing the public and stakeholders' perception of the crisis and the organization can be considered managing meaning in the crisis management process.

4.2 Key concepts of SCCT

The central concepts of the SCCT set forth an evidence-based theoretical framework that aims to help individuals and organizations assess and understand how to enhance their reputational protection during a crisis. A key focus of the SCCT is placed on crisis managers to thoroughly investigate each crisis to evaluate and understand the magnitude of the reputational threat posed to their organization by the crisis they are confronted with (Coombs, 2007). The theory also speaks to how stakeholders' perception about an affected organization's reputation can influence the attributions of responsibility or emotions made about a crisis.

Nevertheless, there are three essential characteristics of a crisis that can potentially shape the reputational threat presented during an organizational crisis. The first element that shapes reputational threats is referred to as initial crisis responsibility, which can be interpreted as the level at which relevant stakeholders believe that specific actions of the organization caused the crisis. Such perception is usually built on the crisis type or the basis on which the crisis is framed (Coombs, 1995). However, the more stakeholders believe that the affected organization is the cause of a particular crisis, the more likely it is for the threats to its reputation to escalate (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 1999).

The second factor that shapes the organization's reputational threats is crisis history, referring to whether or not the organization has had a similar crisis experience in the past. Moreover, if it is established that the ongoing crisis is homogeneous to other situations experienced by the affected organization, stakeholders may derive an understanding that the organization has a problem that must be addressed to save its reputation (Aquino et al., 2004; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

Thirdly, prior relations contribute to shaping a reputational crisis because it speaks to how an organization has related or is perceived to have coexisted with its stakeholders in other organization-related contexts. Having good prior relations with external and internal stakeholders is beneficial to organizations. Nevertheless, when they do not have a positive relation with their stakeholders in different domains outside of a crisis event, their chances of reducing reputational threats are limited (Porritt, 2005).

Considering the different factors that are likely to shape the way organizations are viewed in terms of crisis responsibility, reference has been made to three crisis clusters that are formed based on how crisis responsibility is attributed to organizations based on the crisis type. figure 1 presents brief explanations of the different crisis clusters and crisis types. The picture provides a general idea of what constitutes a cluster and how responsibilities are attributed to the crisis type. However, to fully understand the different crisis types, refer to Coombs and Holladay (2002), where crisis types and clusters are extensively discussed.

Figure 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters (Coombs, 2007)

Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.

(Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)

Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.

Rumor: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.

Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.

Product tampering/Malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organization.

Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.

(Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)

Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.

Technical-error accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.

Technical-error product harm: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.

Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.

(Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)

Human-error accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.

Human-error product harm: Human error causes a product to be recalled.

Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.

Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.

Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

These clusters are separated into three, beginning with the victim cluster, where responsibility attributed to organizations is insignificant because the affected organization is also viewed as a victim of the situation (natural disasters, rumors, product tampering, and workplace violence). The next crisis cluster is what is termed the accidental cluster. Even though this cluster is slightly different from the victim cluster, there is still a limited amount of responsibility attributed to the organization, for example, a technical error is considered uncontrollable and unintentional. The last cluster identified in current literature is the intentional cluster, which accounts for the most substantial attribution of crisis responsibility. This cluster is formed when a crisis is perceived as purposeful and based on human error or organizational misdeed (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

4.3 Crisis Response strategies

Since crises are often influenced by outside forces, the essence of crisis management is to try to avoid them or prepare to handle them by developing and implementing an effective crisis response strategy (Verčič et al., 2019). Crisis response strategies are symbolic resources vital to helping crisis managers deal with crisis events in organizations (Coombs, 1995). Coombs (2007) explained that crisis response strategies are instrumental in repairing the reputation of organizations, reducing harmful effects, and preventing unfavorable behavioral intentions during an organizational crisis.

There are two primary components of crisis response, according to Coombs (2007): (1) base crisis response (instructing and adjusting information) and (2) reputation management crisis response. However, identifying and understanding the crisis and the context in which it occurs is critical in selecting a crisis response strategy (Coombs, 1995). From the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) standpoint, instructing and adjusting information is the fundamental crisis response strategy needed when responding to a crisis. Coombs (2007) argues that the instructing information is provided to help inform relevant stakeholders about what action can be taken to protect themselves during a crisis physically, while the adjusting information explains what, why, when, where, and how of the crisis to help stakeholders cope psychologically with an ongoing crisis.

There are three different types of instructing information usually used as a crisis response strategy in crisis response literature: (1) crisis basics, which is the information provided to stakeholders at the initial stage of the crisis detailing what has occurred in the crisis event; (2) Protection instructing information provides necessary instructions on what relevant stakeholders should do to be saved from any harm caused by the ongoing crisis; and (3) Correction instructing information that seeks to assure the public and stakeholders about the affected organization's efforts in correcting the problem that may have caused the crisis and what measures are put in place to ensure that similar crisis is avoided in the future (Bergman, 1994; Coombs, 2006, 2014; Sturges, 1994).

However, the SCCT, which is used mainly in public relations, focuses on maintaining and re-establishing a favorable reputation with its stakeholders during a crisis. Hence, the extent to which stakeholders believe the organization is responsible for a crisis, is paramount (Coombs, 2007). According to the SCCT, protecting the reputation of an organization should be a high priority for a crisis response strategy because it is a valuable intangible asset to any organization, and damage to an organization's reputation is a threat to its existence, particularly during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Coombs and Holladay (2002) further suggest that organizations must carefully align their crisis response strategies to each crisis type. Moreover, for organizations to protect their reputation during a crisis, the response strategy must be suitable for the specific crisis and the potential harm to its reputation.

Most importantly, an organization in crisis needs to ensure a good flow of communication between stakeholders as part of its crisis response strategy. Those stakeholders are likely to dismiss negative information and see the organization as less responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Also, Coombs and Holladay (2008) argue that what message(s) an organization communicates as well as its actions when responding to a crisis can usually determine how its reputation is protected or affected negatively by the ongoing crisis.

Therefore, there are several crisis response strategies (apology, sympathy, or information) employed by communication practitioners based on the type of crisis they are confronted with and the extent to which the organization's reputation is being threatened by the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). In general, an apology is regarded as the most effective crisis response strategy because of its ability to shape public perception and limit the impact of a crisis on an organization's reputation (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997). However, in disagreement, Kesetovic et al. (2014) argue that an apology's success in crisis response depends on several components, including crisis setting, time, and how the apology is channeled or presented to the target group. A public apology is when organizations acknowledge their fault and seek forgiveness from their stakeholders and the public (Benoit & Drew, 1997). On the other hand, the sympathy response is an accommodative strategy that is often applied when an organization accepts responsibility for a crisis and shows concern for those affected by such a situation (Coombs, 2006). Lastly, the information-only strategy, also referred to as adjusting information, is used when an organization resolves to communicate only about what has happened. However, many scholars still have opposing views

on the effectiveness of each strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; DiStaso et al., 2015).

4.4 Reflection

The above section has provided a discussion on the development and fundamental concepts of the SCCT, which has been chosen as the theoretical foundation for analyzing the findings of this study. Considering that the study seeks to understand the cultural and political influence on crisis communication in non-western settings, it is only essential to highlight the characteristics and response strategies of one of the most used theories that focuses on determining ‘Crisis Response Strategies by aligning them to the crisis types and other response option’ and its applicability in organizational crises. The SCCT also focuses on protecting and maintaining an organization’s reputation. However, it is not so clear on how the theory can be used across different cultures.

Even though the SCCT is, to a certain extent, concerned about crisis communicators and managers understanding their environment, one can argue that the understanding of how it can be applied to different cultures is overlooked. Culture has been discussed as a significant factor that influences how crises are interpreted and the meanings that are ascribed to them (Dykeman, 2005), while politics has been found to be particularly essential to understanding the position and response of organizations during a crisis (Pang et al., 2010). Therefore, discussing the theory and using it as a foundation for this study is crucial as it provides an understanding of why such a study is particularly relevant. The theory will also help us understand whether crisis communication and the chosen response strategies used by public sector organizations in Liberia are influenced by cultural and political system or structure.

5.0 Methodology

The qualitative method and the interpretative perspective were selected as the research method and paradigm for this thesis since the study seeks to explore the experiences and interpretations of communicators on how the cultural and political context of Liberia shape crisis communication in public sector organizations. This section presents a detailed explanation of the research paradigm followed by the research design and a presentation of the interview procedure and data analysis process. Additionally, the participants' selection process will be discussed.

5.1 Research approach

Since this thesis is concerned with understanding context in crisis events, it is paramount to use a qualitative research approach that values the subjective interpretation and understanding of participants' experiences. From an interpretive viewpoint, meanings are established and re-established through everyday interactions, usually referred to as the social construction of reality (Leavy, 2017). In other words, social reality is implanted within and cannot be absorbed from other social settings; as such, the reality is interpreted through a process of sense-making rather than hypothesis testing. Therefore, how people structure, classify and interpret their world and their reactions to these interpretations is essential (Prasad, 2019).

A qualitative research approach is appropriate for the study since the aim is not to acquire a single correct answer; instead, the research findings are based on the participants' own experiences and interpretations. Because this study seeks to expand knowledge on a supposedly understudied area and topic (cultural and political influence on crisis communication in Liberian public organizations), the choice is obvious. This is because the interpretive tradition is developed on the notion that people's interpretation is the starting point for expanding understanding of a social phenomenon (Prasad, 2019). Therefore, the world is shaped and reshaped through different interactions and interpretive processes that assign meanings to situations, gestures, and activities (Leavy, 2017). Furthermore, interpretive researchers value context because of the assumption that

context creates the basis for how meaning is constructed (Leavy, 2017). Thus, a qualitative, interpretive approach is helpful in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and political challenge(s) that influence crisis communication in Liberia. This paradigm allows me to investigate the social realities the participants have constructed for themselves in relations to how crisis communication is influenced. Understanding the realities, they have constructed based on their experiences is particularly essential to this study as these realities influence their behavior and decision-making process.

However, even though this research approach is appropriate and helpful in answering the research question, it is essential to note that it impacts the interview process. Using the interpretive approach requires that I observe my biases as interacting with the participants is a social construction of reality.

5.2 Research Design

Since the research seeks to explore and understand the influence of culture and politics on crisis communications based on participants' experiences and interpretations, the qualitative research design has been chosen. The qualitative method is appropriate when information needed to answer a research question is based on people's beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and viewpoints (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This research approach helps researchers explore and learn about social behaviors to unpack the meaning people assign to different events, situations, or artifacts; or develop a profound understanding of some social dimensions. Generally, research methods must be chosen based on their potential to address the research aim and assist in answering the research question (Leavy 2017).

Therefore, in order to address the research question: (How does the cultural and political context in Liberia shape the practice of crisis communication in public organizations?), this thesis uses a qualitative research method to acquire an understanding of the communicators' subjective experiences and their meaning-making process through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which helped address the purpose of the study and answer the research questions.

5.3 Qualitative Interview Proceedings

This study attempts to understand the cultural and political challenges that influence crisis communication from the perspective of communicators from public organizations in Liberia. Based on that, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to clearly understand the communicators' subjective realities regarding the research phenomenon. The in-depth semi-structured interview approach was selected because it allows the communicators to extensively explain their experiences and provide interpretations in detail using their own language (Carter & Henderson, 2005).

To ensure that the interviews were guided and that critical concepts and themes from the literature were covered, an interview guide was developed (Appendix 1). Despite the interview guide, the semi-structured interview method provided flexibility because the interviewer could ask probing questions during the interviews to gain a better understanding of the participants' views. The interview guide included a wide range of open-ended questions to encourage meaningful conversations with the communicators since understanding their interpretations and experiences is essential to achieving the purpose of this thesis. The interview guide was structured based on Carter and Henderson's (2005) suggestions on how semi-structured interview guides should be designed. According to them, it is helpful for an interview guide to begin by reintroducing the research purpose and reassuring participants about how the data will be used.

Additionally, generic preliminary questions were intended to make the communicators feel comfortable speaking on the topic. Using this format gave participants sufficient time to adjust while also creating the right atmosphere to build rapport. Another advantage of starting the interviews with generic questions enabled me to get some basic information about their

organizations. Also, using this pattern is usually helpful because interviewers can get additional information that is likely to be helpful for other specific questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A face-to-face interview was chosen because it allows the researcher to build rapport, observe gestures, and capture other visual cues during the conversations (Leavy, 2017). Even though the interviews were face-to-face, I discussed and arranged with the communicators to conduct the sessions in a neutral place to maintain dependability. Even though some interviews were conducted at the communicators' offices, we conducted the session in secured places like conference rooms or offices where they could not easily be distracted by other co-workers or organization members. Each interview lasted about an hour.

5.4 Selection of Participants

The focus of this master's thesis is to explore and understand the cultural and political influences on crisis communication in public sector organizations in Liberia. This study refers to public sector organizations as state-owned entities. This sector was selected mainly because of its vulnerability to external influence and public scrutiny since it operates in an open system (Boyne, 2002) and the high expectations and criticism it gets from the public (Andrews & Walle, 2013). To understand the research phenomenon, a purposive, criterion-based non-probability sampling procedure was used to select the participants of the study. This sampling procedure was employed because of its ability to produce what Patton (2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) refers to as "information-rich cases". According to Patton (2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), information-rich cases produce insights that researchers can use to 'learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose' of the phenomenon under study (53). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that an essential aspect of purposive, criterion-based sampling is identifying the selection criteria that may be significant in choosing the appropriate participants or sites to study. As such, it is essential to first establish what characteristics of the sample group are critical to the research and identify people who meet those criteria because the principles set up for the sampling should directly mirror the focus of the study and guide recognition of 'information-rich cases.'

Based on that, the following criteria were established to ensure that the participants' experiences could get the most out of the interviews in terms of functional or helpful information that would help address the research purpose and answer the research question:

1. Participants must be in a senior communication position in public sector organizations.
2. Participants must have spent at least two years with their current organizations and five or more years working as professional communicators.

After identifying twelve communicators working in senior communication positions in public sector organizations that match the criteria for the study sample, initial telephone calls were made to them seeking consent. During the telephone conversations, I provided brief information about the purpose of the study and asked if they would want to participate in the data collection process. Following our first conversations, the ten communication practitioners who agreed and expressed interest in participating in the study received emails with detailed information about the study and how the data collected would be used. Additionally, communicators received a second email with an informed consent form (see appendix 2) that explained the purpose of their participation and their right to decline at any point in the data collection process. Providing the communicators with an informed consent form was an ethical step because they have the right to know and understand why they are being researched. In essence, research participants have the right to understand the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time (Seale et al., 2007).

5.5 Process of Analysis

Due to the focus of the study, the data analysis process was done using the inductive approach with an interpretive frame prioritizing how the communicators interpret and construct or assign meaning to the research topic. This implies that the information derived from the in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted was merged and arranged into several themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure that all information used in the analysis was accurate, the interview sessions were recorded with the communicators' consent. The analysis process started with transcribing the interviews using an artificial intelligence software called Otter AI. Even though the software helped capture

most conversations, I listened to the audio recording while going through the transcripts to ensure that the information captioned by the software corresponded with what was said. Additionally, to ensure the credibility of the data, participants were contacted to verify the information from the transcripts, especially those that were not clearly captured by the software and could not be further clarified even after listening to the audio recordings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After verifying the transcripts, making sense of the data began by sorting it into open codes using short words and phrases to help me retrieve specific information throughout the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The open coding process was necessary for making sense of the data because it allowed me to extensively identify different segments that later became helpful to the analysis process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Several themes were developed from the open codes by grouping similar answers, ideas, and concepts together. However, they were later sorted, and those relevant to addressing the research questions were discussed in the analysis. Sorting out the data and developing the themes that are essential to the research is vital since the goal of ‘data analysis is the process of making sense of the data by consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read’ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p.202). Themes developed from the open coding process were arranged using Nvivo. The main themes captured from the data are:

1. Culture of Individualism
2. Culture of Collectivism
3. Culture of Disbelief
4. Authority and Propaganda

The communicators’ interpretations of the themes were found to be relevant to addressing the purpose of the study and answering the research question.

6.0 Analysis

What follows in this chapter is an empirical analysis of the cultural and political influence on crisis communication in Liberia, particularly from the perspective of communicators working in public sector organizations. The results will be presented in line with themes generated from the ten semi-structured interviews based on the frequency of its appearance and its relevance to answering the research question.

The first part of this section presents the participating communicators' strategic approach to crisis management vis-a-vis the Liberian context in crisis communication. Following that, the three major themes that are relevant to addressing cultural influence will be presented. These themes focus on understanding how the cultural orientation of Liberia influences crisis communication.

A significant finding under this theme is that there exists a divide in the culture of urban (**Individualism**) and rural (**Collectivism**) settings. These findings will be discussed and followed by the other theme that emerged under this element of the research question, a **Culture of Disbelief and Distrust**.

The second part of this section will present the theme that emerged regarding the influence of politics on how communicators in public sector organizations communicate during a crisis. Under this segment, the theme presented is '**Authority and Government Propaganda**'. These are the different challenges that influence crisis communication as presented by the participating communicators interviewed for this thesis project.

For confidentiality purposes, the names of the public sector organizations and the participating communicators will not be disclosed. The participants will be represented by the letter "C" (for "Communicator") followed by the number corresponding to the order in which the interviews were conducted. For example, the first interviewee will be referred to as C1.

6.1 Strategic Approach to Crisis Communication

[C2] We do not have a crisis communication plan, but we have risk management included in our communication plan. When a crisis erupts, we go to the plan and assess the situation before deciding how to approach it. Whether to only issue a press release, go on the radio, issue notice in the newspaper or engage the communities.

[C7] We have developed a communication policy, but we are still waiting to approve it because of the government's bureaucracy, but we meet as a team to understand the situation before deciding how to approach it.

It is evident that most public organizations do not have an actual crisis communication plan; however, how public sector communicators approach a crisis or determine a response strategy is strictly dependent on an impromptu assessment of the organization's reputational threat, crisis settings, nature, or crisis type. Additionally, the extent at which research is conducted to understand a crisis before determining an appropriate response strategy that matches a crisis type remains on the spectrum. Understanding a crisis type and aligning it with each response strategy is one key concept of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007). Nevertheless, in the case of the communicators interviewed for this study, the process of how crisis types are matched with a particular response strategy can be described as ambiguous since they lack a crisis communication strategy that should serve as an introductory guide for assessment and alignment.

[C1] Sometimes we work with our bosses to prepare them to speak with the media during a crisis. We also have an internal communication policy that allows us to engage our colleagues and keep them informed during a crisis. Because the more effective you are internally, the better it is, especially during a crisis.

[C5] If you do not have an excellent internal communication policy, you can never have a standard communication process. We use our policy to keep our staff aware of what is happening during a crisis because they can help defend the organization by providing the right narrative, particularly on social media where people post misinformation.

In order to effectively communicate crisis related information and maintain consistency in the flow of communication provided to the public when a crisis occurs, these public organizations often try to have strategic in-house meetings that seek to inform and educate organizational members on who, what, and when to communicate at a particular stage of the crisis. Such strategic meetings are conducted to prepare executives or relevant organization members with limited media training for when they will have to engage the public on behalf of the organization during a crisis.

Strengthening internal communication is another way the participants prepare for crisis response and ensure that co-workers are informed about every stage of the crisis. In this way, they fully understand the situation, serve as ambassadors for the organization, and can speak about the crisis when the need arises. This practice by the participants aligns with Falkheimer and Heide (2006)'s argument that in addition to providing crisis information to the public, it is logical for communicators to provide media training for other executives on media engagements, mainly when these crisis managers are likely to interact with the public or the media during a crisis. As such media training increases the possibility of getting organizations' stories out to the public.

[C10] We try to assess the potential reputational threats to the organization, and if it is high, we first try to limit those threats. This society is gullible, and people base their judgment on misinformation and wrong perceptions of government organizations, especially here in urban cities. So, you have to defend yourself.

Contrary to the SCCT's support for providing instructing information at the early stage of a crisis (Coombs, 2007); and Harro-Loit et al. (2012)'s assertion that public interest and safety must be a priority before reputation, the participating communicators in some public organizations focus more on protecting the image and reputation of their organizations.

Apparently, such posture is due to the lack of trust in public organizations, a trend developed based on power distance. How far people feel excluded from governance processes and how well they perceive the deployment of power to meet just ends are two critical barometers for measuring trust or lack of it in public organizations and the information disseminated therefrom. As Hofstede and Bond (1988) argue, people in societies with power distance between government and citizens are aware of the inequality in the distribution of authority or power, thus increasing distrust and limiting citizens' ability to forgive those at the top whenever there are crises or human mistakes.

Notably, the participants said that the denial and apology crisis responses are the most used by public sector organizations in Liberia. However, when, and how these crisis responses are usually employed is highly based on the affected public and the circumstances of the crisis. For example, in urban areas where people have strong and different political opinions and are more doubtful about the honesty of those in the public sector, communicators typically use denial or defensive crisis response strategies to protect their organizations' reputations. For example, one of the participants explained that "[C6] our people feel that apologizing or accepting responsibilities in

public relations or in crisis communications, is a wrong thing to do. If you made a mistake, as a government institution and apologize, it will damage the organization's image especially here in Monrovia".

On the other hand, the participants said that communicators are mostly persuasive in their communication approach and accommodating or apologetic when dealing with crises in rural areas. According to Benoit, Drew (1997) and Coombs (2006), organizations use the apology and accommodative (sympathy) response strategies whenever they realize their responsibility for a crisis and seek forgiveness from stakeholders and express concerns for those affected by the situation. However, in the case of public sector organizations in Liberia, the apology and sympathy strategies are often used as their strategic approach to winning the support of rural communities and not necessarily because they recognize their fault in the crisis. The interviewees expressed that being persuasive and apologetic are the most effective ways of managing and communicating crisis-related information in rural areas. The communities have more collective nature and are connected to their traditions and cultures, thus differentiating them from urban settings where inhabitants are individualistic and highly politically driven.

[C5] Communicating with our traditional or rural audience in the Liberian context, you need to use easier words, words that people understand, words that appeal to people, words that would speak to people's consciences, and that is how you get the rural leaders on board.

Based on the empirical materials, one can argue that despite the denial or defensive position often taken by public organizations in a crisis, local communities' views and positions are considered when compiling a crisis communication plan, even though this often comes secondary to managing the organizations' reputation in terms of priorities. Framing and designing messages that are truthful, appealing, and meet the communities' communication channels but still suit the interest of the organization is a strategic approach taken by the participating communicators to obtain acceptance in rural settings since the inhabitants are primarily collective in their response and

bonded by traditional norms. In that sense, the flow of crisis communication usually takes a top-down approach. This means that to successfully disseminate crisis information in rural settings, communicators often start their engagements with local or traditional leaders, who then communicate with their constituents. In essence, any crisis-related information that does not go through the appropriate channel (from local leaders to communities), will likely not be effective or achieve its intended goals.

6.2 Context in Crisis Communication

[C4] The first thing we must realize in the context of the crisis. What is the issue? How does it hurt the institution? What is the culture of the crisis region? For instance, the culture of the southeastern region is different from that of the north, and so are their reactions.

[C6] We consider the specific regions, time of the crisis, political atmosphere, and communication channels or possibilities [and] then come up with a plan to avert the crisis because there is no one size fits all.

The issue of identifying and understanding context appears to be something the participants recognize as a critical factor in strategically preparing and responding to crises. According to the participants, there are some critical contextual factors that communicators in public organizations tend to consider important to understand when preparing for or responding to crises. These are the audience's culture, crisis type, crisis settings, political views, and public perception.

Contextualization has been discussed as an essential part of crisis communication based on the idea that people's understanding and perception of crises substantially differ across cultures, regions, and political systems, thus impacting how they perceive and react to crisis-related information (Dykeman, 2005). Furthermore, Pearson and Clair (1998) argue that it is primarily disadvantageous for organizations when communicators or crisis managers fail to consider the different contexts of crisis and the factors likely to shape people's worldviews. In that sense, it becomes almost impossible to effectively select a response strategy that matches the crisis type because successfully managing a crisis requires the organization to know the contextual factors surrounding the situation.

For the interviewees, the essence of considering the context in their crisis communication preparation is to help them monitor aspects of the crisis that have the potential to undermine their response or affect their communication. In other words, identifying and understanding the context in which a crisis occurs enables them to carefully develop messages that suit different cultures depending on where the crisis has occurred. For example, one of the interviewees explained that “[C8] People here have different ways to react to crises, so we need a trend of response, and for us to meet their needs, we must understand all the different parts of the crisis”.

Another significant context flagged by the participating communicators was ‘culture’, as they explained, influences crisis communication at different levels. This naturally leads us to our next context.

6.3 Crisis Communication and Cultural Context

In this section, the cultural context will be addressed by discussing the following themes: **Culture of Individualism, Collectivism, and shared values in rural settings, and Culture of Distrust and Disbelief.**

6.3.1 Culture of Individualism

[C6] I think it is an individualistic culture here in Monrovia. When responding to crises, we do not look at it holistically as a national issue. If it affects you, it does not affect me. You know, it is not my issue.

[C7] It is mostly an individualistic approach for people in urban areas. People focus on their families and close contacts. I do not mind once something does not affect me and my immediate friends or family; I do not mind. I close my eyes to it. The day it affects me, that is when I will complain.

The culture of individualism stood out in all the interviews, and the participating communicators had extreme views and concerns about it. However, individualism was discussed in terms of responding to crises and not as the overall cultural system of Liberia. Discussion of this theme revealed that Liberians have different reactions to crises, particularly those involving the public organizations and depending on where the crisis is being managed.

Additionally, the interviewees explained that the issue of individualism is primarily common in urban areas, whereas people in rural settings are more collective in their response to a crisis. As part of Hofstede's first four cultural dimensions, the Culture of Individualism is described as societies where members often care for and seek their personal interests over group or collective interests (Rinne et al., 2012). The cultural difference identified between urban and rural settings in Liberia supports Basabe and Ros (2005)'s assertion that individualism is typical in more evolved areas while less developed areas are often more collective in nature.

However, most urban dwellers are more inclined to be highly involved with the political system. It can often be challenging to communicate with such a group as there are several factors to understand and consider when planning a crisis response strategy. Responding to a crisis in urban

areas requires understanding these factors. These factors can include:

- educational status
- political orientation
- public and media perception of the affected organization

However, what seems to be important to the participating communicators in their approach to crises in urban areas is how messages are constructed and framed. According to them, the urban public often doubts the importance and honesty of communication emanating from public organizations. So, in order to achieve the goals of a crisis communication strategy or plan, communicators must clearly show the necessity of the information and, most importantly, what negative or positive impact a particular crisis situation would have on that audience.

When crisis messages are not clearly communicated or cannot show why such information is essential, they are likely to be criticized or narrated as a propaganda strategy to promote the government's interest. In essence, most urban dwellers can often be opinionated and critical of public organizations, especially those who have some level of education. They are only interested in understanding how a crisis will affect them or their close relations.

Unfortunately, such an approach seemed to be a challenge for crisis communicators. For example, some interviewees expressed that “[C5] People are highly political in Monrovia and are often critical about government organizations, so for us, messaging is very important when dealing with the crisis here.” Participant [C6] says “The message development process is mainly important for communicating here during crises. People are always prepared to criticize or create their own narrative, so your messages must be clear and well-formulated, because everyone cares for him/herself, so your messages must be strong on the potential harm of the crisis.”

Providing clear and well-tailored messages is arguably the key to ensuring that crisis-related information achieves its intended purpose when communicating in urban areas in Liberia. Additionally, crisis information intended for affected urban communities must clearly show the crisis threat and its impact on the community. From the quotes immediately above, one can argue that even though public organizations may be noted for using the denial or defensive crisis response strategy mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, the participating communicators understand the

different interests of their audiences and the implications for their crisis communication processes.

[C5] The culture is both individualistic and collective. Nevertheless, I will describe people in Monrovia as more individualistic. We have not been able to build systems to support individuals, and to be honest, all of our mistakes come back at us when we have a crisis because then we have to deal with the people who are largely affected by the system.

In contrast to Hofstede's claim that the culture of individualism is built in complex and developed societies where people are independent (Basabe & Ros 2005), the interviewees believe that Liberia's individualistic culture is based on citizens' disappointment in the governing system. Accordingly, urban residents tend to act in an individualistic way during a crisis because there has not been a working government system that seeks to support people's basic needs, thus prompting people to care only for themselves and those that matter to them. The participants argue that such an attitude threatens the progress of communication during a crisis, considering that crises faced by public organizations are often situations of national concern. Oftentimes these crises hamper the economy, overstretch infrastructure, healthcare delivery services, or other national concerns. So, when people refuse to understand and approach these crises from a national point of view, it threatens the flow of communication and the overall process of resolving the crisis.

[C1] People here approach crises [sic] from an individual point of view, and that is bad for us. One example is the current Covid-19 crisis. When the first case was reported, most people in other surrounding communities did not care to follow the instructions because it was not close to them.

It can therefore be argued that for a public sector organization to effectively communicate during a crisis in this setting, it is crucial first to scan the crisis setting from different perspectives. Such a scan should be done considering different levels, including religion, social class, political affiliations, and educational status.

Other than that, communication not sufficiently tailored to address and meet the requirements of this group is likely to fail and be met with severe resistance and criticism. In essence, crisis communication in this setting needs to show how people in this group can be affected by a crisis if the information is not taken seriously.

6.3.2 Collectivism and shared values in traditional settings

[C4] You know, I will say people are connected in some rural areas because they believe in a particular value or tradition that bonds them together. They can barely question or speak to their traditional leaders or political leaders who have control as kinsmen. [C1]. The culture requires them to listen to their leaders. Those people are seriously loyal to their values and tradition. [C10] Because of the influence traditional leaders have on the people, and the connection they have with their tradition, they automatically agree to information from their leaders because they believe it is in the interest of their community. It is difficult to break that culture during a crisis.

Another cultural influence on crisis communication is collectivism in traditional settings. The communicators defined the culture of collectivism and Shared Values in traditional settings as being bonded by a collective value, thus suppressing people's opinions, and limiting their freedom to speak out or make decisions due to traditional norms. However, the culture of collectivism is also one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. It is described as a culture where the most significant interests and experiences of the people are internal and interconnected, thus, placing group over self-interest (Basabe & Ros 2005). Such tradition can be helpful and problematic for communicators when faced with a crisis.

On the one hand, there can be a smooth flow of crisis communication between local leaders and their community members when the leaders fully understand the crisis and believe that the organizations are honest and not responsible for the crisis. On the other hand, it can be problematic when the local leaders are not allies of the crisis organization.

Such distinction is important because local or traditional leaders are significant in ensuring the smooth dissemination of communication in rural areas. I would argue that such difference in realities emphasizes the argument that every crisis setting may influence and challenge communication in unique ways. People interpret crises differently depending on age, life situation, and past crisis experience (Harro-Loit et al., 2012). As such, communicators need to scan and understand the particular setting in which they function to effectively communicate and achieve their goals and protect their reputations during crises.

Environmental scanning is essential because the ability to acknowledge and understand the different reactions of the public plays a vital role in achieving crisis communication goals (Loit et al. 2012). In this sense, environmental scanning in a crisis is fundamental since each organization has its stakeholders, competitors, and public with unique interests and needs, especially when dealing with crises (Shobaki & Naser, 2017). Even though all the communicators did not agree on how this theme challenges or influences their crisis communication plan or strategy, they all agreed that holding onto shared values is an issue in some parts of Liberia, particularly in rural or traditional settings.

The interviewees asserted that the culture of collectivism in rural Liberia is such that members of traditional communities are not allowed to speak out or question traditional authorities, and as such, they follow whatever they are told by those they consider leaders. The concern raised by the interviewees is that because people in rural communities have been trained in a system that subjects them to be silent, they sometimes are vulnerable to manipulation and believing misinformation, thus, limiting the free flow of communication during crises.

However, to communicate crisis information in such areas, there must be a specific channel or pattern of communication. It is also essential to recognize and understand the perception of local leaders. According to the interviewees, a communicator might use questions such as the following to achieve this understanding:

- How do they perceive the organization managing the crisis?
- What is their understanding of the crisis?
- What is their political alignment?

These different questions need to be considered when planning crisis communication during a crisis involving the rural public because of their traditional beliefs and collective nature. According to the communicators, if these are overlooked, and local leaders have different perceptions, the implication is usually not favorable to communicators.

In essence, communicating in rural settings often requires special efforts and planning in order for messages to be fully accepted and for necessary actions to be taken by the communities.

One of the communicators [C9] uses the following statement to describe his organization's approach:

Normally, when there is an issue that requires us to engage rural communities, we first start our engagement from top to bottom. That is, our plan starts with the traditional leadership. If not, whatever we say would mostly be disregarded or misinterpreted by the people, and they would only listen to what their traditional leaders instructed.

Some of the participants whose organizations have managed crises in such a setting explained that it might be traditionally unacceptable for people to question local leaders in some rural settings. Therefore, communication must be adequately managed and disseminated using the appropriate channel (getting local or traditional leaders involved from the beginning) to avoid further crisis escalation.

[C2] You know the habit of collective cultural values affects and influences our communication during a crisis. You may think that not questioning the actions of our leaders or believing in a certain value is a sign of respect until you are faced with a crisis, and the leaders of small towns are against you; that is when you feel the effect of that tradition. [C6] Most traditional leaders have their political biases, so they sometimes think that we only care about protecting the government. [C8] I think traditional leaders sometimes take advantage of this culture to mislead people. That behavior is terrible for us, especially when we have to disseminate information during a crisis, but again, it is a problem of tradition.

Based on how the interviewees responded to the issue of collectivism, it became apparent that the issue of collective values in some areas can pose a significant threat to communication efforts and influence how information is shared in rural communities. However, the case may be different in urban areas where people are more educated and can debate organizations' actions.

Accordingly, the flow of crisis communication in the rural parts of the country is dependent

primarily on the acceptance and understanding of traditional leaders because the inhabitants rely on local or traditional authorities for information, especially during a crisis. Based on that, the involvement of local leaders in the development and sharing of crisis information is significant to achieving crisis communication goals. Additionally, how authority or leadership is solicited when communicating during a crisis plays a vital role in contextualizing crisis information and helps ensure effective communication with stakeholders and the public (Podar & Voina 2022).

The interviewees also explained that when traditional leaders believe that the public organization is responsible for the crisis, it becomes challenging to provide crisis information to the communities. Since people believe in their values and are not allowed to go against their leaders, communicators have to go through several negotiation processes to ensure that traditional leaders understand the risk and threat of the crisis and why providing the correct information to their community members is essential. However, the participants admit that such a process is often complex because people in rural communities have their own beliefs that cannot easily be changed. After all, it has become a part of the existence of communities. Additionally, the communicators argue that in a setting where people are not allowed to speak out, it becomes difficult for an outsider to communicate, especially when traditional leaders are not interested in the situation or believe the organization is responsible for the crisis. Such action is what the SCCT refers to as 'Initial Responsibility'. From the perspective of the SCCT, several factors shape reputational threats to organizations during a crisis, including this 'initial responsibility' which is the level at which stakeholders assume that a crisis was caused by the organization's own mistakes (Coombs, 1995).

Furthermore, the more stakeholders believe the organization is at fault, the higher the reputational threat (Coombs, 1995). However, even though people at the rural level may often approach crisis from a collective standpoint, their actions are primarily based on the interest and influence of their traditional leaders and kinsmen in authority. The responses from the interviewees show that collectivism is common in local or rural areas in Liberia, and this culture influences the presentation of crisis-related information and how communicators design their crisis communication strategies in those regions. However, such an approach differs in urban areas where people are more individualistic in their approach.

6.3.3 Culture of Distrust and Disbelief

[C1], As communicators in government institutions, people do not believe or trust what we say. Moreover, because of the existing perception of the public and how they see our institution, we often try to be defensive in our approach when dealing with crises. [C6] For some reason, there seems to be a natural tendency for people not to believe, and it makes me wonder, why are they not believing? Why are they not trusting the system? [C3] We have this kind of culture, and there is a thing to disbelieve. That is a cultural scenario that has filled the society. It is to the extent where the culture of the society and politics seem to be in synergy.

Several factors are likely to influence and impact the way communication professionals disseminate information and the kind of messages they provide the public during crises. Nevertheless, from the empirical materials, the issue of Distrust and Disbelief seems to be one of the challenges that influence how communicators working in public organizations in Liberia communicate during a crisis. The challenges posed by such a culture resonated with all the participating communicators. As seen in the above quotes, it becomes evident that the participators develop their crisis communication strategy with high consideration of public perception of the organizations and how those perceptions affect the reputation of the affected organization.

Even though the perceptions of the local communities are considered at the preparation stage, crisis messages are often tailored toward protecting or defending the organizations' reputations. However, the participants expressed frustration about such a culture because it makes communication difficult, especially when it requires convincing the public during a crisis.

[C5] The thought of lacking basic social services has affected the people, eventually leading to the culture of resistance. We feel the pinch of it because we must communicate and convince the same people who are already feeling disenchanting. So, there is always this dilemma of communicating messages that will serve the public's interest or prioritize our organizations' image and reputation.

Because citizens are often considered significant stakeholders in public organizations (Andrews & Walle, 2013), and due to a lack of public trust in the integrity and honesty of public organizations in the country, dealing with stakeholders' acceptance level and maintaining credibility becomes a significant challenge that influences crisis communication. The quest to continue defending organizational reputation comes to bear as communicators struggle between balancing their relationship with stakeholders and the public and preventing reputational threats. Based on that, the participants expressed that no matter the crisis, communication is usually shifted towards building stakeholders' and public trust by providing evidence when defending the organization, especially when dealing with a crisis that erupts based on false accusations.

Even though the SCCT suggests that communicators must understand the crisis type and match it to their response strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), communicators under these circumstances decide their strategies not based on the crisis type alone but on the social construct or culture of their public. The interviewees expressed dissatisfaction over how the public (both rural and urban) perceived them and elaborated that any information coming from public organizations is automatically considered a 'lie' and an attempt to promote the organizations' image and the government in general. In line with this, Pedersen (1987) explains that despite the crisis type, crisis settings, and the public involved, the social construct of the people plays a dominant role in how they interpret the actions of organizations and the crisis.

Additionally, the communicators explained that there is a wall of resistance, a strategy used by the people because they believe those working in the public sector have failed them and will continue to do so. The response by the interviewees indicates their level of frustration over such a culture.

As the empirical material reveals, communication practitioners have several factors to consider and challenges to overcome when communicating during a crisis. Based on the explanations from the interviewees, I would argue that in crisis communication there is never a single or straightforward way to navigate to reach a stage of resolution. Nevertheless, communicators should consider several contexts and perspectives before or while responding to a crisis. The interviewees explained that the culture of distrust and disbelief that the Liberian population has developed affects the success of their communication and limits the extent of their crisis response strategies.

For example, when public organizations are faced with a crisis and have to engage the public, there is often this narrative of public organizations using a crisis to achieve ulterior motives. As such, people pay less attention and follow their already built narrative. Such an explanation supports the reason for Pearson and Clair (1993)'s argument that it is not enough for crisis managers and communicators to rely only on understanding the reputational threat presented by a crisis. However, they must consider seriously how their environment is framed because they do not operate in isolation from the setting in which their organization exists, especially during crises.

Furthermore, the interviewees complained that functioning in a system where people disregard every information emanating from your organization makes communication difficult. Communicating is to ensure that a message is sent, received, and understood. However, it is difficult for them in public sector organizations.

6.4 Crisis Communication and Political Context

This section focuses on addressing the political influence on crisis communication by discussing the theme (**Authority and Government Propaganda**) that emerged as a major factor in shaping how communicators in public sector organizations prepare for crisis communication.

6.4.1 Authority and Government Propaganda

[C10] Politics play a major role in our communication here; I mean, it is living in bed with our culture, the issue of regional solidarity, party solidarity, and defending governmental institutions against oppositions. C6] The political culture limits communicators from being honest, so it greatly influences how we provide information during crises.

Even though there were several themes generated from the responses to this question, authority and government propaganda emerged as the most significant influence on communication during a crisis in public organizations. As communicators in public organizations, the responsibility or quest to always communicate messages that will help promote the government's image and reputation is of significant priority. Therefore, such responsibility seems to influence communication professionals' crisis plans or strategies significantly. The communicators expressed that the political system in Liberia does not appreciate 'accepting wrongs' and working to improve on them. Based on that, most information is often focused on ensuring that the organization's reputation and that of the Liberian government are protected.

However, just as in the case of the different cultural influences discussed earlier, the communicators had different opinions about how this theme influenced their communication during a crisis. Some of them acknowledged that even though the political culture encourages propaganda, communicators' continuous denial and defensive position contribute to why distrust can sometimes become a problem during a crisis. For example, a participant provided a crisis scenario and how the denial and defensive strategy encouraged distrust. "[C4] I remember a famous incident at one of the political parties' headquarters some years back where someone was shot. Five minutes later, I turned on my radio, and the then spokesman of the police was speaking. He told the public that they only used rubber bullets, and no live bullets were fired. Meanwhile, people saw the victim bleeding on the ground. The way the institution responded increased doubts and evoked public

criticism. After that incident, it became difficult for the public to believe any information from the police. Such denial is common within public sector organizations".

On the other hand, the other communicators believed that the most important function of communicators is to defend the organization. Therefore, their strategies are often shaped towards achieving their organizational goals but with a greater purpose of protecting the government's image since public organizations are government owned. For this group of participants, taking a defensive approach is the essence of their communication; therefore, most of their crisis communication plans are developed on that basis. For example, a communicator indicated that:

[C10] As a communicator in this country, especially working in government institutions, you must be able to provide a counter that will challenge or correct what is reported against your organization's interest. This society is gullible, and people base their judgment on misinformation and wrong perception of government organizations. You have to defend yourself.

Even though the communicators had different positions on their role during a crisis, they all agree on one thing: The political system of the country is a critical factor in shaping their communication during a crisis.

Based on the above quote, the desire to always be correct, and unwillingness to accept mistakes and improve on them, influence the participating communicators' use of defensive or denial crisis response strategies. However, such behavior sometimes creates a disconnect between the public and the organization, thus reducing their trust in communicators. The interviewees further explained that with the political system there is a tendency to circumvent the truth and hide things from the public, mainly when there is a severe threat to the governments' image. Accordingly, mistakes made by public organizations are usually shifted towards the government because there is already the issue of distrust among the public. Public organizations are usually exposed to critical examinations from their audience because they are considered state-owned, thus increasing citizens' interest in questioning their actions (Andrews & Walle, 2013).

[C5] When there is a crisis, the first thing management emphasizes is prioritizing the government's image, and you know we have a government system that promotes a good name. Sometimes we even get more combative instead of trying to make people understand what the real issues are because the system does not appreciate accepting wrong. [C3] You will see that, communicators, especially those in the public sector,

have to be heavily biased based on the nature of the governance system. [C8] It is a difficult thing based on our political culture; for those who find themselves in a communication position in the public sector, it is hard to be objective as a public institution. Moreover, you must always try to cover up almost every time.

The participants' expressions confirm An et al. (2010)'s argument that there are several factors to be considered when communicating during a crisis. However, the issue of politics and the need to be politically correct or have a perfect image to the public shapes crisis communication in a way that limits the essence of providing crisis related information. From the discussion, the political culture plays a significant role in how and why crisis communication messages are disseminated regardless of the crisis type or setting. Beyond the focus of government structure, a key point to highlight in this segment is that regardless of the organization, the political interest of those in a position of authority in the organization and the level at which they view and value communication in crisis also influences how communications decisions are made. This argument is evident from the discussion with the communication professionals as they also flagged that the involvement of organizational leadership in communication activities also shapes the process.

[C9] Based on our work here, our organization is almost always faced with crises. But unfortunately, in Liberia many of our leaders in the public sector believe that communication is only about a press release or press conference. So, when something happens, the concern is to put out a statement. [C2] Leaders only want to have a press conference, and they do not see it. I think it is a challenge that runs through Liberian public officials, that communication is almost relegated to the background.

Wailcox et al. (2017) say that communicators have a significant role during a crisis, going beyond producing and publishing press releases. As such, communicators must go beyond “developing press statements” and be fully involved in planning and making strategic decisions geared toward improving the organization's crisis communication management (Ahmad & Idid, 2020). However, the involvement of organizational leaders (Ministers, Managing Directors, and Commissioners) to a certain extent limits the control of communicators, thus, forcing them in the direction of propaganda, which seems to be the central focus of organizational leaders who primarily have some political alignment.

The participants acknowledged the general lack of trust in public organizations' honesty. They claimed that such lack of trust could largely be attributed to the continuous defensive posture of public sector organizations over the years. Accordingly, the culture of Distrust and Disbelief may have its foundation in how public organizations have positioned themselves within the public domain. In essence, the participants described the position of public sector organizations as one that is biased towards protecting the government's image and reputation. However, the issue of propaganda is often based on public organizations' refusal to honestly accept their part in a crisis and to seek forgiveness from the public. This leaves communicators only with the option of communicating what is acceptable by political leaders. Due to the attitude of public sector organizations when faced with a crisis that threatens their reputation, accepting responsibilities and apologizing is often seen as a weakness. Based on such beliefs, the interviewees normally tailor their communications to suit the political system as there are consequences if other strategies are employed without the permission of those organizations' leaders.

[C3] You have to develop your communication in agreement with the head. If not, you get into trouble. Furthermore, communication professionals in government agencies communicate what they are told to communicate; they will not work on their own.

Because if you try to open up too much, you get into trouble.

7.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The study seeks to explore and achieve knowledge and understanding of cultural and political challenges that influence crisis communication in public sector organizations from a non-Western viewpoint, thus using Liberia as the study area. This thesis recognizes a gap in the literature on context in crisis communication, particularly cultural and political influence, and the somewhat limited outlook of the SCCT. Based on the empirical materials, and to answer the research question, I argue that the influence of culture on crisis communication in public sector organizations in Liberia is equivocal. In essence, crisis communication in public sector organizations is influenced by different cultures and traditions depending on the crisis settings and the public sector organization managing the situation. Additionally, the results show that crisis communication may also be influenced by the political interest of public sector organizations' leaders and, most importantly, government propaganda.

Based on the findings, the importance of environmental scanning cannot be over-emphasized, considering the numerous factors that come to play when dealing with a crisis in urban and rural settings in Liberia. For organizations to strategically communicate and achieve crisis communication goals, communicators must be aware of the organizations' environment to keep track of external influences to match crisis responses to the crisis type (Amuna et al., 2017). In addition, organizations need to have a formal crisis communication plan that would serve as a guiding principle for strategically responding to crises. Due to the absence of a formal crisis communication plan, as in the case of the public sector organizations in this thesis, one can argue that the possibility of determining crisis response or communication strategies in a timely way would be a challenge for communicators. Moreover, such delay may threaten the success of the overall crisis management process. In order to effectively respond to a crisis, I would argue that communication practitioners must become more proactive than reactive in their communication approach. A proactive approach to crisis communication in Liberia would mean researching the different cultures and perspectives of the public in urban and rural communities to understand what resonates with those affected by the crisis and the different publics.

However, the general findings of this study can be discussed with a tone of uncertainty as there are several factors to consider regarding how culture and politics influence the way communicators in public organizations in Liberia plan and communicate during crises and how that communication is received. However, these contextual factors depend on the crisis settings, the type of public organization managing the crisis, the culture, and their proximity to and interest in the country's political system. On the one hand, the results suggest a cultural divide between urban and rural settings in Liberia. Nevertheless, the level at which each of the challenges of the different cultural practices influence and impact crisis communication depends on the regions and the type of public organization involved.

On the other hand, the political system demands cover-ups and propaganda, prescribing how communication is processed and shared during crises. However, like culture, the political system also influences communication at different levels and in ways that may be unique to each crisis setting and public organization within the country. Based on the complexities and differences in how crisis communication is influenced in these public organizations, it can be argued that different organizations may be challenged with different factors that shape their communication even when operating under the same sector or structure. Therefore, understanding the context in which each crisis occurs is of tremendous significance.

I would further argue that communicating during crises in Liberia requires careful consideration of the rural or traditional culture, which may differ substantially from urban settings. With this argument, I agree with Siew-Yoong Low et al. (2011, p. 234) that there is no "one size fits all approach and there is no superior culture" in crisis communication management because different cultures work differently. Even though people may be under similar political settings or cultures, how their realities are shaped is based on their involvement with other smaller or closed groups. The differentiating factors between individualistic and collectivistic cultures may be few, but how it influences crisis communication differs substantially. For example, public organizations dealing with crises in rural settings will most likely implement a response strategy that requires negotiations and acknowledging the public's concerns. Such a strategy helps communicators to adjust the organization's approach to clear negative perceptions and restore trust among stakeholders or the

public regardless of the crisis type. In contrast, communication in urban settings invokes defensiveness. A key takeaway is that, in rural settings, the formulation of crisis messages, perceptions of local or traditional authorities, and information dissemination channels are of utmost importance. On the other hand, message formulation, source credibility, and trustworthiness are essential to achieving crisis communication goals in urban settings.

The findings suggest that communication practitioners working in public sector organizations are encouraged to use defensive crisis communication approaches (attacking their accusers with little concern about making public apologies). This means that the crisis response strategy usually used is the denial strategy to protect the image and reputation of the organization. The Liberian political system may promote information manipulation and cover-ups during crises to prevent damage to the government's reputation.

Distrust in public sector organizations has been debated around several issues. Such a strategy is employed precisely in different contexts because an existing distrust culture has positioned the public to become resistant to most information emanating from a public sector organization. Again, this kind of response is typical in urban areas where literate people can debate the public sector organizations' actions. However, the most common cause of the decline in public trust in public sector organizations is that 'outputs and outcomes are below standard, and governments often fail to deliver on their promises' (Walle et al., 2008, p. 49). Therefore, Pearson (1993) argues that it is not enough only to understand the organization's risk or level of reputational threats but also to narrow environmental scanning down to different national cultures or system levels and what shapes people's actions at individual and group levels. Often, communicators may be focused on understanding their public's response and acceptance level. Based on the results, my argument is that it is essential to understand the culture that communicators and organizations have built over time that is manifested through the actions and reactions of the public. Therefore, it is vital for organizations also to evaluate their shared culture when developing their crisis communication plan or strategy.

7.1 Contributions and Implications for Research and Practice

This thesis theoretically contributes with significant findings on the cultural and political challenges that influence crisis communications in public organizations in Liberia. The results from this study suggest that crisis communication in Liberia, particularly by public organizations, is highly influenced by a political system that promotes cover-ups and propaganda as well as the different cultural dimensions of the country. The study reveals the split between urban and rural cultures, particularly how people respond to crisis and their perception of crisis-related information. Additionally, how communicators develop their strategies based on these different factors. A key contribution of the study is that culture and politics can influence crisis communications at different levels in an equivocal way, thus advancing the understanding that when communicating in Liberia during a crisis, it is not enough to plan or develop response strategies based on national cultures. This is because people's reactions, level of cooperation, and acceptance of crisis information is mostly dependent on how their close groups are framed as well as different political interests and demands.

Even though these findings can somewhat be interpreted as ambivalent or complicated, it is important to note that communication during a crisis will likely not be effective if it is developed based on a single cultural dimension or national cultural context. This phenomenon is something that also needs to be studied in order to adequately understand the level at which culture influences crisis communication and how they are received and accepted.

This study further emphasizes and contributes to the understanding that cultural consideration, whether at national or local levels, is a factor in crisis communication that must not be overlooked. Even though there are crisis communication theories like the SCCT that presents some guidelines for when organizations can communicate during a crisis and what kind of information to provide at what stage of the crisis, there is still a missing gap in providing specific details about who needs to speak to the public in crisis other than organizations or crisis managers.

However, from this study, one can learn that the issue of understanding cultural difference is

significant for crisis communication but what is even more critical is organizations being able to find or build a connection between themselves and their public. For example, organizations should be able to match the cultures or values of their organizations or spokesperson to that of the public to ensure a smooth corporation and coordination. In essence, this thesis contributes to the understanding that if crisis communicators wish to communicate effectively in a culture like that of the rural settings in Liberia, in addition to assessing the environment of the crisis, it may be paramount first to understand how the culture of the crisis organizations or spokespersons aligns with that of the values of the target public. That is why Yeo et al. (2017) argue that adaptation to different cultures is essential for effective crisis communication and management because recognizing cultural values and acknowledging and matching the heritage of others serves as a guiding principle for contextualizing social phenomena.

Lastly, the practice of strategic communication can gain from the insights of this thesis to advance understanding and acknowledge the different factors that underpin crisis communication from a non-Western perspective. A key learning from this study that is beneficial to practice is the divide between cultures in urban and rural settings in Liberia which presents a different viewpoint that is different from the common Western scenario famous in crisis communication literatures.

7.2 Suggestions for Future Research

In order to continue to explore and expand the understanding of the importance of context in crisis communication in non-Western settings, it is paramount to increase studies that focus on highlighting the perspective of such culture. Therefore, considering that the findings from this thesis are exclusively from one sector, the study can be further developed with research that would incorporate other sectors to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how the challenges regarding culture and politics influence crisis communication management in Liberia. Also, a study on practitioners' perception about the ethical dimension of crisis communication influenced by politics. Additionally, I suggest that research also consider the role that organizational culture plays in influencing crisis communication and how they are perceived and accepted by different publics.

7.3 Concluding Statement

Ultimately, neither culture nor politics can be separated from the context that influences crisis communication in public sector organizations in Liberia but instead have a long-lasting impact on how communication are developed in these organizations. Additionally, public reaction or response to crisis-related communication is carefully constructed based on each crisis setting, the organization's past relationship with its stakeholders, and its ability to approach the public based on the culture they belong to. Therefore, this thesis can conclude that the contextual factor that shapes crisis communication in public sector organizations is dependent on the different cultural and traditional values as well as political interests of both the public and the affected organization.

The cultural divide between urban and rural settings suggests that crisis-related information cannot be directly channeled to rural communities. As such, local or traditional authorities must be considered in crisis communication management in Liberia, which may not be the case for Western cultures. This finding is key to answering the research question on cultural influence as it shows the difference in how communicators approach crisis communication in the two settings.

Limitation

The findings and conclusion of this master's thesis is limited because it does not fully incorporate all of the contextual factors that are likely to influence crisis communication in Liberia. Firstly, the study only explored the view and understanding of communicators in public sector organizations and does not consider those of private or other organizations. Therefore, the results cannot be seen as the general assumption and reality for how culture and politics influence crisis communication in Liberia even though it can be an interesting analytical assumption for public organizations.

References

-
- Ahmad, Z. A., & Idid, S. A. (2020). PR practitioners' roles in crisis management: Malaysian perspectives. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 22.
- An, S.-K., Park, D.-J., Cho, S., & Berger, B. (2010). A Cross-Cultural Study of Effective Organizational Crisis Response Strategy in the United States and South Korea. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 4(4), 225-243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2010.515543>
- Andrews, R., & Walle, S. V. d. (2013). New Public Management and Citizens' Perceptions of Local Service Efficiency, Responsiveness, Equity and Effectiveness. *Public Management Review*, 15(5), 762-783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2012.725757>
- Aquino, K., Douglas, S., & Martinko, M. J. (2004). Overt anger in response to victimization: attributional style and organizational norms as moderators. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 9(2), 152-164. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.9.2.152>
- Arokiasamy, L., Kwaider, S., & Balaraman, R. A. (2019). Best Practices for Crisis Communication A Qualitative Study. *Global business and Management Research: An International Journal*, 11(2).
- Ashcroft, L. S. (1997). Crisis Management – Public Relations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 12(5), 325-332.
- Avery, E. J., Lariscy, R. W., Kim, S., & Hocke, T. (2010). A quantitative review of crisis communication research in public relations from 1991 to 2009. *Public Relations Review*, 36(2), 190-192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.01.001>
- Avruch, K., & Black, P. W. (2001). Conflict Resolution in Intercultural Settings In *The conflict and culture reader*. New York University Press.
- Barnett, M. L., Jermier, J. M., & Lafferty, B. A. (2006). Corporate Reputation: The Definitional Landscape. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 9(1), 26-38. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550012>
- Basabe, N., & Ros, M. (2005). Cultural dimensions and social behavior correlates: Individualism-Collectivism and Power Distance. 18(1), 181-226.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995). *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies : A theory of Image Restoration Strategies* [Non-fiction]. State Univ. of New York Press. <http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.uid&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.2977721&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Benoit, W. L., & Drew, S. (1997). Appropriateness and effectiveness of image repair strategies. *Communication Reports*, 10(2), 153-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08934219709367671>
- Bergeron, W. P. (2015). Considering culture in evacuation planning and consequence management. *J Emerg Manag*, 13(2), 87-92. <https://doi.org/10.5055/jem.2015.0222>
- Bergman, E. (1994). Crisis? What crisis? [Article]. *Communication World*, 11(4), 19. <http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.uid&db=bth&AN=9412021993&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Bernard, N. R., Basit, A., Sofija, E., Phung, H., Lee, J., Rutherford, S., Sebar, B., Harris, N., Phung, D., & Wiseman, N. (2021). Analysis of crisis communication by the Prime Minister of Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2021.102375>
- Boin, A., Hart, P. t., & McConnell, A. (2009). Crisis exploitation: political and policy impacts of framing contests. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(1), 81-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760802453221>

- Boyne, G. A. (2002). Public and Private Management: What's the Difference? *Journal of Management Studies* 39, 0022-2380.
- Bradford, J. L., & Garrett, D. E. (1995). The Effectiveness of Corporate Communicative Responses to Accusations of Unethical Behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics* 14, 875-892.
- Brown, K. A., & White, C. L. (2010). Organization–Public Relationships and Crisis Response Strategies: Impact on Attribution of Responsibility. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 23(1), 75-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726x.2010.504792>
- Cancel, A. E., Cameron, G. T., SalJot, L. M., & Mitrook, M. A. (1997). It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(1), 31-63.
- Cancel, A. E., Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M., & Mitrook, M. A. (1997). It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(1), 31-63. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0901_02
- Carroll, C. E. (2013). Corporate Reputation and the Multi-Disciplinary Field of Communication. In C. E. Carroll (Ed.), *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Reputation* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Carter, S., & Henderson, L. (2005). Approaches to Qualitative Data Collection in Social Science. In *Handbook of health research methods : investigation, measurement and analysis*. Open University Press. <http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.1622020&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Choi, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2005). Overcoming Ethnocentrism: The Role of Identity in Contingent Practice of International Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(2), 171–189.
- Chong, J. K. S. (2004). Six Steps to Better Crisis Management. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 25(2), 43-46. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02756660410525407>
- Coombs, T. W. (2016). *Methodological Challenges of International Crisis Communication Research*. 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Coombs, T. W., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16(2), 165-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089331802237233>
- Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the right words
The Development of guidelines for selection of the Appropriate Crisis Response Strategy. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8(4), 447-476.
- Coombs, W. T. (1999). Information and Compassion in Crisis Responses: A Test of Their Effects. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11(2), 125-142. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1102_02
- Coombs, W. T. (2006). The Protective Powers of Crisis Response Strategies
Journal of Promotion Management, 12(3-4), 241-260. https://doi.org/10.1300/J057v12n03_13
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049>
- Coombs, W. T. (2010). Parameters for Crisis Communication
In W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *HandBook of Crisis Communication*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Coombs, W. T. (2014). *Ongoing crisis communication : planning, managing, and responding* (Fourth edition. ed.) [Non-fiction]. SAGE. <http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.4317498&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Coombs, W. T. (2017). Situational crisis communication theory: Influences, provenance, evolution, and prospects. In F. Frandsen & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Handboos of communication science* (Vol. 23). Walter de Gruyter Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110554236-201>

- Coombs, W. T., Frandsen, F., Sherry J. Holladay, & Johansen, W. (2010). Why a Concern for Apologia and Crisis Communication? *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 15(4), 337-349. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281011085466>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2008). Comparing apology to equivalent crisis response strategies: Clarifying apology's role and value in crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 34(3), 252-257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.04.001>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2009). Further explorations of post-crisis communication: Effects of media and response strategies on perceptions and intentions. *Public Relations Review*, 35(1), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.09.011>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2014). How publics react to crisis communication efforts Comparing crisis response reactions across sub-arenas. *Journal of Communication Management*, 18(1), 40-57. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jcom-03-2013-0015>
- Dhanesh, G. S., & Sriramesh, K. (2018). Culture and Crisis Communication: Nestle India's Maggi Noodles Case. *Journal of International Management*, 24(3), 204-214. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2017.12.004>
- DiStaso, M. W., Vafeiadis, M., & Amaral, C. (2015). Managing a health crisis on Facebook: How the response strategies of apology, sympathy, and information influence public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 41(2), 222-231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.11.014>
- Downs, B. J. S., Fischhoff, W. B. d., B, H., & Maibach, E. (2009). How people think about cancer. In R. L. Heath & H. D. O'Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of risk and crisis communication* (pp. 507-524). Routledge. <http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.2492528&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Dykeman, B. F. (2005). Cultural Implications of Crisis Intervention. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 32 (1).
- Falkheimer, J. (2009). Rhetorical Defence Strategies After The Tsunami Flood Disaster In U. KiviKuru & L. Nord (Eds.), *After The Tsunami Crisis Communication in Finland and Sweden* Nordicom University of Gothenburg.
- Falkheimer, J., & Heide, M. (2006). Multicultural crisis communication towards a social constructionist perspective. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 14, 180-189.
- Fasth, J., Elliot, V., & Styhre, A. (2021). Crisis Management as Practice in Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises during the first period of COVID-19. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12371>
- Figueroa, M. E. (2017). A Theory-Based Socioecological Model of Communication and Behavior for the Containment of the Ebola Epidemic in Liberia. *Journal of Health Communication*, 22(1), 5-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2016.1231725>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2007). The Apology of a Sports Icon Crisis Communication and Apologetic Ethics. *Hermes, Journal of Linguistics*, 38.
- George, A. M. (2016). Crisis Communication Research in Nigeria. In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (Vol.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Ha, J. H., & Boynton, L. (2013). Has Crisis Communication Been Studied Using an Interdisciplinary Approach? A 20-Year Content Analysis of Communication Journals. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 8(1), 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2013.850694>
- Ha, J. H., & Riffe, D. (2015). Crisis-related Research in Communication and Business Journals: An interdisciplinary review from 1992 to 2011. *Public Relations Review*, 41(4), 569-578. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.06.019>

- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Books/Duobleday Dell Publishing Group Inc.
- Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M., & Lacey, S. d. (2016). Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them. *Human Reproduction*, 31(3), 498-501.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>
- Harro-Loit, H., Vihalemm, T., & Ugur, K. (2012). Cultural Experience as a (Critical) Factor in Crisis Communication Planning. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 20(1), 26-38.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2011.00657.x>
- Haruta, A., & Hallahan, K. (2003). Cultural issues in airline crisis communications: A Japan-US comparative study. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 13(2), 122-150.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980309364841>
- Heath, R. (1998). Dealing with the Complete Crisis-the Crisis Management Shell Structure. *Safety Science*, 30, 139-150.
- Hofstede, G. (1983). The Culture Relativity of Organizational Practices and Theories *Journal of International Business Studies*, 75.
- Hofstede, G., & Bond, M. H. (1988). The Confucius Connection from cultural roots to economic growth. *16*(5-21).
- Hu, Y., & Pang, A. (2016). Public relations practitioners' perceptions of the use of crisis response strategies in China. *Public Relations Review*, 42(2), 333-335.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.02.006>
- Huang, Y.-H., & Bedford, O. (2009). The Role of Cross-Cultural Factors in Integrative Conflict Resolution and Crisis Communication: The Hainan Incident. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(4), 565-578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209347631>
- Huang, Y.-H. C., Wu, F., & Cheng, Y. (2016). Crisis communication in context: Cultural and political influences underpinning Chinese public relations practice. *Public Relations Review*, 42(1), 201-213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.11.015>
- Jankelová, N., & Mišún, J. (2021). Key Competencies of Agricultural Managers in the Acute Stage of the COVID-19 Crisis. *Agriculture*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture11010059>
- Jong, W. (2021). Evaluating Crisis Communication. A 30-item Checklist for Assessing Performance during COVID-19 and Other Pandemics *Journal of Health Communication*, 25(12), 962-970. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2021.1871791>
- Kelley, H. H., & Michela, J. L. (1980). Attribution Theory and Research. *Annual Reviews Inc*, 31, 457-501.
- Kesetovic, Z., Toth, I., & Korajlie, N. (2014). Apology as Crisis Communication Strategy-Importance of Cultural Context *38* (1), 171-178.
- Khodarahmi, E. (2009). Crisis management. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, 18(5), 523-528. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09653560911003714>
- Kim, S., & Sung, K. H. (2014). Revisiting the Effectiveness of Base Crisis Response Strategies in Comparison of Reputation Management Crisis Responses. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(1), 62-78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726x.2013.795867>
- King, G. (2002). Crisis Management and Team Effectiveness: A Close Examination. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 41, 235-249.
- Kovoor-Misra, S., Zammuto, R. F., & Mitroff, I. I. (2000). Crisis Preparation in Organizations: Prescription versus Reality. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 63, 43-62.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0040-1625\(99\)00049-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0040-1625(99)00049-9)
- Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design. quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches* [Bibliographies

Online
Non-fiction

Electronic document]. Guilford Press.

<http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.uid&db=cat02271a&AN=atoz.ebs13174620e&site=eds-live&scope=site>
[http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&site=edspub-](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&site=edspub-live&scope=site&type=44&db=edspub&authtype=ip.guest&custid=s3912429&groupid=main&pr)
[live&scope=site&type=44&db=edspub&authtype=ip.guest&custid=s3912429&groupid=main&pr](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&site=edspub-live&scope=site&type=44&db=edspub&authtype=ip.guest&custid=s3912429&groupid=main&pr)
[ofile=eds&bquery=AN%2013174620](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&site=edspub-live&scope=site&type=44&db=edspub&authtype=ip.guest&custid=s3912429&groupid=main&pr)

Lee, B. K. (2005). Hong Kong Consumers' Evaluation in an Airline Crash: A Path Model Analysis. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(4), 363-391.

https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1704_3

Maden, C., E. A., E. T. E., & D. K. (2012). Linking Corporate Social Responsibility to Corporate Reputation: A Study on Understanding Behavioral Consequences. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 58, 655-664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.1043>

Marsen, S. (2020). Navigating Crisis: The Role of Communication in Organizational Crisis. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57(2), 163-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488419882981>

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research A Guide to Design and Implementation* Jossey-Bass.

Moon, S., Sridhar, D., Pate, M. A., Jha, A. K., Clinton, C., Delaunay, S., Edwin, V., Fallah, M., Fidler, D. P., Garrett, L., Goosby, E., & Gostin, L. O. (2015). Will Ebola change the game? Ten essential reforms before the next pandemic. The report of the Harvard-LSHTM Independent Panel on the Global Response to Ebola. *The Lancet*, 386(10009), 2204-2221. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(15\)00946-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(15)00946-0)

Negandhi, A. R. (1980). Multinational corporations and host governments' relations Comparative study of Conflict and Conflicting Issues. *Journal of Human Relations*, 33(8), 517-541.

Nyenswah, T., Engineer, C. Y., & Peters, D. H. (2016). Leadership in Times of Crisis: The Example of Ebola Virus Disease in Liberia. *Health System Reform*, 2(3), 194-207.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23288604.2016.1222793>

Olsson, E.-K. (2014). Crisis Communication in Public Organisations: Dimensions of Crisis Communication Revisited. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 22(2), 113-125.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12047>

Pang, A., Jin, Y., & Cameron, G. T. (2010). Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management: Directions

for the Practice of Crisis Communication from a Decade of Theory Development,

Discovery, and Dialogue. In W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *Handbook of crisis communication*. A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Pasquier, M., & Fivat, E. (2012). Crisis communication characteristics and error: A case study. *Public Communication Review*, Vol 2,(1).

Pearson, C. M., & Clair, J. A. (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared a framework for crisis management. *Academy of Management Executive*, 7(1).

Pearson, C. M., & Clair, J. A. (1998). Reframing Crisis Management *Academy of Management Review* 23(1), 59-76.

Pedersen, P. (1987). Ten Frequent Assumptions of Cultural Bias in Counseling. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 15(1), 16-24.

Podar, B., & Voina, A. (2022). Does Politics Influence Crisis Communication? An Analysis of Health Minister Nelu Tătaru's Discourses During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Media Research*, 15(1 (42)), 40-57. <https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.42.3>

Porritt, D. (2005). The Reputational Failure of Financial Success: The 'Bottom Line Backlash' Effect. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 8(3), 198-213.

Prasad, P. (2019). *Crafting Qualitative Methods, Beyond positivist traditions* Routledge.

Rauh, C. (2021). Supranational emergency politics? What executives' public crisis communication may tell us. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1916058>

- Rindova, V. P., & Martins, L. L. (2012). *Show Me the Money: A Multidimensional Perspective on Reputation as an Intangible Asset*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199596706.013.0002>
- Rinne, T., Steel, G. D., & Fairweather, J. (2012). Hofstede and Shane Revisited. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 46(2), 91-108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069397111423898>
- Schwarz, A., Seeger, M. W., & Auer, C. (2016). *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Seale, C., Giampietro, G., Jaber, F. G., & David, S. (2007). *Qualitative Research Practice* [Book]. SAGE Publications Ltd.
<http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=nlebk&AN=775811&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Seeger, M. W., Auer, C., & Schwarz, A. (2016). Risk, Crisis, and the Global Village International Perspectives
 In *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research*
 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Shobaki, Y. M. A. A. M. J. A., & Naser, S. S. A. (2017). Strategic Environmental Scanning an Approach for Crises Management. *International Journal of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering*, 6(3).
- Siew-Yoong Low, Y., Goodman, M. B., Varughese, J., & Pang, A. (2011). Communicating crisis: how culture influences image repair in Western and Asian governments. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16(3), 218-242. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281111156880>
- Sturges, D. (1994). Communicating through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 7(3), 297-316. (Sage Publication)
- Taylor, M. (2000). Cultural variance as a challenge to global public relations: A case study of the Coca-Cola Scare in Europe. *Public Relations Review*, 26(3), 277-293.
- Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2015). *Effective crisis communication : moving from crisis to opportunity* [Non-fiction]. SAGE Publications.
<http://ludwig.lub.lu.se/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.1705157&site=eds-live&scope=site>
<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip068/2006004956.html>
- Verčič, A. T., Verčič, D., & Coombs, W. T. (2019). Convergence of crisis response strategy and source credibility: Who can you trust? *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 27(1), 28-37.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12229>
- Walle, S. V. d., Roosbroek, S. V., & Bouckaert, G. (2008). Trust in the public sector: is there any evidence for a long-term decline? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 74(1), 47-64.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852307085733>
- Wasserman, H., & Hyde-Clarke, N. (2016). Crisis Communication Research in South Africa
 In A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger, & C. Auer (Eds.), *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Weick, K. E. (1988). Enacted Sensemaking In Crisis Situations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 25(4).
- Weick, K. E. (2010). Reflections on Enacted Sensemaking in the Bhopal Disaster. *Journal of Management Studies*, 47(3), 537-550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00900.x>
- Yeo, J., Knox, C. C., & Jung, K. (2018). Unveiling cultures in emergency response communication networks on social media: following the 2016 Louisiana floods. *Qual Quant*, 52(2), 519-535.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0595-3>
- Yeo, J., Li, H., Shin, Y. A., & Haupt, B. (2017). Cultural Approach to Crisis Management. In A. Farazmand (Ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance* (pp. 1-4). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_794-1

- Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 487-505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2018.1493485>
- Zhao, H. (2018). Constructing authority in times of crisis: A genre analysis of government crisis communication in China. *Journal of Communication Management*, 22(3), 346-360. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jcom-11-2017-0137>
- Zhao, H. (2021). Beyond culture: Advancing the understanding of political and technological contexts in crisis communication. *International Communication Gazette*, 83(5), 517-537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485211029066>

Appendix

Interview guide (Appendix 1)

Introduction questions

Good morning and thank you for agreeing to contribute to the study. Like I mentioned in my previous email, the results of this interviews will be analysed with other interviewees responses to form part of findings for my master thesis. And all the results will remained confidential and only used for the purpose you which you have given your consent.

Today, we will be having a conversation about the different contexts or factors that have the potential influencing how you communicate during crisis. A special focus will be placed on exploring the role of culture and politics and how they shape crisis communication Liberia's public sector organizations.

For this interview, we will define culture as the lens that shapes people's perception, and influences how they see, think, and feel about the world around them. And in terms of crisis, it can also be based on their experience of crisis.

Introduction

1. Can you kindly introduce yourself and tell me about your experience as a communication professional?
2. What is your knowledge of crisis communication in Liberia?
3. What type of organizational crisis have you been faced with before and what kind of organizational crisis you are likely to encounter and why?

Understanding Crisis response strategies

- 1 How do you use communication to manage institutional crisis?
- 2 Does your institution have a formal crisis communication plan or strategy? **Follow up question if the answer is yes.** what are the elements that are present or consider in the plan or strategy? If no, why?

- 3 What do you look for when developing a crisis communication plan or strategy?

- 4 How do you determine what kind of crisis communication strategy is appropriate for addressing a particular crisis? Ex: Denial strategy, or apology etc.

- 5 What are some of the contexts you considered when managing a crisis?
Ex: public perception, cultural or political understanding of the public etc.

- 6 What can you say is /are the major influence on how you communicate when your institution is face with a crisis?

- 7 How would you describe the culture of Liberia in terms of how they respond to crisis or crisis related information?

- 8 Would you argue that Liberia has a nationalistic, individualistic, or collective culture when responding to a crisis or not? Please explain your choice.

- 9 How does that shape the way they receive and react to crisis related information?

- 10 In what way does Liberia's culture influence how you communicate during crisis?

- 11 What role does the political climate of Liberia play in shaping how you communicate during a crisis and what impact it has on the public?

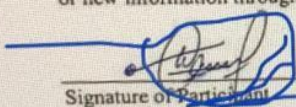
12 In summary, how do culture and politics impact how you approach a crisis that threatens the reputation of your institution?

Consent Form (Appendix 2)


participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researcher or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time because of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What Your Signature Means

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this thesis project and agree to contribute as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.


Signature of Participant

3/28/22
Date


Print Name: