



RESEARCH PAPER

**Role of Situational Crisis Communication Theory in
Telecommunication Crises: An Analysis**

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ABSTRACT

Telecommunications companies are encountering a growing array of crises. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offers a framework that takes into account the specific context of a crisis. Thus, the main objective of the study was to review the crisis communication plans for effective use of SCCT principals. The study was descriptive in nature so the qualitative in approach was used. The sample size was four public relations officers from telecommunication companies. The semi-structured interview was conducted. These interviews followed a protocol containing open-ended questions about crisis management strategies and work experiences. Collected data was analyzed by using the content analysis. The findings reveal notable variations in crisis communication strategies among the selected companies. Some organizations adopt a proactive and transparent approach, providing regular updates while others exhibit a more reactive and defensive stance, leading to potential reputational damage. The recommendations of the study were to emphasize the importance of aligning crisis communication efforts with organizational values and maintaining transparency.

KEYWORDS Communication, Situational Crisis, Telecommunication

Introduction

The modern world faces a critical issue in telecommunication crisis management due to the ubiquitous nature of telecommunications, which has become an essential aspect of life. The potential for disruption or malfunction can have severe consequences. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for effectively managing such crises. This paper will discuss the significance of SCCT in crisis management, focusing on a specific case study, i.e., a major telecommunications company's data breach. The SCCT's effectiveness in mitigating the crisis's impact will be illustrated using Coombs' (2017) work. The telecommunications industry is the backbone of the global economy, connecting people and businesses across the world and facilitating communication and data-sharing. Additionally, the industry is a key component of the global digital transformation as IoT and 5G networks are rapidly changing how businesses and individuals communicate and interact (Mares, 2016). Despite its importance, the industry faces a crisis, which will be examined in this paper.

Many organizations are struggling to keep up with the rapidly changing technological landscape due to the increasing complexity of the industry, resulting in a lack of capital, resources, and expertise to properly manage and maintain systems and networks, leading to a decrease in service quality and reliability (Harmanci, 2011). Given the changing dynamics of the telecommunications sector, firms need to adopt effective crisis communication strategies. This paper aims to explore the use of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in the context of the telecommunications crisis. By examining this theory and its application to the telecommunications sector, we can gain

greater insight into the challenges faced by firms in this sector, as well as the strategies they must adopt to effectively respond to these challenges (Coombs, 2017).

Literature Review

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was developed by Professor Timothy Coombs in the 1990s and is a comprehensive theory that examines the communication strategies that organizations should adopt when faced with a crisis. The theory is based on the premise that organizations should identify the specific crisis they are facing and then develop a communication strategy that is tailored to that particular situation. The theory suggests that organizations should consider the nature of the crisis, the stakeholders affected, and the communication strategies that are most appropriate for the situation (Coombs, 2011).

In the context of the telecommunications crisis, the SCCT suggests that organizations should take a proactive approach to crisis communication. This means that organizations should identify the potential risks associated with their operations, as well as the potential consequences of those risks. By understanding these risks, organizations can then develop communication strategies that are tailored to their particular situation. For example, organizations should consider the potential impact of data breaches, customer service issues, or regulatory and legal issues on their operations. By understanding the potential risks, organizations can then develop communication strategies that are designed to mitigate those risks (Coombs, 1999). According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), organizations need to be prepared to respond promptly and effectively during a crisis. This entails having a well-defined crisis management plan in place, outlining the necessary steps to be taken in case of a crisis. The plan should encompass a comprehensive response strategy that guides the organization's actions during the crisis. Furthermore, it should ensure that the organization has the required resources to respond efficiently to the crisis at hand (Kelly, 2011).

Organizations can gain greater insight into the challenges they face in the telecommunications crisis by utilizing the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. This theory enables organizations to understand the potential risks and develop communication strategies that are tailored to their specific situation, ensuring effective crisis communication. Moreover, having a crisis management plan in place and responding to the crisis in a timely and efficient manner can help protect an organization's reputation and brand. The telecommunications industry is currently facing a crisis due to rapid technological advancements, increased competition, and declining customer loyalty. This crisis has been further intensified by recent events such as the emergence of the Internet of Things (IoT), the advent of 5G mobile networks, and the rise of digital media. As a result, telecom companies are grappling with unprecedented challenges in adapting to changing market conditions to remain competitive. To effectively address this crisis, telecom companies must employ effective crisis communication strategies. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a valuable framework for comprehending and addressing communication obstacles during a crisis. This literature review aims to assess the application of SCCT by telecommunication companies in effectively managing the ongoing telecommunications crisis (Langley, 2005).

Telecommunications companies are encountering a growing array of crises that pose substantial threats to their reputation and financial stability. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to comprehend the most effective communication strategies in crisis

situations. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offers a framework that takes into account the specific context of a crisis and guides appropriate communication responses. However, there is a notable research gap regarding the practical application of SCCT within the telecommunications crisis context, particularly in the case of Pakistan. This study aims to study the role of situational crisis communication theory in telecommunication crises.

Material and Methods

This research is grounded in qualitative methods and specifically utilizes content analysis to interpret data. The study focuses on the experiences of four public relations officers from telecommunication companies operating in Pakistan, who were selected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews followed a protocol containing open-ended questions about crisis management strategies, work experiences, public behavior during crises, and other related topics. Content analysis is a widely used approach in qualitative research for analyzing data collected from interviews with participants. In this study, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with public relations officers to gather insights into their crisis management strategies, public response, controlling panic during crises, and the application of SCAT principles. The interviews were conducted at the respondents' workplaces or residences, and those who were unable to attend in person were provided with the questions in advance. The interviews were conducted in Urdu and later translated into English. The study was conducted from April to May 2023, and the final transcripts were reviewed and the core arguments for each research question and supplementary question were identified through consensus with the supervisor. The interviews lasted for 30 minutes each, and all six research questions were covered in the questions.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Severity of a Crisis in the Telecommunications Industry

Question	The appropriate response in the severity of a crisis:	Factors
Q1: How do you assess the severity of a crisis in the telecommunications industry, and what factors do you consider when determining an appropriate response	In Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Coombs defines crisis severity based on four criteria: potential magnitude of consequences, probability of potential consequences, acceptability of potential consequences, and magnitude of confusion. The overall score of each of these criteria represents the severity of the crisis. Potential magnitude of consequences considers the impact of the incident, and how large an area it has affected. The probability of potential consequences takes into account how likely it is that the consequences may occur. Acceptability of potential consequences looks at the public opinion of the potential consequences, while the magnitude of confusion measures how much general	1. The source of the crisis 2. Internal preparedness 3. Impacts 5. Response strategies

confusion and uncertainty surround the incident. Altogether, these criteria are used to assess the degree of crisis severity and communicate the right message to the public to minimize damage and maintain public confidence.

As this research is mainly based on telecom companies, we conducted an in-depth interview with all telecom companies presently working in Pakistan including Telenor Pakistan, Ufone, Zong, and Jazz. To explore the crisis management strategies used by the telecom sector we asked the same question by Public Relations Officers of these companies. Upon taking the Telecommunication companies under consideration for interviews, Ufone Responded that the severity of a crisis in PTCL/Ufone depends on various factors, including the nature of the crisis, the impact it has on customers and stakeholders, the level of media and public attention it receives, and the potential financial and reputational damage it can cause. To assess the severity of a crisis, we usually engage with relevant internal stakeholders to assess the nature of the crisis. Once the severity of the crisis has been assessed, we can determine an appropriate response based on the principles of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. We can select from several crisis response strategies outlined by the theory, including denial, diminishing, rebuilding, bolstering, and transcending. The response strategy selected should be appropriate for the situation, consider the needs and expectations of stakeholders, and be delivered consistently across all communication channels to ensure a unified message. Whereas Telenor responded that as with any industry and company, telecom and Telenor is susceptible to several different crisis situations with varying degrees of severity. Some are directly linked to the organization and its operations, while some are indirect. Some of the crisis situations managed by the organization include network outages, coercive action by tax authorities and reactions on marketing campaigns in terms of direct; and blasphemy, nationwide power outages, and network closures on authority requests in terms of indirect crisis situations. Although all crises are damaging in different ways; the most severe ones are those that impact the provision of services to the customers and disrupt connectivity for Pakistanis. Factors determined for response include the impact on customers, how Telenor feels about the situation, and what can Telenor do to mitigate the situation if possible. The response is strictly based on factual information. The organization does not speculate or comment on something unclear.

Table 2
Crisis Communication Plan for a Telecommunications Company

Question	The appropriate response in the severity of a crisis:	Factors
Q2: How do you develop a crisis communication plan for a telecommunications company, and what are the key elements that should be included?	Crisis communication plan and key elements:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An appraisal of the risks faced by the company, including threats from technology, competition, market conditions, rumors, disinformation, and other sources. 2. A strategy for monitoring potential risks and gathering intelligence. 3. An internal and external crisis communication strategy that is tailored to the company's unique profile.

4. A cohesive and proactive communication strategy that supports the company's mission and ensures the company's voice is represented.
5. procedures for investigating, responding to, and resolving the crisis.
6. Clear and regular communication with internal and external stakeholders.
7. Last but not least, a clear process for evaluating the outcome of the crisis communication plan.

Dr. W. Timothy Coombs is a leading authority on crisis communication and believes that it is essential for companies to have a well-developed crisis communication plan. He argues that such a plan should be comprehensive and should include guidelines for monitoring, analyzing, and responding to crises. It should address the organization's tactics for dealing with any potential future crises, from small missteps to larger-scale disasters. He also emphasizes the importance of proactively managing stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's crisis response tactics. Ultimately, he encourages companies to focus on crisis prevention and create an open dialogue between the organization and various stakeholder groups. While addressing this question, Telenor Pakistan Responded that; Any issues or red flags are closely monitored to see if they have the potential to turn into a crisis. When it seems that the situation can turn into a crisis, the crisis management team is invoked. The crisis management SOPs are already established and well-detailed. Periodic meetings are set up, inputs are taken from all relevant functions, and main discussion points, depending on the nature of the crisis, including people safety, network and product availability, logistics, and movement, reputational impact, etc. If the crisis requires communication, the Comms department is the only one in charge. The company stance is drafted and approved by the crisis management team for all channels. It is determined which are the most active comms channels to reach out to. Reactive and proactive communication is drafted and approved and is used as and when required.

Table 3
SCCT principle

Question	The appropriate response in the severity of a crisis:	Factors
Q3: Can you provide an example of a crisis in the telecommunications industry that was effectively managed using SCCT principles?	Attempt of SCCT principles during crisis:	Dr. Coombs applied the 3 Ps of crisis management: prepare, perceive, and repair. He collaborated with university faculty, staff, and students to ensure that everyone was on the same page. He prepared for the university's response to the crisis by assembling a task force to respond to the academic needs and anxieties of students and faculty. To ensure the trust of the audience, he created channels of communication and ensured that information was communicated correctly. Lastly, Dr. Coombs understood the need to repair the university's image by addressing any misinformation or

misunderstanding and communicating policies in a transparent way that was accessible to university stakeholders.

One of the great examples of a crisis in a telecom company is about AT&T's in 2018 when AT&T's response to the 2018 fire that took out three subsea cables that provided internet access to Puerto Rico. AT&T was quick to deploy both physical repairs to the cables and teams on the ground to assess the damage and set up alternate networks to ensure that internet access was restored as soon as possible. Furthermore, AT&T actively incorporated stakeholders both in PR and in the US into the response. This allowed clear communication and plans to be developed for the long-term restorations, helping to minimize the crisis. On this question, Telenor responded that: PRA (Punjab Revenue Authority) 2016 issued a tax demand; and proceeded to seal Telenor's Regional Office in Lahore, without giving Telenor time to assess, or respond. The action was undertaken without following the due process of law. The action was taken on Friday so it would be difficult to obtain a stay order. As soon as the office was sealed, PRA published a PR saying Telenor had evaded taxes. The comms team immediately issued a statement highlighting the demand had been disputed, the process was not followed and Telenor has always been a law-abiding citizen. Communication was rolled out to staff and partners. The legal team filed for stay order and the govt relations team reached out to various forums for intervention. The coordinated effort resulted in the de-sealing of the office in the minimum possible time. Such a situation always damages reputation, but we initiated a campaign to highlight Telenor's role in national development and highlight the facts about Telenor being one of the highest taxpayers. Protests were recorded at the highest levels of govt. to direct tax authorities to follow due process of law.

Table 4
Strategy to update during crisis in telecommunication industry

Question	The appropriate response in the severity of a crisis	Factors
Q4. How do you ensure that all stakeholders, including customers, employees, and shareholders, are informed and updated during a crisis in the telecommunications industry?	Information shared with team and stakeholders:	The priority when facing a crisis is to ensure the safety of all stakeholders and prevent further harm. To do so, it is imperative to provide instructions that will guide stakeholders in taking the appropriate action to protect themselves from any physical risks. This can be done through broadcasting warnings such as sirens, or the distribution of contact alerts via news media, for example, recalls. Keeping stakeholders safe and informed should be the top priority in any crisis.

Adapting information can help people manage the psychological amassment caused by a crisis. In such a scenario, stakeholders require thorough data about the crisis and the steps that are being taken to prevent it in the future. This assures them of their safety, thereby lessening their stress (Sellnow et al., 1998). Additionally, expressions of concern for the victims, although not admissions of guilt, are strongly recommended and expected by stakeholders (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Patel and Reinsch, 2003). Hence, adapting information is vital in helping stakeholders cope with the psychological stress of a crisis (Sturges, 1994). For crisis communication to be ethical, professionals should

prioritize addressing the physical and psychological concerns of victims before considering the reputation of the organization. Crisis managers can use the principles set forth by the SCCT (Social Crisis Communication Theory) to help them decide when they have fulfilled their obligations and are ready to assess reputational assets. Telenor's PRO said that: There are SOPs in place where relevant functions immediately inform their respective stakeholders which include the customers, employees, regulator, Telenor Group, Government stakeholders, partners and suppliers, etc. All comms modes are utilized – calls, SMS, emails, social media, media, reports, and meetings. During such situations, there is a specific focus on ensuring the communication stays open and various systems and mechanisms are put in place as contingencies so comms are not compromised. Telenor Pakistan has established a well-defined crisis communication plan that is designed to ensure that all stakeholders, including customers, employees, and shareholders, are informed and updated during a crisis in the telecommunications industry.

Discussion

Most organizations engaged in flood-related activities utilize the social networking platform Twitter, as per Bove (2011). Although some businesses maintain multiple Twitter accounts for their local chapters, each organization possesses its dedicated account, as per Geasey (2011). According to Pearson and O'Connell (2010), the decision to employ social media, such as Twitter, should only be made if the organization has the necessary time and resources for planning and consistent usage. The organizations interviewed believe that Twitter enables them to quickly transmit information, leading them to believe that they have sufficient time to strategize and implement their social media usage effectively. Additionally, the simplicity and user-friendliness of Twitter may be another contributing factor. It is worth noting that many interviewees also use Facebook for similar reasons, as it shares the attributes of user simplicity and platform popularity that make Twitter appealing. In crises, companies typically choose social media platforms based on their popularity and widespread accessibility to a large user base, as per Joyce (2011). Almost all of the interviewees, with a few exceptions, utilized Facebook and Twitter in some capacity, primarily driven by their organizational structures, as per Elmer (2011). These platforms were chosen due to their extensive popularity and the ability to connect with a vast community that is already familiar with the format, as per Hess & Coe (2006). The literature analysis conducted in the study emphasizes that telecommunication companies should only adopt social media technologies that contribute to the success of their campaigns, as per Pearson and O'Connell (2010). To maximize their effectiveness through social media tools and platforms, companies should prioritize those that offer maximum reach and engagement with their target audience. Telecom companies, in particular, stand to benefit the most and achieve higher levels of success by selecting the most widely used social media platforms.

A key factor influencing organizations' decision not to utilize social media during a crisis is the constraint of limited resources (Joyce, 2011; LaTouche, 2011). Although organizations facing a crisis have increased their reliance on social media, the primary challenge they face is the scarcity of time available for dedicating to social media activities during such critical periods. Furthermore, organizations with small communication teams and time constraints may feel discouraged from adopting social media in crisis situations (O'Hair & Cody, 2010). The literature study underscores the importance of assigning social media responsibilities to individuals well-versed in the company's communication strategy, as it requires dedicated attention to be effectively utilized (Molleda, 2019). Considering these factors, it is highly probable that all telecom

businesses in Pakistan would employ social media during crises, given the presence of knowledgeable employees familiar with social media platforms and the required communication strategies to leverage them successfully. The decision of a telecom company to utilize social media during a crisis is also influenced by the recognition that text messages and online responses serve as superior communication channels in such situations (Joyce, 2011; LaTouche, 2011). There are several possible reasons for this preference. Firstly, phone calls and emails might prove more effective than social media in reaching the company's specific target market. Additionally, the company may have a longer history of using text messages and online responses, resulting in a broader audience that can be reached through various social channels, in addition to SMS.

While some crisis-affected corporations may face resource constraints, other organizations leverage social media for specific objectives when communicating during such challenging times. For instance, Telenor Pakistan and Jazz are notable examples of companies utilizing social media for a variety of purposes (Khan, & Amjad, 2018). One significant advantage of social media is its ability to rapidly disseminate critical and essential information, making it a valuable tool throughout a crisis (Hoffman, 2014). Additionally, some organizations cite their use of social media as a means to encourage donations for disaster relief efforts, reflecting a prevalent trend in social media utilization (Coombs, 1998).

Conclusion

This study has established a set of best practices for organizations facing social media crises, irrespective of the cause, by analyzing relevant literature and conducting interviews with communication practitioners in the telecommunications field. The professionals from the four major telecommunications companies in Pakistan all recognized, agreed upon, and implemented these best practices to help organizations maximize the effectiveness of their social media usage during a crisis. Additionally, they provided recommendations for areas where organizations can enhance their social media utilization on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during such critical situations. These findings hold significant importance in enhancing the utilization of social media during crises, enabling better management of disinformation and misinformation that can potentially impact a company's reputation. All the field workers of the External communication branch of the telecom industry in Pakistan (following Coombs' strategy) say that the online crisis which involves tweets, posts, quote tweets with hashtags, etc. can be controlled by analyzing/monitoring the situation thoroughly, updating stakeholders regarding the issue, controlling the panic by stating all official platforms of the company that gives an update of an issue and how the team is working on it to resolve the issue as soon as possible. Managing the upcoming complaints that could lead to major crises through planned positive responses. Lastly, stepping towards the major part, it is sometimes necessary to involve the local influencers (if needed) from the area where the crisis occurs. In the media industry, Influencers play a huge role in making up a perception. Sometimes, depending upon the situation, the influencers could be from political grounds, and sometimes they could belong to the entertainment industry. In short, based on these considerations, the unanimous opinion of all Public Relations Officers in Pakistan's telecommunication industry has agreed on an appropriate crisis response strategy. The response strategy may involve elements such as denial, diminish, rebuild, bolster, or transcend, as outlined by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. This shows that initially, the strategy is built by focusing on the issue and the severity of an issue, but there could be multiple ways of attempting the strategy during the crisis. Mainly focusing on the position of a PRO, one could respond to the issue through a press release briefing the media to educate people regarding the

crisis, or it could be done by simply responding to tweets and posts appearing on social media platforms mentioning and tagging the official accounts of a company as it could affect the company's reputation. Many areas for future investigation are suggested by this study. Further research is warranted to ascertain the optimal types of social media messages to be disseminated during a crisis. Additionally, it is important to investigate how the broader public, who may not be directly affected or actively involved in the issue, utilizes social media during disasters or crises. Exploring the reasons behind the use of social media during such times of disaster can significantly expand our understanding. Moreover, as the applications of social media continue to evolve, delving deeper into the best practices for strategic instruments to effectively manage crises during disasters or combat misinformation becomes an area worth exploring in greater detail.

Recommendations

1. Telecommunications companies should emphasize the importance of aligning crisis communication efforts with organizational values.
2. Telecommunication companies should maintain more transparency in their reactive and proactive approach regarding updating their stakeholders.
3. Telecommunication companies should engage stakeholders throughout the crisis response process.

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