



An Assessment of Crisis Communication Preparedness in Selected National Polytechnics in Kenya

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Abstract

This study evaluated crisis communication preparedness in Kenyan national polytechnics in four institutions located in Kisumu, Kakamega, Nairobi, and Kiambu Counties. The study aimed to assess the readiness of crisis communication teams, the effectiveness of communication messages and support documents, stakeholder identification and communication channels, and the existence and review of crisis communication plans and policies. Using a descriptive research design and census sampling, survey data was collected from 72 administrators (Principals, Deputy Principals, Registrars, Deans, and Heads of Departments) via Google Forms and complimented with documentary research. Results were analysed using descriptive statistics. Results were analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions and percentages, to identify the prevalence of crisis communication preparedness across the selected polytechnics. Findings revealed significant gaps in preparedness as crisis communication teams were ineffective and messages were scarce. Communication channels used to reach key stakeholders did not disseminate information fast and widely leading to misinformation, trust erosion and stakeholder disengagement. Formal crisis communication plans and policies existed in some cases but were rarely updated. Additionally, weak enforcement strategies and limited leadership commitment further debilitated the implementation of crisis communication efforts. The study recommends establishing trained crisis communication teams with defined roles and developing and updating crisis communication plans, policies, and messages. Regular training and strengthening stakeholder engagement and collaboration may also play a major role in mitigating damages, and building reputation. Lastly, adopting modern digital technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) can re-engineer the crisis communication process. These measures can bolster the stability and resilience at the National polytechnics in Kenya and TVET sector as a whole by ensuring timely and effective responses to crises.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Preparedness, National Polytechnics, Stakeholders, Communication Plans

Introduction

Effective crisis communication system benefits organizations and individuals by stopping misinformation, preserving reputation, and building trust. It facilitates prompt responses to disruptions and restores stability (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2022). Globally, robust crisis communication frameworks are used to manage crises, yet, many institutions lack structured plans, resulting in ineffective responses to crises and reputational damage (Kim, Kang, Lee, & Yang, 2019). In Africa, educational organisation, equally grapple with crises such as student unrest, infrastructural failures, and financial mismanagement in the face of weak crisis communication management systems (Amuhaya, & Muturi, 2023). Studies in Nigeria and South Africa reports that reactive responses to crisis, weak communication structures, and untrained teams may lead to institutional shutdowns and erosion of public trust (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019; Agu, Adeola, Ibelegbu, & Esho, 2022).

In Kenya, National Polytechnics also face frequent crises in communication. Despite their critical role they lack structured crisis communication teams, established channels, and crisis-specific support documents (Muiru, 2020; Birya, 2020). Studies in crisis management in Kenyan higher education have been conducted though few focus on National Polytechnics' crisis communication preparedness (Adjei, 2024; Alariki & Al-Abed, 2021). This study bridges this gap by evaluating crisis communication readiness in selected Kenyan National Polytechnics, assessing the suitability of crisis communication team, communication materials, stakeholder identification, and crisis plan implementation to enhance institutional resilience and inform policy.

Crisis communication is vital for managing interruptions in institutions of higher learning, ensuring operational stability and stakeholder trust. However, many Kenyan National Polytechnics lack trained crisis communication teams and comprehensive strategies (Verest & Wang, 2021). Unclear leadership in crisis communication often results in misinformation and uncoordinated efforts. Additionally, the availability and effectiveness of crisis communication messages and support documents, are understudied in Kenyan TVET institutions, despite their role in mitigating damage and restoring trust. Effective stakeholder communication requires reliable channels, yet gaps persist, complicating crisis resolutions (Kim, Kang, Lee, & Yang, 2019). Moreover, crisis communication plans in National Polytechnics are inconsistent, with infrequent updates to address evolving risks. These factors increase vulnerability to reputational and operational harm (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019; Agu, Adeola, Ibelegbu, & Esho, 2022; Bosire, 2019). This study evaluates crisis communication preparedness in selected Kenyan National Polytechnics, identifying weaknesses and proposing strategies to enhance resilience and effective crisis management.

The objectives of the study was to assess the composition and preparedness of crisis communication teams in selected National Polytechnics in Kenya, and to evaluate the availability and effectiveness of crisis communication messages and support documents and to examine the established key stakeholders and the communication channels used during crisis situations in selected National Polytechnics in Kenya.

The study is significant to multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, TVET administrators, staff, students, parents and researchers. For policymakers, data-driven recommendations will enhance crisis communication policies within the TVET sector. TVET administrators will benefit from insights on best practices for establishing and maintaining crisis communication teams, stakeholder engagement, and communication channels. Students, parents and staff will gain a better understanding of crisis communication protocols, which will enhance their confidence in institutional responses during crises. Additionally, researchers will find the study useful as a reference for future studies on crisis communication preparedness in educational institutions, particularly in National Polytechnics in Kenya.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

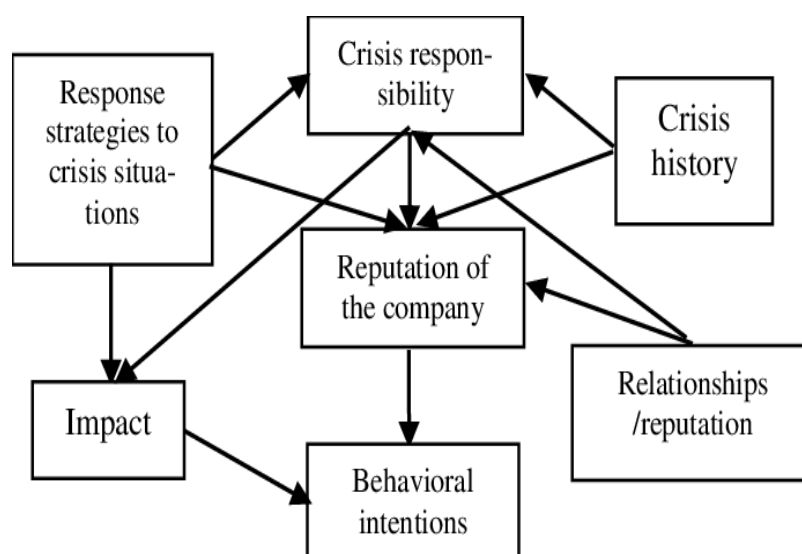
The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), focuses on how organizations should communicate in response to different types of crises based on factors like responsibility, crisis history, and severity. Coombs (2010) categorized crisis types into victim, accidental and preventable types. SCCT recommends denial, diminishing, or rebuilding communication strategies based on the organization's responsibility level to mitigate reputational damage (Kim, Kang, Lee, & Yang, 2019).

For Kenyan National Polytechnics, SCCT guides the development of crisis communication strategies in ensuring service continuity and credibility. The theory posits that effective crisis communication requires anticipating crises, establishing clear protocols, and using strategic messaging to meet stakeholder expectations (Coombs, 2010). By applying SCCT, polytechnics can enhance preparedness, minimize damage, and foster recovery through transparent,

responsible communication, strengthening institutional resilience. Elements of SCCT theory are summarised in Figure1.

Figure 1

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) Model



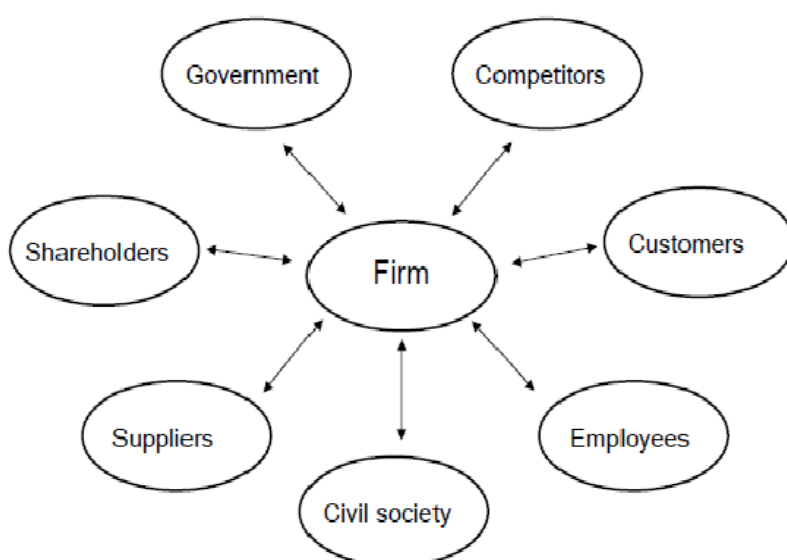
Source: (Coombs, 2010)

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), advocates for key stakeholders engagement in organizational decision-making, to reduce misinformation, builds trust, and enhance institutional resilience (Freeman, 1984; Agu, Adeola, Ibelegbu, & Esho, 2022). For Kenyan National Polytechnics, Stakeholder Theory recognizes students, staff, parents, government, and media as key stakeholders whom polytechnics should establish relationships with and communicate with during crisis. The theory also guides the creation of inclusive crisis communication plans using diverse channels to ensure timely responses (Bosire, 2019). By applying Stakeholder Theory, polytechnics can improve crisis responsiveness, strengthen stakeholder confidence, and minimize disruptions, ensuring institutional steadiness. Figure 2 demonstrates the stakeholder model.

Figure 2

Stakeholder Model



Source: Freeman,1984

Crisis Communication in TVET

Crisis communication is vital for National Polytechnics to manage for institutional stability (Mensah, 2018). Effective preparedness requires structured crisis teams, clear protocols, and trained spokespersons to engage stakeholders like students and industry partners, minimizing disruptions and maintaining trust (Moore, 2015). Multiple channels, such as press releases and social media, are essential for transparent, timely communication to prevent misinformation. Studies highlight gaps in Kenyan TVET institutions, where ineffective communication leads to delayed responses and stakeholder disengagement (Apondi, 2014). Structured crisis communication frameworks, with designated teams and stakeholder engagement mechanisms, enable polytechnics to manage crises effectively, ensuring operational continuity and stakeholder confidence.

Crisis Preparedness in TVETs

Crisis preparedness in Kenyan TVET institutions is a management best practice. Dedicated crisis communication teams with designated spokespersons and security officers reduce miscommunication and panic (Apondi, 2014), while regular simulations identify response gaps (Moore, 2015). In addition, Predefined communication messages ensure timely and accurate information dissemination (Verest, M. & Wang, (2021), while engaging stakeholders via multiple channels enhances coordinated responses (Alimasunya, Inyang, & Anake, 2019). Analyzing past crises, eqally , informs proactive strategies (Amuhaya & Muturi, 2023) while regular risk assessments strengthen preparedness (Adamu, Mohamad, & Rahman, 2016). Preparedness also involves regularly reviewing crisis communication plans and leveraging digital platforms to ensure relevance (Agu et al., 2022). Embedding preparedness in organisational governance fosters resilience and enables effective crisis management (Bosire, 2019).

Key Stakeholders and the Communication Channels used During Crisis Situations

Effective crisis communication in TVET institutions hinges on identifying key stakeholders and establishing tailored communication channels (Kim, Kang, Lee, & Yang, 2019). Students, may need communication channels that require instant updates via mobile alerts, emails, and social media like WhatsApp while Faculty and staff rely on internal channels such as emails and memos for clear instructions on crisis roles (Bosire, 2019). Government agencies, including the Ministry of Education and TVETA, need formal communication through reports and press releases (Apondi, 2014; Alimasunya, Inyang, & Anake, 2019) while Industry partners and parents may be reached via websites, emails, and helplines. The general public may be informed through traditional media for transparency (Amuhaya & Muturi, 2023; Agu, Adeola, Ibelegbu, & Esho, 2022). Its thus in order to conclude that stakeholder-centric communication ensures timely, accurate responses, maintaining trust and institutional stability.

Research Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was used for this study. This design is appropriate for assessing the preparedness of crisis communication because it allows the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. It provides a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication frameworks, preparedness levels, and challenges faced by the selected National Polytechnics. The design enabled an analysis of institutional policies, stakeholder engagement, and communication channels used during crises while identifying areas that require improvement.

The study targeted 72 polytechnic administrators from four national polytechnics located in Kisumu, Kakamega, Nairobi, and Kiambu Counties. The administrators included Principals, Deputy Principals, Registrars, Deans, and Heads of Departments. These individuals play key roles in crisis communication preparedness, policy implementation, and decision-making within their respective institutions. The four national polytechnics—located in Kisumu, Kakamega, Nairobi, and Kiambu Counties—were selected for this study because they represent diverse

geographical regions of Kenya, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication preparedness across different contexts. Nairobi, being the capital, offers a central urban perspective, while Kisumu, Kakamega, and Kiambu provide insights from both urban and rural settings. This selection enables the study to capture varied administrative approaches and challenges faced by polytechnic institutions in crisis communication across different environments, promoting a well-rounded analysis of the issue.

A census sampling technique was adopted for this study, meaning that all 72 administrators from the selected polytechnics were included. Since the number of participants was relatively small, the census approach ensured comprehensive data collection without excluding any relevant perspectives. This method was appropriate for capturing insights from all decision-makers involved in crisis communication, ensuring the reliability and richness of the findings.

The primary data collection tool was a structured questionnaire, developed based on the research objectives and literature review. The questionnaire combined both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture qualitative and quantitative data. Google Forms were used to distribute the questionnaire, enabling easy access and automated data compilation. Additionally, documentary evidence, including crisis communication policies, emergency response plans, training manuals, and past crisis reports, was reviewed. These secondary sources provided valuable context, helping to validate and enhance the findings from the survey.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive method. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were employed to summarize and interpret trends in crisis communication preparedness, including the availability of communication plans, staff training, and response strategies. This analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the crisis communication preparedness in the selected polytechnics.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1

Background Information

Variable	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	41	62.12
	Female	25	37.88
Age bracket	Below 30 Years	13	19.70
	31 – 40 Years	16	24.24
	41 – 50 Years	18	27.27
	Above 50 Years	19	28.79
Level of education	Diploma	9	13.64
	Graduate	25	37.88
	Postgraduate	32	48.48
Current administrative position	Principal	2	3.00
	Deputy Principal	8	12.10
	Registrar	3	4.50
	Dean	4	6.10
Years in current position	Head of Department	48	72.70
	Below 5 Years	44	66.67
	5 to 9 Years	18	27.27
	More than 10 Years	4	6.06
	Total	66	100.00%

The respondent demographics reveal a male-dominated workforce (62.12% male, 37.88% female), reflecting gender imbalances in Kenyan polytechnic leadership, potentially skewing crisis communication strategies. Age distribution is balanced, with 56.1% aged 41+ and 43.9% under 40, blending experience with fresh perspectives. Most respondents (48.48%) hold postgraduate qualifications, indicating capacity for strategic crisis communication. Heads of Department dominate (72.7%), emphasizing operational focus, but limited top-level

representation (Principals, Deputy Principals) may hinder institutional-wide insights. With 66.67% serving under five years, short tenures highlight the need for ongoing training to strengthen crisis preparedness. This demographic mix underscores diverse perspectives and gaps in effective crisis communication.

Table 2

Composition and Preparedness of Crisis Communication Teams in Selected National Polytechnics in Kenya

Variable	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Presence of a Designated Crisis Communication Team	Yes	44	66.70
	No	15	22.70
	Not sure	7	10.60
Presence of a designated crisis communication team	Yes	24	36.40
	No	42	63.60
Training of crisis communication team members	Yes	19	28.80
	No	47	71.60
Preparedness of crisis communication team	Small extent	30	45.50
	Moderate extent	21	31.80
	Large extent	15	22.70
Effectiveness of crisis communication policy	Very Effective	6	9.10
	Effective	23	34.80
	Not sure	21	31.80
	Ineffective	12	18.20
	Very Ineffective	4	6.10
Types of crises encountered or anticipated	Fire outbreaks	24	36.40
	Student unrest/riots	52	78.80
	Cybersecurity breaches	12	18.20
	Examination irregularities	44	66.70
	Staff strikes	41	62.10
	Sexual harassment/misconduct	27	40.90
	Terror threats/security breaches	10	15.20

The data highlights significant gaps in the crisis communication preparedness of polytechnics in Kenya. While 66.7% of the surveyed institutions have designated crisis communication teams, only 36.4% report having fully functional teams, indicating potential reliance on ad-hoc groups during crises. A concerning 71.6% of respondents noted that team members lack formal training, which undermines their ability to communicate effectively under pressure. Additionally, 79.7% of respondents rated their teams as poorly or moderately prepared, pointing to the need for improved planning and training. The types of crises most frequently anticipated include student unrest (78.8%) and examination irregularities (66.7%), with other issues like staff strikes, sexual harassment, and fire outbreaks also being significant concerns. This variety of crises calls for more comprehensive and adaptable crisis communication strategies. While some institutions have functional policies, there is a clear need for refinement and better engagement to enhance their effectiveness.

Table 3

Availability and Effectiveness of Crisis Communication Messages and Support Documents in Selected National Polytechnics

Variable	Response	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Availability of pre-prepared crisis communication messages	Yes	21	31.80
	No	45	67.60
Regular update and review of crisis communication messages	Yes	19	28.80
	No	47	71.60
Effectiveness of crisis communication messages and documents	Very effective	4	6.10
	Effective	11	16.70
	Not sure	30	45.50
	ineffective	17	25.80
	Very ineffective	4	6.10
Impact of crisis communication messages on crisis response	Small extent	10	15.20
	Moderate extent	20	30.30
	Large extent	36	54.50
	Total	66	100.00

The data reveals significant shortcomings in the crisis communication preparedness of national polytechnics in Kenya. A majority (67.6%) of institutions lack pre-prepared crisis communication messages or templates, which are crucial for consistent and rapid messaging during crises. Without these, institutions may face delays and inconsistencies in their communications. Additionally, 71.6% of respondents noted that crisis communication materials are not regularly updated, raising concerns about the relevance and effectiveness of the materials during emergencies. This lack of ongoing preparation could result in outdated or ineffective communication. Furthermore, 69.8% of respondents reported uncertainty or ineffectiveness in the available crisis communication materials, indicating that many institutions do not assess or test their crisis messages. Despite these challenges, over half (54.5%) of respondents acknowledged that the availability of pre-prepared messages significantly impacts crisis response, underscoring the importance of proactive crisis communication planning and regular updates to ensure readiness.

The findings indicate that most institutions (68.2%) have identified key stakeholders for crisis communication, including students, staff, parents, government agencies, and the media, which is a positive step for targeted communication during crises. However, 22.7% of respondents were unsure whether stakeholders had been clearly identified, suggesting some uncertainty in crisis planning. Regarding communication channels, 71.2% of respondents confirmed the presence of designated channels, indicating structured communication, though 22.7% were unsure and 6.1% reported no channels, highlighting potential gaps. Communication challenges such as distorted information, lack of timely updates, inconsistent internet connectivity, and difficulty reaching certain stakeholders (e.g., parents without access to digital tools) were identified. While 46.9% of respondents rated the effectiveness of communication channels as moderate, 25.8% found them limited, and only 27.3% considered them highly effective, pointing to a need for improved strategies to ensure efficient communication during crises.

Table 4

Key Stakeholders and the Communication Channels Used During Crisis Situations in Selected National Polytechnics

Variable	Response	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Identification of key stakeholders for crisis communication	Yes	45	68.20
	Not sure	15	22.70
	No	6	9.10
Designated communication channels for different stakeholders during crises	Yes	47	71.20
	Not sure	15	22.70
	No	4	6.10
Effectiveness of existing communication channels in reaching key stakeholders	Small extent	17	25.80
	Moderate extent	31	46.90
	Large extent	18	27.30
	Total	66	100.00%

Table 5

Existence, Implementation, and Review Process of Crisis Communication Plans in Selected National Polytechnics

Variable	Response	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Existence of crisis communication plans	Yes	21	31.80
	No	7	10.60
	Not sure	38	57.60
Review and update of crisis communication plans	Yes	22	33.30
	No	6	9.10
	Not sure	38	57.60
Effectiveness of crisis communication plan implementation	Small extent	20	30.30
	Moderate extent	26	39.40
	Large extent	20	30.30
	Total	66	100

The study revealed significant gaps in crisis communication preparedness among Kenyan National Polytechnics. Most respondents (57.6%) were uncertain about the existence of formal crisis communication plans, with only 31.8% confirming their presence and 10.6% reporting none, indicating inadequate awareness or planning. Only 33.3% of institutions regularly reviewed plans, while 57.6% were unsure and 9.1% reported no reviews, highlighting poor maintenance practices. Implementation effectiveness varied: 39.4% rated it moderately effective, 30.3% minimally effective, and 30.3% highly effective, reflecting inconsistent execution. These findings underscore the need for improved awareness, regular plan updates, and stronger implementation to enhance crisis management and institutional resilience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study reveals that national polytechnics are making significant strides in establishing crisis communication frameworks, but several challenges still hinder their effectiveness. Although some institutions have identified key stakeholders and designated communication channels, issues such as distorted information, unclear procedures, and inconsistent communication delivery remain prevalent. The implementation and review of crisis communication plans are not always consistent across institutions, and while improvements are

being suggested, there is a need for a more structured approach to communication. Ensuring that communication is clear, timely, and accessible to all stakeholders, along with fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation is key.

It is recommended that national polytechnics develop formal and comprehensive crisis communication plans with clearly define roles, responsibilities, and procedures for all key stakeholders involved, ensuring a coordinated and effective response during crises. A formalized structure may minimize confusion and enhance the efficiency of crisis communication efforts. Further, regular review and updates of these crisis communication plans are essential to ensure they remain relevant and responsive to emerging crisis scenarios. Institutions should set up a systematic process for reviewing these plans, incorporating feedback from crisis response teams and stakeholders, and making necessary adjustments based on lessons learned from past incidents. Also, the management of institutions should prioritize training and sensitization for all staff members, including faculty/departments, administrative personnel, and students, on the importance of crisis communication and their roles during crisis situations. Training programs should be held regularly, and crisis response teams should organise simulations to prepare for real-life crisis situations. Lastly, it is crucial for institutions to embrace digital platforms and social media for crisis communication for diversity. Institutions should establish social media policy, verify and authenticate their social media accounts to establish credibility and reduce the risk of misinformation during a crisis.

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