



**COMMUNICATING CRISIS PREPAREDNESS
IN ACADEMIC TERTIARY INSTITUTION: A CASE
STUDY OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN GHANAⁱ**

Andrews Kwakwa Peprahⁱⁱ

Lecturer,

Kessben University College,
Ghana

PhD Student,
University of Education, Winneba,
Ghana

Abstract:

This study examines the internal communication strategies and channels used by Kessben University College (KUC) to prepare for potential crises. Using a conceptual framework and thematic analysis of crisis communication through in-depth interviews, the study revealed that face-to-face communication, social media engagement, and departmental (group) meetings are the primary methods through which KUC communicates its crisis preparedness to the university community. These strategies, often employed according to the study, include using a student-staff forum as an effective communication tool and utilizing the Office of the Dean of Students as the main avenue for addressing potential crises. These practices have become part of the organizational culture, with existing communication channels and processes adopted to convey preparedness for future crises. Additionally, social media was preferred because it offers prompt, consistent, and accessible communication, which improves overall effectiveness. The study recommends increasing efforts to make crisis preparedness information readily available and accessible to all employees. Therefore, organizations must integrate a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) into their Crisis Management Plan (CMP) while also employing a variety of crisis management techniques.

Keywords: Crisis Communication Plan (CCP), organizational culture, thematic analysis, stakeholder engagement, multi-channel strategy

ⁱ LA COMMUNICATION DE LA PRÉPARATION AUX CRISES DANS LES ÉTABLISSEMENTS D'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR: ÉTUDE DE CAS DES UNIVERSITÉS PRIVÉES AU GHANA

ⁱⁱ Correspondence: email peprahandrews@yahoo.com

Résumé :

Cette étude examine les stratégies et les canaux de communication interne utilisés par le Kessben University College (KUC) pour se préparer aux crises potentielles. En s'appuyant sur un cadre conceptuel et sur une analyse thématique de la communication de crise à partir d'entretiens approfondis, l'étude révèle que la communication en face à face, l'utilisation des médias sociaux et les réunions départementales (de groupe) constituent les principaux moyens par lesquels le KUC communique sur sa préparation aux crises auprès de la communauté universitaire. Selon les résultats de l'étude, ces stratégies comprennent notamment l'utilisation du forum étudiants-personnel comme outil de communication efficace et le recours au Bureau du Doyen des étudiants comme principal canal de gestion des crises potentielles. Ces pratiques sont devenues partie intégrante de la culture organisationnelle, les canaux et processus de communication existants étant mobilisés pour transmettre les informations relatives à la préparation aux crises futures. En outre, les médias sociaux sont privilégiés en raison de leur capacité à offrir une communication rapide, cohérente et accessible, ce qui améliore l'efficacité globale. L'étude recommande de renforcer les efforts visant à rendre les informations relatives à la préparation aux crises facilement disponibles et accessibles à tous les employés. Par conséquent, les organisations doivent intégrer un Plan de communication de crise (PCC) à leur Plan de gestion des crises (PGC), tout en ayant recours à une diversité de techniques de gestion des crises.

Mots-clés : Plan de communication de crise (PCC), culture organisationnelle, analyse thématique, engagement des parties prenantes, stratégie multicanale

1. Background of the Study

Organizations, both profit and non-profit, may face crises when a negative incident becomes a common occurrence within the organization. More often, a crisis occurs when stakeholders connected to the organization need an immediate response from the affected organization (Coombs, 2007). It must be emphasized that many organizations around the world have experienced crises in one way or another, such as the collapse of the Melcom building in Achimota in the Greater Accra region and the nationwide energy crisis Ghana faced. The bottom line is that a crisis threatens the sustainability of an organization and its relationship with its publics (Coombs, 2007).

There are a number of definitions of crisis that are worth discussing. Ciekanski (2023) posits four definitions of crisis in an organisation, which these definitions will be explained and situated in the context of this study. According to Barton (1993, as cited in Ciekanski, 2023), a crisis is a big, unforeseen incident that can have detrimental effects and severely restrict an organization's operations in terms of output, services, employment, financial health, and reputation. Moreover, a crisis is expressed as a situation that jeopardizes a business's ability to survive, achieve its objectives, and limits the amount of time available for corrective action. It also surprises decision makers by

occurring, which creates conditions of intense strain (Slatter *et al.*, 2001, as cited in Ciekowski, 2023). Based on management effectiveness, a crisis can be viewed as the result of a disruption in the realization of one or more external and internal elements that determine a company's existence and growth (Zepek, 2003, as cited in Ciekowski, 2023). Conclusively, Ciekowski (2023) asserts that a crisis endangers a business's ability to operate normally, raises concerns about the enterprise's core beliefs, and as such crisis has a detrimental impact on the company's efficiency and reputation, and the crisis may be out of the control of the organisation.

According to Nteka (2021), crises are unexpected and unpredictable situations that are characterized by stress and insecurity, and that could affect a person, family, company, organization, society, institutions, or the global environment. In simple terms, Mustafa *et al.* (2016) posit that a crisis is described as circumstances linked to danger and altering the normalcy of a process or situation within an organisation. Coombs (2007) asserts that crisis management is an essential executive function. Failure can result in significant losses for an organization or institution, which may ultimately lead to its demise, as well as cause serious harm to its stakeholders. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that to improve organizational productivity, communication, emotions, the environment, and the psychological and technical aspects of media are all relevant.

Crises could be caused by a plethora of both internal and external situations. Ciekowski *et al.* (2023) argue that management errors, such as ill-considered decisions, inadequate control, and a lack of appropriate employee supervision, among others, could contribute to a crisis. With this, Ciekowski *et al.* (2023) summarize that the actions and inaction of management could contribute to a crisis in an organisation. Again, financial problems, such as falling revenues, rising costs, and unprofitability, according to Ciekowski *et al.* (2023), could contribute to a crisis. More importantly, internal conflicts, such as disputes among employees, between management and employees, or between individual departments, could also contribute to crisis situations in organisations. Pen ultimately, in the effectiveness of processes, such as long order processing time, production faults, and bad resource management, could also contribute to a crisis. Ultimately, Ciekowski *et al.* (2023) summarizes by ascribing a lack of innovation, which may lead to reduced effectiveness of the organisation is one of the possible causes of crisis in enterprises. Organisations may also suffer from a crisis due to external factors. Ciekowski *et al.* (2023) argue that changes in the economy, technological environment, social environment, and natural threats could also be considered as some of the natural causes of crisis. One of the main targets of the change and transformation agenda is higher education institutions (Hussain & Rawjee, 2014).

Unexpected things happen during crises (Ciekowski *et al.*, 2023). For that reason, an organization must be ready for every eventuality. To safeguard its stakeholders and reputation, companies must choose the right routes or media for information flow and create a suitable reaction plan. It is worth noting that private tertiary educational institutions are noted as an organisation that may encounter a crisis. This study examines the internal pre-crisis communication channels and strategies used by Kessben

University College (KUC), a privately-owned tertiary educational institution. Additionally, to learn how employees feel about those channels and whether they would rather use other strategies and channels than the ones that are currently in place. Having a crisis communication plan in place and communicating effectively during these challenging times can help management at higher education institutions prevent crises or be better prepared to handle them. Public relations professionals must have a crisis communications plan and develop communication strategies and procedures to support the organization's many stakeholders in addressing the root causes of a crisis.

2. Profile of Institution

The Kessben University College (KUC) is one of the privately-owned tertiary institutions in Ghana that seeks to offer tertiary level education to all qualified applicants irrespective of race, religion, creed, nationality, gender, age, culture or other backgrounds, that will prepare them to contribute to the socio-economic development of Ghana and the broader world. KUC seeks to offer competitive, demand-driven programmes of study that will ensure that it becomes a centre of excellence and, therefore, a college of choice for prospective students. The vision of KUC is to become a centre of excellence for the dissemination of knowledge and skills to produce high-quality human resources to meet the ever-changing socio-economic developmental needs of society. The mission of KUC is to provide a congenial environment for teaching, research, entrepreneurship, and community service geared towards the socio-economic development of society and promoting innovative and multidisciplinary as well as integrated approaches to problem solving, and being an equal opportunity employer as it seeks to recruit and retain high-calibre staff and students.

3. Statement of the Problem

According to Nteka (2021), crises are unexpected and unpredictable situations that are characterized by stress, insecurity and could affect a person, family, company, organization, society, institution, or the global environment. In simple terms, Mustafa *et al.* (2016) posit that a crisis is described as circumstances linked to danger and altering the normalcy of a process or situation within an organisation.

Coombs (2007) asserts that crisis management is an essential duty of the top management body. Failure can result in significant losses for an organization, which may ultimately lead to its demise, as well as cause serious harm to its stakeholders. Crises in an organization may be caused by internal and external factors (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2008). These internal factors can include crises related to the organization's strategies. Such causes of crises associated with the organization's strategy include unclear company policies, incorrect or imprecise goals, a lack of understanding of the organization's mission, failure to follow strategies in line with developmental, functional, or instrumental to internal and external conditions affecting the organization's operation.

Another internal cause of a crisis, as discussed by Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2008), relates to employees within an organization. These causes include high management-staff turnover, poor management practices, inaccurate assessments of employee potential, indecisive management and decision-making, an upcoming age shift within the organization, employees' difficulty connecting with the business, entrepreneurship, budgeting errors and high costs are also noted as the internal causes of crisis.

Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2008) explores the external causes of crisis in an organisation. The external causes of crisis were grouped into the macro-environment and micro-environment. According to Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2008) include low economic growth rate domestically, change in economic policy towards businesses with regard to excise, anti-trust and licensing policies, market liberalisation and deregulation, restrictive fiscal policy, high interest rates, fall in the population's income level, unemployment level, greater tendency to save than to consume income, changes in the consumption model, changes in supply and demand, fast pace of technological change, causing a reduction in the life cycle of products and the need for costly implementations, restrictive labour code, changes in legislation, among others.

Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2008) explores other micro-environment factors that lead to crisis. These are identified as unfavourable changes in the condition of companies' partners, payment backlogs, trouble with state institutions, falling demand for the company's products or changes to its structure, ageing market (sector), intensity of competitive struggle in the sector, high pressure of potential competition, increased capital inflow into the sector, increase in the influence of suppliers, increase in the influence of producers of substitutes, unfavourable changes in the prices of goods among others. It must therefore be emphasized that organisations may be challenged by these external factors which may result into crisis in the organisation and beyond.

In the quest to mitigate the challenges associated with a crisis, effective communication is essential. Zakiri (2020) asserts that effective communication fosters confidence at the workplace, safeguards workers and other stakeholders in an emergency. In other words, organisations that engage in effective communication prevent false information from spreading at the workplace and further reduce anxiety among workers, thereby increasing a sense of security. It must be noted that effective crisis communication prevents a crisis from endangering the organization's viability, reputation, and strategic goals. Organisations usually orient staff members to the overarching crisis management plan and allow them to collaborate on the same objectives of the organisation. In making effective communication preparedness, there is a need for organisations to sync up the exterior and internal communications and maintain the reputation of the organisation (Zakiri, 2020).

It is important to appreciate the fact that individuals in an organisation must be oriented with a crisis communication plan that could help mitigate the challenges associated with a crisis. Numerous studies found that if organisations have crisis preparation strategies in place and foresee potential crises that might jeopardize their organisations' continuity, they can avoid such organizational crises. Others (Lockwood,

2005; Promsri, 2014; Lando, 2014; Coombs, 2014; Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Johansen *et al.*, 2012; Mazzei *et al.*, 2012; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) verified and suggested that managers of an organisation overlook management-employee communication during crises. From the same perspective, higher educational institutions, such as a private university, also design a crisis communication plan as non-educational institutions do (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

A crisis communication plan may be relevant to an organisation based on the leadership and policies of the organisation. Research has established that organisations such as public educational institutions have crisis communication plans to mitigate any possible crisis that may hit the institution (Manisuru, 2025; Abban, 2017). The focus of this study is therefore to find out whether Kessben University College, a privately owned tertiary institution, has a proper or laid down crisis communication plan to prevent or minimize a potential crisis. From a higher perspective, the study seeks to assess the workers' favorite internal communication channel and assess their level of satisfaction with the channels utilized to inform them of emergencies

3.1 Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

- 1) Identify the internal communication channels used by Kessben University College in preparing for crises
- 2) Examine the internal communication strategies employed by Kessben University College for its crisis preparedness communication, as outlined in its crisis communication plan.
- 3) Evaluate the satisfaction of employees with the channels used in communicating crises to them and identify their most preferred internal communication channel.

3.2 Research Questions

To achieve the above objectives, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Which internal communication channels are used by Kessben University College in preparing for crises?

RQ 2: What are the internal communication strategies that are employed by Kessben University College in preparation for a crisis?

RQ3: How satisfactory are the channels used in communicating crises to employees, and identify their most preferred internal communication channel?

3.3 Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the importance of internal crisis communication preparedness to organizations and open up further scholarly investigation on the subject within Africa, since most studies done have considered the Western context. The study will also contribute to scholarship in the crisis communication field. In addition, the findings of this study will help Kessben University

College to build strong internal strategies for crisis communication management in order to better manage future crises.

Findings of this study will also encourage the institution under study to make crisis information easily accessible to all employees so that the employees can easily relate to the organizational culture and perform productively towards their organizational goals. It will also highlight the importance of management-employee crisis communication preparedness before considering the external crisis communication. Organizations in the educational sector can also apply the recommendations that stem from this study to improve their crisis resiliency.

3.4 Operational Definition of Key Terms

The following terms used in this study have been defined as follows:

- 1) **Employees:** In this study, the word employee is used to refer to anyone who has been employed by the Kessben University College.
- 2) **Management:** The decision-making body of Kessben University College, which is in charge of operations, decision-making, and administration. It is also used interchangeably with top management to mean the same in this study.
- 3) **Internal Communication:** This refers to the exchange of information between an organization or management and its internal stakeholders or employees. For this study, Internal Communication has been used interchangeably with organizational communication.
- 4) **Crisis:** It is any unpredictable event that threatens stakeholders' expectations and can fatally impact an organization's performance and cause negative outcomes.
- 5) **Preparedness:** It involves psychologically rehearsing circumstances and providing the organization with systems and procedures so that they can react appropriately, sufficiently, and timely.

3.5 Delimitation of the Study

The study has a number of delimitations, which focus on finding appropriate answers to the research questions of the study. The study only focuses on Kessben University College, a privately owned university in Ghana. The study is based on crisis communication channels and strategies that the private tertiary education institution will use in times of crisis to effectively protect the image of the University College in order to survive in competition.

Again, the study focuses on the perception of both students and workers on the readiness of the university to combat potential crises, which, if not carefully managed, could degrade the University College and may tarnish the image of the university, resulting in reduced productivity.

4. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

4.1 Defining Crisis

Studies have argued that crisis is an essentially subjective concept because any trivial incident can provoke a crisis if an individual defines it as threatening. Ciekanowski (2023) defines a crisis as an abrupt, unforeseen circumstance that jeopardizes an organization's ability to operate normally. Boin (2008) agrees with the definition of Ciekanowski (2023) and further adds that an organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event that jeopardizes the organization's survival. It is typified by uncertainty about its cause, effect, and resolution options, as well as a conviction that decisions must be made quickly, but the uncertainty of choosing the effective step remains a challenge for individuals involved in it.

Nteka (2021) argues that the idea of a crisis is multifaceted. This denotes the existence of a challenging issue, which is experiencing an abnormal and anomalous period, or that it is in a critical period. It is worth noting that a crisis is defined as unpleasant, unattractive or undesirable events that heavily affect a given entity.

4.2 The Role of Communication in Effective Crisis Management

Communication is a very crucial aspect of any organization. It is therefore important for effective communication to be utilized when a crisis is imminent in an organisation. Coombs (2007) asserts that crisis management through effective communication is an essential function of management. Mismanaged organizational crisis, according to Zakiri (2020), has been traced to breakage in communication and as such, Hussain and Rawjee (2014) assert that effective communication ensures that organisations' crisis is less of a challenge to affected organisations.

According to McEntire (2007), implementing a crisis management plan entails fostering a culture of learning within the company, gaining acceptance for the work, and cooperating with others. These ideas, according to McEntire (2007), could be achieved when effective communication is applied. The type of communication that centers on these pre-crisis preparedness activities is known as crisis communication, according to Cameron and Cheng, (2024). According to Cameron and Cheng (2024), crisis communication includes training stakeholders and *"the collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team"*

4.3 Communication Strategy

Cameron and Cheng (2024) assert that a communication strategy is any laid-down plan that seeks to provide a way to use communication to achieve a goal. Coleman (2023) argues that an effective crisis communication strategy indicates the purpose of the strategy approach, the communication priorities, the structure of the response, phases of a crisis – roles and responsibilities, scenarios, narratives, and key messages, priority channels, stakeholder engagement, resourcing, and review and evaluation. The goal of a

communication strategy is to provide a way to use communication to achieve the goal (Coleman, 2023). When handling any problem or incident, a crisis communication strategy lays out the high-level course of action to be followed.

4.4 Communicating Crisis Preparedness

Any firm can achieve effective team performance through communication. With exploratory study, Zakara (2020) asserts that effective communication is comparable to the blood circulation system of the human body. As a result, any organization that recognizes the value of communication for effective crisis management makes good use of it. It guarantees the synchronization of production variables and, above all, the organization's human and material components as a productive network of development and progress. The communication process begins with the sender, encoding, message, channel, decoding, receiver, noise, and feedback, according to Snavely (2001), quoted by Zakari (2020).

4.5 Conceptual Framework – The three-stage Crisis Management Framework

The straightforward three-stage method that adheres to a pre-crisis stage, crisis stage, and post-crisis stage is the conceptual framework of crisis. This three-stage framework was proposed by Coombs (2007). With the pre-crisis stage, Coombs (2007) states that leaders of organizations that take actions combined with a culture that does not prioritize readiness can create an environment in which a trigger event is all that is required to initiate a crisis. According to Smith (1990), the organization does its best to handle the issue during the pre-crisis stage once it has begun. Creating a supportive environment among the major crisis participants is what defines the pre-crisis stage.

With the crisis stage, Coombs (2007) discusses the use of tactics that help to organize an institution to act in the context of strategies that do not damage the overall reputation and core actions of the organisation, but concentrate on activities that will help not to eradicate or negatively affect the running of the organisation.

With the post-crisis stage, Coombs (2007) argues that it is important for organisations to put in place plans and activities that will prevent the crisis from occurring again. It is important to note that lessons that have been taken from the crisis must be.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Approach

Research approaches are plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Dooly *et al.*, 2017; Pandey & Pandey, 2015). In this study, a qualitative research approach was used. A qualitative research approach is described as the research approach that allows a detailed exploration and analysis of a topic of interest, in which information is collected by a researcher through designs such as case studies, ethnography and

phenomenology (Creswell & Clark, 2010). The qualitative research approach in this study achieved findings through interviews because the qualitative approach tells “how or why” in answering research questions (Maxwell, 2010). Thus, qualitative sources of data for a study, according to Maxwell (2010) and Rahman (2017), provide the basic data for the development of an understanding of the relations between social actors and their situations, and as such, as asserted by Rahman (2017). Data were collected from selected female medical officers to examine the concept of identity and its professional and cultural contexts in the medical profession.

5.2 Research Design

A research design is a “*plan, structure and strategy of investigation so conceived as to obtain answers to research questions or problems*” (Kumar, 2011, p. 95). Creswell (2014) defines a research design as a strategy, plan, and structure for conducting a research project. The direction provided by a research design guides the collection of data as well as the analysis and interpretation of the data. The goal of exploratory research is to examine a phenomenon or find a solution to a question (Singh, 2021). Singh (2019) adds that the exploratory research is when a study is conducted with the intention of either an area where little is known and as such exploratory study design was employed for the study to find out how the identity of female medical officers is constructed in the areas of self, professional, and cultural.

5.3 Population

The population that helps in reaching the assumption, context, or goal of a study is the entire set of units that the study uses to make findings and conclusions or generalizations of the objectives of the study (Asiamah *et al.*, 2017). The population for this research is private universities that are offering diplomas, degrees, master's, and doctoral programmes. This, therefore, makes answers to the research questions valid since these answers were from the population of the study and, in this case, female medical officers.

5.4 Sampling Method and Sampling Size

In this study, convenient sampling techniques were used. Galloway (2005) asserts that convenience sampling involves using respondents who are “convenient” to the researcher. Convenience sampling was employed in selecting senior members, senior staff and junior members of the university who served as respondents to the subsequent interview sessions.

Based on the convenience sampling technique, there was a practical approach, prioritizing ease of access, willingness, and availability, rather than strict statistical representation, since there are no strict rules for determining the ideal sample size (Giri, 2024; Singh & Masuku, 2014). In this study, five (5) administrative staff, thirty (30) lecturers and one hundred and twenty students or junior members are all part of the university community.

5.5 Data Collection Instrument

Data refers to facts that are raw, unprocessed and misarranged. Data is therefore processed and converted to become information (Aina, 2004). A semi-structured interview as a primary data collection instrument was employed in the study, which allowed the interviewer and the interviewee to have an intimate engagement according to the objectives of the study. This aligns with Ajayi's (2017, p. 2) assertion that primary data is "*original and unique data*" for research.

5.6 Data Analysis

In this study, thematic data analysis was employed in analysing the interviews of each selected female doctor to explore systematic insight into patterns of meaning or themes from the interviews, which aim at identifying, organising, and offering meanings from the data (Smith, 2018). Thematic analysis was used to answer the research questions in the study. Data from female medical officers in the form of semi-structured interviews were analysed.

5.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

Shenton (2004) posited that it is very important for a researcher to take steps that will demonstrate the research findings that emerged from the data of the study and not the researcher's own assumptions. The trustworthiness of the study is the product of the trustworthiness of the instruments for the collection of data for the study (Shenton, 2004). With the interviews with the participants, clarification of biases as posited by Creswell (2014) was ensured. First, the researcher phoned and interviewed each of the medical officers who served as participants for the study. The recorded interview was transcribed. The researcher cross-checked the transcribed interviews with the audio version to check for errors and omissions. The researcher also allowed the participants to have access to the transcribed interview to affirm the information in the transcribed interviews in order to ensure their authenticity (Metro-Jaffe, 2011; McMullin, 2023).

5.8 Ethical Consideration

In academic research, the application of ethical standards is important because ethics in research provides a guideline or set of principles that help in carrying out a study in a fair and non-harmful manner (Dooly *et al.*, 2017). In ensuring a scholarly research work, Kantian Ethical Principles were employed. The Kantian ethical principle is a set of standards that serve as social guidelines in the carrying out of a study (Bowen, 2004). He further discussed the elements of the Kantian ethical principle. These principles are informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence, withdrawal, and minimal risk.

6. Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2012) is the process of methodically locating, classifying, and providing insight into meaningful patterns (themes) within a dataset. Thematic Analysis was employed to analyze the interviews conducted among participants to find answers to the research questions, which were:

RQ 1: What channels does KUC use in communicating its crisis preparedness to its employees?

RQ 2: How do the internal crisis communication strategies adapted by KUC adequately prepare its employees for crises?

RQ3. Which of the internal communication channels do KUC employees prefer and perceive as effective?

RQ1: What communication channels does KUC use to communicate its crisis preparedness to employees?

From the interviewee, the institution has not experienced any crisis situation which may call for urgent attention since its inception. It was indicated that situations such as suicide, sexual harassment between a lecturer and a student, and conditional admission of students, among others, can trigger a crisis.

To answer RQ1, themes were generated from interviews with university staff members responsible for these duties. The themes included face-to-face interaction, social media platforms, and departmental meetings.

A. Face-to-face communication

Meyer (2016) asserts that face-to-face communication is a kind of communication, often known as interaction, and it is direct and unmediated. In particular, sender-message-receiver theories of communication, according to Meyer (2016), have been called into question by the fact that contact is instantly responsive and that communicators base their activities on this fact. Face-to-face communication was argued to be one of the channels that Kessben University College (KUC) uses to communicate its crisis preparedness to employees. This is illustrated in the interviews below.

Extract 011

"... Oh yes! As an institution, we have a Public Relations and media officer who is responsible for ... eerrmm... or is a link or liaison officer between the public and the university. In times of potential crisis, that office is expected to... eeerrmm... intervene and at the university environment, we work with structures, and the office reports directly to the President since it's the ultimate authority in this campus ... and to the academic board...then it moves to the university governing council, which is responsible for the overall discipline..." (Respondent 001)

Extract 012

"... we have cordial interactions with the students...and that cordial interactions... eerrmm... really helps give a good atmosphere where students will tell us (management) what its troubling them that could bring a crisis, so that it lets us always be ready for danger..." (Respondent 002)

The above respondent agrees with Kimani (2024) that it is important that organisations create a good atmosphere where workers can have thorough discussions with leaders when any unpopular situation is breeding conflict that may lead to crisis situations.

B. Social media channels

From the interview with Respondent 002, it was found that social media platforms, especially WhatsApp platforms, have been used to group students into several departments, including BSc Business Admin (Accounting), BSc Business Admin (HRM), BSc Business Admin (Banking & Finance), BSc Business Admin (Marketing), BSc. Information & Comm. Tech., B.A. Media & Comm. Studies, BSc Nursing and Midwifery, Bsc Logistics, procurement and supply chain management, BA Politics and International Relations, BA Public Administration and Leadership Studies, and BSc Computer Science with Entrepreneurship. All students reading these individual courses have a WhatsApp platform that serves as the avenue for information dissemination. This is carefully expressed in extract 013 below.

Extract 013

"... every class has a WhatsApp platform where students share information among themselves... You see, the university has a WhatsApp page for each programme which is managed by the Dean of that so so ... information is usually broadcast on the WhatsApp platforms for students to know the latest updates in the University College." (Respondent 002)

C. Departmental (Group) meetings

From the interview session, it was found that the University College uses Departmental meetings to address pertinent issues challenging the institution and plans to engage students in these meetings to address potential crises. This is illustrated in the extract below:

Extract 014

"... every department has regular meetings with lecturers and students to address issues... and I'm sure that crisis will be met with the same channel of engagement..." (Respondent 004)

When asked about alternative channels that could be used to effectively mitigate the challenges associated with a crisis in case it hits the organisation, Respondent 012 emphasized the bottom-top approach as the strategy that has helped the institution to perform preventive measures against any situations of crisis.

Kajumba *et al.* (2016) define the bottom-up approach as an interventional approach that the leadership of an organisation uses to communicate with the grassroots of the organisation by seeking answers to challenges they (the grassroots) are battling with. This will be taken into consideration so that the organisation starts to solve the challenges right from the ordinary staff up to the executive members of the organisation. This approach, the institution believes, is the right way of curbing potential crises in an organization.

RQ 2: How do the internal crisis communication strategies adapted by KUC adequately prepare its employees for crises?

According to a preliminary empirical review conducted by Kimani (2024), several studies consistently demonstrate that effective internal communication, two-way communication, leadership communication, and the use of multiple communication channels are positively related to higher levels of engagement. This underscores the importance of effective internal communication strategies in enhancing employee engagement within higher education institutions. The findings from the study addressing this research question—specifically, the internal crisis communication strategies adopted by KUC to prepare its employees for crises—align with Kimani (2024), who asserts that employee commitment to organizational objectives is influenced by leadership communication. This is particularly crucial in shaping organizational culture and values that support the development of robust crisis communication strategies for potential emergencies (Kimani, 2024). However, challenges such as language barriers, information overload, and disparities in departmental communication effectiveness persist. A multimodal approach, including investments in technology and training programs, is necessary to address these issues. This study emphasizes the vital role of internal communication in enhancing engagement and organizational performance, while also calling for further research to explore specific tactics and emerging trends across different private universities with diverse organizational contexts.

The quotations below carefully hammer on leadership communication in the form of student-staff forums and the use of the office of the Dean of Students Affairs as an internal crisis communication strategy, which is especially important in forming an organizational culture and values that align with those of Kessben University College. Extracts x and y affirm the discussions above.

A. Students-staff Forum

Extract 021

“...for Kessben, we have what is called a student-staff forum, and we have a good relationship with the SRC and the Junior Common Room (JCRC). With the strong rapport

between the students, we can use these strategies to address any crises we might face. We also utilize the Dean of Students Office, and these are our current strategies.” (Respondent 002)

B. Office of the Dean of Students

Extract 022

“We also use the Office of the Dean of Students to have positive interactions with the students... so we plan to use that office very well for a possible crisis...” (Respondent 004)

The interviewee above expressed the opinion that the University College uses the Office of the Dean of Students as a platform to register grievances of students, which, if unchecked, could lead to a potential crisis. These grievances result from the bottom-top approach of settling grievances in the institution.

RQ3: Which of the internal communication channels do KUC employees prefer and perceive as effective?

Based on interviews with the university employees and students, it was found that face-to-face communication among leadership, faculty, and students is the most effective internal communication method preferred by both senior and junior members of the university community as an internal communication channel for crisis communication. According to inform, regulate, integrate, manage, persuade, and socialize and as such, employees play a critical role in exploiting a firm's competitive advantage since they have both acquired knowledge about the organization and networks of relationships with coworkers, managers, and clients (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 2000 as cited in Kim *et al.*, 2019).

This is expressed in the extracts below:

Extract 031

“...although we have not had any chances of crises, but we have built that rapport with students, and we believe that the existing strategies in reality could work out... also, it is not only about experiencing it, but having preventive measures, and as such these strategies are very effective, that is why we have not experienced...” (Participant 003)

Extract 032

“Generally speaking, I always say that if you want to manage students, you have to be a student and see them as your customers... You know we are dealing with people from different backgrounds and interests... maybe psychological issues and others, but you have to make sure that the crisis doesn't occur at all...” (Participant 005)

It was discovered that the most successful internal communication strategy, favored by both senior and junior members of the university community, for crisis communication is face-to-face communication between leadership, faculty, and students.

7. Summary

This study sought to explore how private universities, in this case, Kessben University College, have made effective preparations to meet a crisis. In addressing Research Question One (RQ 1), the study employed thematic analysis to identify the channels through which KUC communicates its crisis preparedness to the university community. The study revealed that face-to-face communication, the use of social media channels, and departmental (Group) meetings are the channels that Kessben University College has adopted as channels that will be used by the institution for effective communication. In answering Research Question Two (RQ 2), which focused on how the internal crisis communication strategies adapted by KUC adequately prepare its university community for crises. These communication strategies, often employed according to the study, include using a students-staff forum as a tool for effective communication, and also making use of the Office of the Dean of Students as the avenue for addressing possible crises. In answering Research Question Three (RQ 3), it was discovered that both senior and junior members of the university community preferred face-to-face communication between leadership, teachers, and students as the most effective internal communication route for crisis communication.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

Crisis continues to be a situation worth discussing because it may contribute to the growth or failure of an organisation. According to Coombs (2007), crisis management is a crucial executive function. Failure can cause considerable harm to its stakeholders and result in large losses for an organization or institution, which may ultimately lead to its destruction.

A Crisis Management Plan (CMP) is a tool used by many businesses to deal with emergencies. Plans for evacuation, crisis response exercises, and backup machinery and generators may be part of these plans. However, many businesses lack a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP), which makes them unprepared for communication during a crisis (Lando, 2014). In that regard, it is important that educational institutions also put down a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) as posited by Coombs (2007) and Lando (2014) in order for the organisation to meet the crisis head-on. Although there could be challenges as a result of the crisis, an adequate plan will help mitigate or lessen the negative effects of the crisis in an organisation.

It is therefore crucial to remember that while businesses aim for a variety of crisis management methods, they must also incorporate the Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) into their Crisis Management Plan (CMP). It makes use of the three-stage crisis

management model developed by Coombs (2007), which meticulously takes into account the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases and must be carefully executed in crises.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Andrews Kwakwa Peprah is a media and communication studies lecturer at Kessben University College, Ghana. He is a PhD Student in Communication and media studies (Strategic communication) at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. His teaching and research interests include but not limited to crisis communication, public relations, new media studies, political communication, identity construction.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7585-7963>.

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