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AI-Integrated crisis communication: A conceptual extension of Situational Crisis Communication Theory

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing organisational communication, including crisis communication responses. While existing studies acknowledge the importance of AI for monitoring, analysis and message creation, limited theoretical work has examined how AI can be integrated into an established crisis communication theory. By focusing on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this conceptual paper extended the model by proposing AI-integrated crisis communication as part of response strategies and for addressing reputational threats. Although still widely acknowledged, SCCT is based on linear, human-centred assumptions that do not fully reflect the realities of algorithmically mediated communication environments. Drawing on literature from crisis communication and AI-mediated communication, this conceptual paper distinguished between AI-as-support and AI-as-agent and examined their relevance across the pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis stages of SCCT. A conceptual framework is proposed that extends SCCT through predictive attribution, anticipatory response alignment, hybridisation and recalibration and adaptive governance. In doing so, the proposed framework reconceptualises crisis communication as an adaptive socio-technical process and extends SCCT beyond reputation repair toward continuous reputation management.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence**,** AI-as-support, AI-as-agent, Crisis Communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory

INTRODUCTION

Literature indicates that artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded in organisational communication practices, including crisis communication.[1] Although definitions of AI differ, it is broadly understood as computational systems capable of performing tasks associated with intelligent human behaviour, such as reasoning, communication and decision-making.[2] More recent scholarship extends this understanding by emphasising AI's capacity to interact, communicate and act in social

[1] Alexander Buhmann and Candace L. White, "Artificial Intelligence in Public Relations: Role and Implications," in *The Emerald Handbook of Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Media* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022), 625–38, https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80071-597-420221036.

[2] Alan K Mackworth and David L Poole, *Artificial Intelligence*: *Foundations of Computational Agents* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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environments in ways similar to humans.[3] This extension indicates a change in how organisations communicate, particularly in contexts with reputational consequences for organisations such as crises. A crisis arises when organisations are perceived not to meet key stakeholder expectations, leading to negative outcomes for both the stakeholders and the organisation involved, with potential disruptions to operations.[4]

Crisis communication has become more complex in digitally mediated environments.[5] For example, social media platforms enable crises to emerge, escalate and spread rapidly, often before organisations can respond strategically.[6] Stakeholders also actively participate in crisis meaning-making by sharing, reframing and amplifying information, which intensifies reputational risk and reduces organisational control over communication processes. As a result, crisis communication increasingly unfolds in real time within interactive, networked spaces rather than through linear transmission of messages.[7] Alongside these changes, AI tools have become more visible and accessible in communication management. Early applications of AI in organisational communication focused on automating routine tasks such as media monitoring, customer surveys and the generation of standardised information packages.[8] More recently, advances in generative AI (GenAI) and predictive analytics have expanded these functions to include real-time sentiment analysis, trend detection, personalised message generation and adaptive feedback mechanisms.[9] The release of widely accessible GenAI tools has further accelerated their adoption and experimentation by organisations, resulting in renewed attention to the role of AI in crisis communication contexts.[10]

Crisis communication scholarship shows a growing emphasis on understanding crisis responses as persuasive messages rather than neutral information. Crisis response strategies are thus designed to influence stakeholder perceptions, responsibility attributions and organisational reputation. Therefore, effective crisis communication depends on aligning organisational responses with stakeholder expectations and emotional reactions as a crisis unfolds. The way in which an organisation communicates during a crisis must be at the centre of reputation management.[11]

One of the most influential models still guiding crisis communication research is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs.[12] SCCT remains an important theory in crisis communication literature since it links crisis types to response strategies based on perceived organisational responsibility. Crises are categorised as victim, accidental, or preventable, with subsequent response strategies such as deny, diminish, or rebuild. For almost two decades, SCCT has provided a systematic approach for selecting crisis responses aimed at protecting an organisation's reputation – see Table 1.[13]

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[3] Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Manuel Goyanes, and Timilehin Durotoye, "A Scholarly Definition of Artificial Intelligence (AI): Advancing AI as a Conceptual Framework in Communication Research," *Political Communication* 41, no. 2 (March 3, 2024): 317–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2290497.

[4] W. Timothy Coombs and Elina R. Tachkova, "Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory: A Triadic Appraisal Model for Crises," *Management Communication Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (November 9, 2023): 798–820, https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189221151177.

[5] W. Timothy Coombs, "Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)," in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley, 2022), 193–204, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119678953.ch14.

[6] Young Entrepreneur Council, "Why Social Media Can Make or Break a Crisis Response Plan," Forbes, August 15, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/councils/theyec/2023/08/15/why-social-media-can-make-or-break-a-crisis-response-plan.

[7] Calvin Jacey, *Crisis Management: Social Media Is a Double-Edged Sword. How Can You Use It to Your Advantage in Times of Crisis?* (The Castle Group, 2023).

[8] Monika Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, "Organisational Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence Development. Opportunities and Threats," *Social Communication* 20, no. 2 (January 1, 2019): 62–68, https://doi.org/10.2478/sc-2019-0010.

[9] Yang Cheng, Jaekuk Lee, and Jinzhe Qiao, "Crisis Communication in the Age of AI: Navigating Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Horizons," *Media and Crisis Communication*, 2024, 172–94.

[10] Martin N. Ndlela, "Ongoing Digital Transformation of Organizational Communication: An Introduction," 2024, 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58307-0_1.

[11] W Timothy Coombs and Sherry J Holladay, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (John Wiley & Sons, 2022).

[12] W Timothy Coombs, "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Corporate Reputation Review* 10, no. 3 (September 14, 2007): 163–76, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049.

[13] Coombs, "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory."

Despite its continued relevance, SCCT is anchored in assumptions that reflect earlier and more traditional communication environments. In this regard, the theory presumes a largely human-centred sender-receiver model in which organisations assess responsibility, select a response strategy, and communicate messages to more passive audiences.[14] As a result, responsibility attribution is treated as relatively fixed while crisis response is conceptualised as a reactive process focused on reputation repair after a crisis. These assumptions are increasingly challenged in digitally mediated environments that are characterised by continuous interaction, algorithmic filtering, and rapidly shifting stakeholder perceptions.[15]

Existing research has begun to explore AI in crisis communication, often focusing on operational efficiency or audience responses to AI-generated messages. Some studies examine whether AI can deliver instructive or adjustive messages effectively, [16] while others compare AI and human spokespersons under specific crisis conditions.[17] However, much of this work remains empirical and fragmented, with limited theoretical integration into well-known crisis communication frameworks.

Consequently, this conceptual paper addresses this gap by examining how AI can be integrated into SCCT to assist with a modern crisis communication strategy. In doing so, this paper draws on literature from crisis, strategic and AI-mediated communication. The paper also distinguishes between AI used as analytical support and AI that functions as a direct communication agent. Based on a synthesis of the extant literature, a conceptual framework that extends SCCT with AI across the pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis stages is proposed.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual paper adopted a narrative literature review to examine how AI can extend SCCT. Narrative literature reviews are particularly suited to conceptual research because they enable the synthesis and interpretation of existing knowledge to extend theory rather than to summarise empirical findings.[18] Literature was identified through searches of Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science using combinations of keywords such as artificial intelligence, crisis communication, strategic communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, AI-mediated communication, generative AI and chatbots. The literature review included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, conference papers and seminal publications in English relevant to crisis communication and AI.

The literature was selected based on three criteria. First, studies had to address AI, crisis communication or both. Second, publications had to contribute theoretically or empirically to understanding crisis communication processes or AI-mediated communication. Third, recent studies were prioritised while seminal works on SCCT and attribution theory were retained for their theoretical importance.

The selected literature was analysed using a thematic approach to identify recurring concepts and theoretical patterns across the reviewed studies.[19] The analysis involved an iterative reading of the literature, identifying common concepts related to AI and crisis communication, grouping similar concepts into broader themes, and comparing their relationships with the assumptions and response strategies of SCCT. The literature review is organised around six sections that emerged from this analysis, namely explicating the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), SCCT's suitability for digitally mediated communication environments, SCCT in the context of AI, AI-as-support versus

[14] Timothy Whims, " AI at the Helm: Transforming Crisis Communication " (Clemson University, 2024).
[15] Andem I Effiong, "Managing Reputation Risk and Situational Crisis in Higher Institutions of Learning," *Independent Journal of Management & Production* 5, no. 2 (2014): 458–79.
[16] Yi Xiao and Shubin Yu, "Can ChatGPT Replace Humans in Crisis Communication? The Effects of AI-Mediated Crisis Communication on Stakeholder Satisfaction and Responsibility Attribution," *International Journal of Information Management* 80 (February 2025): 102835, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2024.102835.
[17] Rachel R Ehlers, *The Effects of Artificial Intelligence on Crisis Communication Rebuild Strategies* (University of South Dakota, 2021).
[18] Elina Jaakkola, "Designing Conceptual Articles: Four Approaches," *AMS Review* 10, no. 1–2 (June 9, 2020): 18–26, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0.
[19] Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333–39.

AI-as-agent, AI responses within Coombs's (2007) SCCT typology, and ethical issues in AI-integrated crisis communication. Following an integrative approach to conceptual synthesis,[20] these sections informed the development of the proposed conceptual framework for AI-integrated crisis communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is now organised around the following six sections, providing the theoretical foundation for the proposed conceptual framework that integrates AI into SCCT.

Explicating the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Crisis communication refers to how organisations communicate during a crisis to address public concerns and protect organisational reputation.[21] Organisations rely on crisis communication to limit the impact of a crisis by providing timely and ongoing information to stakeholders while protecting the reputation of the organisation, guided by a crisis communication strategy. Unambiguous communication helps stakeholders make sense of the crisis and understand the actions of the organisation as a response. Crises are commonly understood as unfolding across three phases, namely a pre-crisis phase that focuses on preparedness and prevention, a crisis phase in which the organisation responds as events develop, and a post-crisis phase concerned with recovery and reducing the likelihood of future crises.[22]

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs,[23] is still widely acknowledged and cited as a foundational framework in crisis communication scholarship to inform the development of crisis response strategies. SCCT provides a framework for explaining how organisations can determine suitable crisis responses by assessing the characteristics of a crisis and the degree of responsibility attributed to the organisation. In this regard, crisis responses consist of the messages and actions organisations use during and after a crisis to influence stakeholder interpretations of the crisis and to protect organisational reputation. Also, crisis responses function as persuasive communication intended to affect stakeholder attitudes and behavioural intentions toward the organisation. As Fediuk et al. note, examining crisis response strategies independently allows more insight into how each influences audience perceptions and behaviour, both on its own and in combination with others.[24]

The seminal work on SCCT explains that the theory is grounded in attribution theory, arguing that stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility and the resulting emotional and reputational consequences determine the selection of appropriate crisis response strategies.[25] Therefore, SCCT provides a framework for predicting stakeholder responses to a crisis by assessing the degree of reputational risk it creates. In addition, the theory anticipates how audiences are likely to respond to the communication strategies an organisation adopts to address and manage that crisis.[26]

The theory classifies crises into victim, accidental and preventable categories and aligns each with a crisis communication strategy, namely deny, diminish, or rebuild, depending on the perceived organisational fault. Table 1 depicts Coombs's[27] typology of crises.

Table 1: Typology of crises

Crisis type	Typical cause or attribution of responsibility	Perceived level of organisational fault	Primary response strategy	Response actions	Purpose of crisis communication strategy

[20] Richard J. Torraco, "Writing Integrative Literature Reviews," *Human Resource Development Review* 15, no. 4 (December 25, 2016): 404–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606.
[21] Coombs and Holladay, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*.
[22] Cheng, Lee, and Qiao, *Crisis Communication in the Age of AI.*
[23] Coombs, *Protecting Organization Reputations.*
[24] Tomasz A. Fediuk, Isabel C. Botero, and Kristin M. Pace, "Crisis Response Effectiveness," in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley, 2022), 31–51, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119678953.ch3.
[25] W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, "Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Management Communication Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2002): 165–86.
[26] Coombs and Holladay, **Handbook of Crisis Communication.**
[27] Coombs and Holladay, **Handbook of Crisis Communication.**

Victim crises	Events where the organisation is seen as a victim of external circumstances beyond its control (for example, natural disasters, tampering, false rumours).	Low	Deny	Refute false claims. Clarify misinformation. Assert lack of responsibility.	To protect the organisation's reputation by removing perceived blame.
Accidental crises	Unintentional incidents such as technical errors, equipment failures, or accidents that occur without malicious intent.	Moderate	Diminish	Provide excuses or justifications. Emphasise limited control. Highlight preventive measures	To reduce perceived responsibility and minimise reputational damage.
Preventable crises	Situations caused by organisational negligence, unethical behaviour, or intentional wrongdoing.	High	Rebuild	Issue public apology. Accept responsibility. Offer compensation or corrective action.	To repair trust and rebuild reputation by demonstrating accountability.

Adapted from Coombs and Holladay[28]

For almost two decades, this theory has provided crisis communication scholars with a suitable crisis communication strategy on how to respond to specific types of crises. However, with the advent of recent technologies and AI, it has become necessary to build on the current literature that revisits the suitability of this theory in today's crisis communication environment for new insights.

SCCT in digitally mediated communication environments

There is evidence in the literature that SCCT has already begun to shift toward digitally mediated communication environments. [29] Nonetheless, several scholars argue that SCCT's linear sender-receiver communication model is not suited for such an environment. Arguments in this regard focus on the foundational assumptions of SCCT that are anchored in human-sender creation of messages and a human audience interpreting these messages. Furthermore, this model relies on static, one-way distribution of information, intending to manage an organisation's reputation during a crisis by selecting response strategies that fit how the public interprets the crisis.[30]

Also, SCCT is grounded in a human-centric epistemology focused on intention, attribution and perception. For example, the theory assumes that crisis communication is a process where humans intentionally create messages to influence audience perceptions and attributions of responsibility and reputation. Thus, SCCT supports human intention as central to the meaning of messages and the effectiveness of crisis management in influencing stakeholders' perceptions and interpretations of an organisation's reputation.[31]

[28] Coombs and Holladay, **Handbook of Crisis Communication, 163–176.**
[29] W Timothy Coombs, "Revising Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Social Media and Crisis Communication* 1 (2017): 21–37.
[30] Effiong, "Managing Reputation Risk and Situational Crisis in Higher Institutions of Learning"; Whims, " AI at the Helm: Transforming Crisis Communication ."
[31] Ehlers, **Effects of Artificial Intelligence.**

It can therefore be argued that SCCT's human-centred foundations do not correspond with algorithmic processes in a digital environment where platform architecture independently influences the flow of communication. Theories of sociotechnical systems, including Latour's Actor-Network Theory, suggest that communication and influence emerge through interactions among human and technological participants, rather than through linear sender-receiver processes.[32] Similarly, Gillespie illustrates how algorithms govern organisations' flow and interpretation of information within digital media environments, thereby challenging traditional communication models that rely solely on human cognition and intention.[33]

Also, Roumbanis argues that algorithms now mediate communication by filtering and organising information within socio-technical systems.[34] These mediations influence how meaning is produced and interpreted, extending beyond human control. In addition, social media has changed how crisis communication messages are produced and received. For example, social media enabled message co-creation by stakeholders and shifted the power from the organisation to the user.[35]

Hancock et al.'s work on AI-mediated communication supports the idea that crisis communication today must be reframed as an ecological process rather than linear messages.[36] For example, AI systems now participate in creating messages, interpreting responses, and influencing how stakeholders perceive organisational communication. Because AI modifies and sometimes generates messages, and digital platform algorithms filter, rank, and distribute content, crisis communication nowadays occurs within an active ecosystem consisting of human and non-human participants rather than the traditional sender–receiver communication model. Of importance is how the public makes meaning about crises through interactions between organisations, stakeholders, AI systems and platform infrastructures. How a crisis is communicated has thus become interactive, reciprocated and more complex. SCCT's linear, human-centred model thus requires revision to reflect crisis communication processes that occur through algorithms and infrastructures in digital media environments to protect an organisation's reputation.

Sundstrom and Levenshus and Kent and Taylor's work furthermore shows that crisis communication now occurs in interactive spaces where publics, through social media engagement, help influence how organisational messages are produced and shared.[37] Social media encourages two-way communication and continuous feedback, creating networked audiences that can amplify or challenge organisational crisis communication messages. Revision of SCCT to include dialogic and networked communication would better reflect how trust and reputation are now built interactively.

Artificial Intelligence in crisis communication

Crisis communication has not only moved to digital environments but also involves interaction with AI systems. It is for this reason that Noller argues that traditional ideas of what constitutes crisis communication authorship can be challenged by algorithms and technology.[38] This argument can be extended to non-human participants such as Generative AI (GenAI), an AI technology that can generate content based on user prompts. In doing so, GenAI can also produce knowledge and informational messages in the context of a crisis, which is referred to as algorithmic authorship. The idea of algorithmic authorship thus supports the idea that theories like the SCCT must be expanded to include non-human

[32] Bruno Latour, *Resembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[33] Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

[34] Lambros Roumbanis, "On Algorithmic Mediations," *European Journal of Social Theory* 29, no. 1 (February 21, 2026): 153–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310251319677.

[35] Nitin Upadhyay et al., "Managing Crises in the Digital Age: Navigating the Complexities of Technology and Management," *Engineering Management Journal* 37, no. 5 (October 20, 2025): 499–504, https://doi.org/10.1080/10429247.2025.2557152.

[36] Jeffrey T Hancock, Mor Naaman, and Karen Levy, "AI-Mediated Communication: Definition, Research Agenda, and Ethical Considerations," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 25, no. 1 (2020): 89–100.

[37] Beth Sundstrom and Abbey Blake Levenshus, "The Art of Engagement: Dialogic Strategies on Twitter," *Journal of Communication Management* 21, no. 1 (February 6, 2017): 17–33, https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-07-2015-0057; Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor, "Fostering Dialogic Engagement: Toward an Architecture of Social Media for Social Change," *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 1 (January 21, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984462.

[38] Richard Noller, "Algorithmic Authorship and Knowledge Production," *AI & Society* 89, no. 102 (2024).

participants in crisis communication. Several studies have revisited SCCT in the context of AI, notably also by Coombs and Holladay, who suggest adaptations and extensions to SCCT to better account for AI and digital communication environments.[39]

Although research on AI and crisis communication has expanded, theoretical engagement in these studies remains limited. A case in point is a systematic review by Cheng et al. of 177 peer-reviewed articles that show that many such studies lack a clear theoretical framework and continue to rely on established models that are not well-suited to addressing human-AI interaction, ethical concerns, or the need for instant adjustment as crises unfold in real time.[40] In addition, most of the studies reviewed focus on adopting AI in only one stage of a crisis rather than examining its role across the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages. Along similar lines, Jong argues that SCCT retains value only if responsibility for a crisis is treated as flexible rather than fixed and when communication strategies can be adjusted in response to changing stakeholder interpretations over time.[41]

The prominence of AI in strategic communication is acknowledged by Kaczmarek-Śliwińska. She argues that in the context of strategic communication, AI is no longer merely an invisible infrastructure of technology but is beginning to mediate communication processes and influence public interaction.[42] AI is therefore seen as moving from a supporting role behind the scenes to a more visible communicative role that interacts directly with the public and influences public discourse. Furthermore, Germinder and Capizzo note that AI is increasingly being used to create messages and responses for strategic communicators, indicating a move from providing analytical support to content creation and public engagement.[43] It can therefore be argued that AI is moving beyond an analytical support role and taking on a more visible communicative function within crisis communication, which is also supported by findings from Zhan et al. Their studies found that AI-generated care and AI combined with human crisis messages can increase trust in government, particularly among those who already understand and feel comfortable with AI.[44] This finding suggests that audiences can perceive AI-generated messages as genuine forms of communication rather than only playing a technical, behind-the-scenes role.

AI as Support and AI as a Communication Agent

It has become important to distinguish between AI-as-support (crisis data analytics) and AI-as-agent (direct crisis communication) when used in a crisis. Starting with AI-as-support, the work of Mazák and Wacławik explains it as assisting with providing real-time data, scenario and predictive modelling that can reduce response time and assist with more accurate decision-making about the crisis.[45] In this regard, AI can assist in the pre-crisis stage and act as an early warning system by analysing communication patterns and sentiment changes. For example, Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad developed a Critical Event Detection Analysis (CEDA) that uses machine learning, statistical pattern recognition and sentiment analysis to identify an emerging crisis.[46] AI-as-support thus enhances situational awareness, making more informed decisions before a crisis occurs. It can thus be argued that in the age of AI, SCCT needs updating to include AI in pre-crisis detection and attribution phases.

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[39] Coombs and Holladay, **Handbook of Crisis Communication.**

[40] Yang Cheng et al., "How Is Artificial Intelligence Shaping Crisis Communication? A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda," *Journal of Risk Research*, November 2025, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2025.2579317.

[41] Wouter Jong, "Beyond the Snapshot: Rethinking Crisis Communication Theories in Dynamic Crisis Situations," *Public Relations Review* 51, no. 3 (September 2025): 102586, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2025.102586.

[42] Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, "Organisational Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence Development. Opportunities and Threats."

[43] Lea-Ann Germinder and Luke Capizzo, "A Strategic Communication Practitioner Imperative: Contextualizing Responsible AI as Part of Responsible Advocacy," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 19, no. 2 (2025): 340–56.

[44] Cheng et al., "How Is Artificial Intelligence Shaping Crisis Communication? A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda"; Emily S. Zhan et al., "Does AI-Generated Care-Based Message Increase Trust in Government? The Pivotal Role of AI Knowledge in Government Crisis Response," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 19, no. 2 (March 15, 2025): 176–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2025.2471527.

[45] David Mazák and Michał Wacławik, "Artificial Intelligence As A Member Of Crisis Management Leadership – Benefits, Limitations, And The Psychological Implications Of Hybrid Decision-Making," *Łódzkie Studia Humanistyczne*, no. 2 (August 15, 2025): 5–13, https://doi.org/10.32782/2956-333X/2025-2-1.

[46] Farahman Farrokhi and Asgar Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, "Rethinking Convenience Sampling: Defining Quality Criteria," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2, no. 4 (2012): 784–92.

However, AI-as-agent is increasingly becoming a reality in that AI can also act as a direct communicator about the crisis and not merely behind the scenes. Significant findings by Zhan et al. show that citizens interpret AI chatbots as human-like agents capable of providing emotional support, influencing perceptions of government service quality, and playing a direct role in crisis communication.[47] Experiments reported by Xiao and Yu indicate that AI chatbots can perform as well as humans and sometimes better, depending on the crisis scenario. The study found that chatbots were perceived as equally competent as humans when delivering adjusting messages (empathy-oriented content) in certain conditions, especially when the user's crisis request was resolved.[48] Thus, when the AI solved the user's problem and expressed supportive messages, participants rated it just as capable as a human spokesperson. When the organisation did not respond to a stakeholder's request, the chatbot delivered educational information that was perceived as more competent than a human.

Despite research indicating that chatbots can be perceived favourably, AI-as-agents are still perceived to lack empathy. For example, Harland et al. found that AI apologies were perceived as lacking sincerity, did not have emotional depth or align with human expectations for empathy and repairing relationships.[49] Contrary to these perceptions, in a study by Ayers et al., chatbot responses to patients were preferred over physician responses, indicating that AI has become capable of generating empathetic responses in specific circumstances, which also has potential for AI in crisis communication.[50]

AI responses across Coombs's SCCT typology

Empirical evidence indicates that AI tools can be useful for different SCCT response strategies and various stages of a crisis. For example, Loof et al. found that in a preventable crisis, AI-generated messages to rebuild were just as effective as those delivered by a human spokesperson.[51] Participants did not show significant differences in trust, credibility, or organisational reputation across the two conditions, indicating that audiences accepted AI as a legitimate crisis communicator even under serious attribution of organisational fault.

Regarding accidental crises, a systematic review by Domfeh and Dancy shows that AI significantly enhances decision-making, situational awareness and coordination of operations in disaster settings through predictive analytics and multimodal data processing. In addition, planning was also expedited through better coordination.[52]

Notably, Cheng et al. put forward that AI strengthens crisis communication across all stages of SCCT. For example, in the pre-crisis phase, AI enhances scanning to detect risks in time through predictive assessment, allowing organisations to anticipate crises rather than merely reacting to them.[53] During the crisis response phase, AI supports real-time engagement, personalised messages, sentiment tracking and immediate control of misinformation, all of which extend how SCCT's instruction and adjustment information are operationalised during a crisis. These studies support the need to modernise SCCT by incorporating AI in all phases of crisis communication. These studies support the need to modernise SCCT by incorporating AI across all phases of crisis communication. The distinction between AI-supported communication and AI as a communication agent provides the foundation for the conceptual framework proposed in this paper.

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[47] Zhan et al., "Does AI-Generated Care-Based Message Increase Trust in Government? The Pivotal Role of AI Knowledge in Government Crisis Response."

[48] Xiao and Yu, "Can ChatGPT Replace Humans in Crisis Communication? The Effects of AI-Mediated Crisis Communication on Stakeholder Satisfaction and Responsibility Attribution."

[49] Hadassah Harland et al., "AI Apology: A Critical Review of Apology in AI Systems," *Artificial Intelligence Review* 58, no. 12 (October 6, 2025): 369, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10462-025-11305-8.

[50] John W. Ayers et al., "Comparing Physician and Artificial Intelligence Chatbot Responses to Patient Questions Posted to a Public Social Media Forum," *JAMA Internal Medicine* 183, no. 6 (June 1, 2023): 589, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2023.1838.

[51] Travis Loof et al., "The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Crisis Communication: A Study of Public Perceptions and Trust of AI," *Iowa Journal of Communication* 55, no. 2 (2023): 9–26.

[52] Emmanuel Adjei Domfeh and Christopher L Dancy, "Human-AI Use Patterns for Decision-Making in Disaster Scenarios: A Systematic Review," *ArXiv E-Prints*, 2025, arXiv-2509.

[53] Cheng et al., "How Is Artificial Intelligence Shaping Crisis Communication? A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda."

Ethical issues in AI-integrated crisis communication

Although there is empirical evidence for the usefulness of AI in crisis communication in different response types and across all stages of SCCT, there are also important ethical considerations. A case in point is Cheng et al., who identify key concerns related to data privacy, algorithmic bias and the absence of human oversight. AI systems often rely on sensitive personal data, which, if mishandled, can undermine public trust.[54] In addition, biased training data for Large Language Models (LLMs) may lead to unequal treatment of stakeholder groups, while AI's limited ability to interpret emotional, cultural and moral contexts means that human judgement remains essential, particularly in empathetic or ethically sensitive communication.

Empirical evidence also suggests that the use of AI may not be suitable for extremely sensitive crises. For example, Schneider and Boman's case analysis shows that stakeholders reacted negatively when a university disclosed its use of AI in crisis communication, perceiving it as a violation of ethical expectations and social norms. Their findings highlight the continued importance of human oversight in more serious crises.[55]

Transparency and ethical governance further influence stakeholder trust. Srinivasan found that AI-supported crisis communication is most effective when organisations apply transparent systems, fair practices and continuous ethical oversight.[56] Extending this view, Liu argues that AI itself can generate crises when organisations violate social norms through biased outputs, misleading content, or opaque use of AI. To address these "ethics of care" messages that prioritise empathy, relational responsibility and accountability are proposed.[57] Supporting this view, Zhan et al. argue that stakeholder trust increases when AI-generated responses follow a care-based approach and are transparent, coherent and easy to understand.[58]

When AI functions as the communication agent, responsibility attribution becomes more complex. In this regard, AI-integrated crisis communication messages can blur the identity of the sender, raising questions about accountability when reputational harm occurs.[59] Research further indicates that AI authorship may also reduce perceived credibility of organisational messages.[60] Since AI is already substantially embedded in PR workflows, there is a need to adapt theoretical models like SCCT to account for the growing role of AI in terms of governance and ethics while accommodating human oversight.[61]

Although SCCT provides the main theoretical foundation for this paper, other theoretical perspectives, including Image Repair Theory, the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model (SMCC), and Dialogic Communication Theory, also contribute to understanding crisis communication in digital environments.[62] A recent systematic literature review, however, indicates that research on AI-integrated crisis communication remains theoretically fragmented, with relatively few studies applying

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[54] Cheng, Lee, and Qiao, "Crisis Communication in the Age of AI: Navigating Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Horizons."

[55] Mosa Moshabela et al., "Development of Non-Profit Organisations Providing Health and Social Services in Rural South Africa: A Three-Year Longitudinal Study," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 12 (December 16, 2013): e83861, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0083861.

[56] Srinivas Srinivasan, "Crisis Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Exploring the Ethical Implications of AI-Driven Risk Management," *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* 6, no. 4 (2023): 137–56.

[57] Juan Liu, "Applying Ethics of Care-Based Response Strategies to Mitigate AI-Related Corporate Crisis: The Moderating Role of Crisis Involvement," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 19, no. 2 (March 15, 2025): 130–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2025.2459609.

[58] Zhan et al., "Does AI-Generated Care-Based Message Increase Trust in Government? The Pivotal Role of AI Knowledge in Government Crisis Response."

[59] Moshabela et al., "Development of Non-Profit Organisations Providing Health and Social Services in Rural South Africa: A Three-Year Longitudinal Study."

[60] Angelica Lermann Henestrosa and Joachim Kimmerle, "The Effects of Assumed AI vs. Human Authorship on the Perception of a GPT-Generated Text," *Journalism and Media* 5, no. 3 (August 20, 2024): 1085–97, https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5030069.

[61] Muck Rack, " State of AI in PR: 2025 Research Report," 2025.https://muckrack.com/research/state-of-ai-in-pr.

[62] William L. Benoit, "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication," *Public Relations Review* 23, no. 2 (June 1997): 177–86, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(97)90023-0; Lucinda Austin, Brooke Fisher Liu, and Yan Jin, "How Audiences Seek Out Crisis Information: Exploring the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 40, no. 2 (May 9, 2012): 188–207, https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2012.654498; Michael L Kent and Maureen Taylor, "Building Dialogic Relationships through the World Wide Web," *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 3 (September 1998): 321–34, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(99)80143-X.

established communication theories and most focusing on disconnected crisis phases rather than the complete crisis lifecycle.[63] These findings support the extension of SCCT proposed in this paper.

TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING SCCT AND AI

The following conceptual framework is proposed to integrate SCCT and AI, consisting of four stages as depicted in Figure 1.

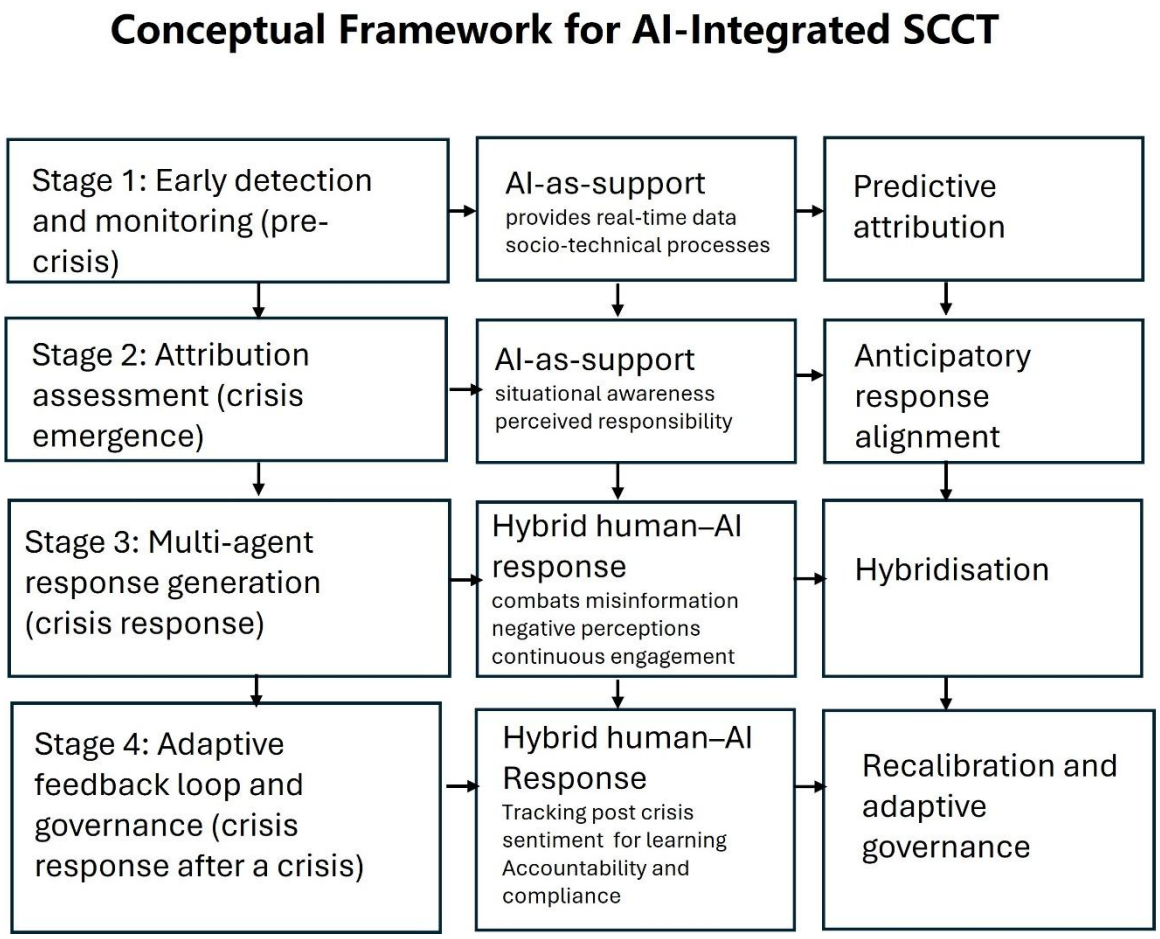


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework for AI-integrated SCCT

Figure 1 can now be explained as follows:

Stage 1: Early detection and monitoring (pre-crisis)

During stage 1, AI tools can act behind the scenes in selected digital environments as an AI-as-support function to provide real-time data in terms of analysis, scenario modelling and predictive forecasting to guide decision-making.[64] AI can be useful during the pre-crisis stage, because it can detect early signs of a crisis in changing communication patterns and sentiment on social media and other digital platforms.[65] During a pre-crisis, AI can thus act in the context of algorithmic authorship through algorithms and infrastructures, in that it can provide important information and knowledge to the organisation to prevent a crisis.[66] The proposed framework thus expands SCCT by also embedding socio-technical processes into early identification of a crisis for predictive attribution.

Some examples of AI tools that can be useful for pre-crisis detection are Dataminr, Splunk ML Toolkit, Palantir Foundry, Talkwalker, IBM Watson and Splinkr AI.

[63] Cheng et al., How Is Artificial Intelligence Shaping Crisis Communication?.
[64] Mazák and Wacławik, Artificial Intelligence as a Member of Crisis Management Leadership.
[65] Farrokhi et al., Using Artificial Intelligence to Detect Crisis Related to Events.
[66] Noller, Algorithmic Authorship and Knowledge Production.

Stage 2: Attribution assessment (crisis emergence)

A second stage in the proposed framework can include attribution assessment to assist organisations with data to estimate perceived responsibility to inform the selection of the strategy category, for example, deny, diminish, or rebuild – see Table 1. In this sense, AI still acts as a support function behind the scenes to improve situational awareness and make more accurate decisions about the emerging crisis.[67] Organisations will be able to anticipate a crisis and not simply react to it. In the attribution assessment stage, AI thus supports organisations by analysing early stakeholder reactions to determine how responsibility for the crisis is likely to be assigned.[68] This stage extends SCCT by enabling an early assessment of who or what stakeholders are blamed for the crisis based on real-time data. This allows organisations to anticipate blame with a suitable response category rather than responding only reactively. Some examples of AI tools that can be useful for predictive attribution are Brandwatch, iEmotions, Black Swan Technologies, Azure ML and Meltwater Intelligence Suite.

Stage 3: Multi-agent response generation (crisis response)

During stage 3, AI assumes the role of a communication agent within a human-AI collaborative response. Since timely communication is essential for combating misinformation and reducing uncertainty, AI can generate personalised messages aligned with SCCT response strategies, while humans provide oversight to ensure accuracy, empathy and ethical compliance.

As Ehlers[69] points out, if there is only a human focus when communicating during a crisis, it will be insufficient since technologies nowadays also influence message creation and interpretation. For example, algorithms filter, organise and influence meaning within socio-technical networks.[70] Trust and reputation of the organisation can be built through participation and continuous engagement with both AI and humans.[71] In this regard, AI can provide emotional support and influence perceptions of the organisation while also responding directly.[72] As argued by Xiao and Yu,[73] AI-integrated crisis communication has become important, during which AI systems can act as autonomous communicators, since in the digital age, crisis communication is no longer only human. AI-integrated crisis communication extends SCCT by accommodating crisis communication within socio-technical systems rather than by humans alone. Some examples of AI tools that can be useful during the crisis response stage are custom GPT-based chatbots, Azure AI Bot Service, LLMs such as Claude and others, Google Perspective API and Full Fact AI.

Stage 4: Adaptive feedback loop and governance (crisis response after a crisis)

As part of post-crisis communication, during stage 4, AI primarily supports organisational learning by tracking stakeholder sentiment, monitoring reputation and evaluating the effectiveness of crisis responses and is referred to as an adaptive feedback loop for this study. Human oversight remains essential to ensure accountability and ethical governance.

When sentiment is tracked in real time after a crisis, the organisation can adjust and adapt its crisis response strategy to benefit its reputation.[74] In this regard, through tracking stakeholder sentiment in real time and refining crisis communication messages iteratively, organisations can adjust their response strategies as stakeholder perceptions change and, in doing so, ensure long-term reputation management.[75] The adaptive feedback loop and governance stage thus extends SCCT to a continuous process informed by data, but which also ensures ethical compliance and accountability.

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[67] Farrokhi et al., Using Artificial Intelligence to Detect Crisis Related to Events.
[68] Cheng, Lee, and Qiao, Crisis Communication in the Age of AI.
[69] Ehlers, **Effects of Artificial Intelligence on Crisis Communication Rebuild Strategies.**
[70] Gillespie, **Custodians of the Internet.**
[71] Kent and Taylor, Fostering Dialogic Engagement.
[72] Zhan et al., Does AI-Generated Care-Based Message Increase Trust in Government?
[73] Xiao and Yu, Chatbots as Crisis Communicators.
[74] Cheng, Lee, and Qiao, Crisis Communication in the Age of AI.
[75] Zhan et al., Does AI-Generated Care-Based Message Increase Trust in Government?

Some examples of AI tools that can be useful for the adaptive feedback loop are NetBase Quid, Azure ML pipelines, IBM Watson Studio and Camunda.

DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review, the following arguments justify revising SCCT and the proposed conceptual framework to integrate SCCT with AI.

First, communication is no longer linear but ecological. Of importance is that digital infrastructures such as algorithms, platforms and AI systems not only influence crisis communication messages but also their distribution, interpretation and how stakeholders respond.[76] Crisis communication now occurs within ecosystems, which cannot rely on traditional sender-receiver communication models such as the SCCT.[77]

Second, the literature indicates that stakeholder perceptions during crises are not constant but can change.[78] This also means that an organisation's responsibility for its reputation can change during phases of a crisis, which can be monitored with AI and predictive analytics. Organisations can thus continuously update their attribution, which is currently not available in the original SCCT model.

Third, it has become important to distinguish between AI-as-support and AI-as-agent in crisis communication. Empirical evidence shows that in some types of crises, AI can either match or even outperform humans, which reinforces its relevance in the response categories of SCCT.[7980] AI can thus function both as support and as a communicator during a crisis, depending on the type of response required. Instead of viewing stakeholders as passive recipients of information, the proposed strategic framework identifies them as contributors to meaning-making, whose responses influence how crisis communication messages are refined and distributed over time. This aligns with empirical findings that trust and reputation are built through ongoing interaction rather than one-way communication.[81]

Fourth, because the use of AI in crises raises concerns about transparency, fairness, accountability and empathy, it is important that SCCT includes human oversight,[82] especially when communicating empathy or making sensitive decisions.[83] Therefore, the proposed framework also extends SCCT to address the normative challenges associated with mediated and automated communication.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper addresses the limited theoretical guidance on how AI can be integrated into crisis response strategies within the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. While SCCT remains a leading framework for explaining how organisations should respond to crises, its assumptions of linear communication and human message creation are no longer suitable for environments in which algorithms and AI systems also participate in the creation, circulation and interpretation of crisis communication messages.

By synthesising literature from crisis communication, strategic communication and AI-mediated communication, this paper extends SCCT to include AI-integrated crisis communication as part of an adaptive socio-technical process to continuously manage the organisation's reputation across the crisis lifecycle. Organisations seeking continuous reputation management in a digital environment must therefore invest in AI systems and technical expertise to support AI-integrated crisis communication.

Since this paper is conceptual, the framework was not empirically validated. Future research should thus test the proposed framework across different crisis types and organisational contexts. More theoretical work is also needed to further expand the application of AI-integrated crisis communication.

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[76] Roumbanis, On Algorithmic Mediations.
[77] Hancock, Naaman, and Levy, AI-Mediated Communication.
[78] Jong, Beyond the Snapshot.
[79] Xiao and Yu, Chatbots as Crisis Communicators.
[80] Loof et al., Use of Artificial Intelligence in Crisis Communication.
[81] Zhan et al., Does AI-Generated Care-Based Message Increase Trust in Government?
[82] Schneider and Boman, Digital Dilemmas.
[83] Cheng, Lee, and Qiao, Crisis Communication in the Age of AI.

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