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FAKE NEWS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE REPUTATION OF MINING

FIRMS: A PUBLIC RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE IN GHANA

BY:

SIMON AGANA BLESSING, AZONGO

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis, titled Fake News and Its Impact on the Reputation of Mining Firms: A Public Relations Perspective in Ghana, is my own original work. It was carried out under the supervision of Dr. George Asamoah of the Department of Public Relations, School of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Media, Arts and Communication. This thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for any other degree or qualification at this or any other university. All sources of information consulted have been duly acknowledged through complete and accurate referencing.

I take responsibility for all errors and omissions that might be noticed in this project.

Student's Signature



Student's Name: Simon Agana Blessing, Azongo

Date: 28th October, 2025

Supervisor's Signature



Supervisor's Name: Dr. George Asamoah

Date: 28th October, 2025

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering faith, support, encouragement, and sacrifices have been the foundation of this journey. Your resilience, love and believe in me have been my constant source of strength and inspiration.

I also dedicate this work to the communities within Ghana's mining areas, whose experiences and realities continue to shape the discourse around corporate reputation. May this study serve as a contribution toward fostering greater understanding, resilience, and truthful dialogue in the fight against fake news.

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ABSTRACT

Fake news has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges for corporate reputation in the digital era. In Ghana, mining firms are especially vulnerable due to their visibility, socioeconomic importance, and the rapid spread of misinformation across social media platforms. This study examines the impact of fake news on the reputation of mining firms and explores the strategies public relations (PR) professionals employ to manage such crises.

Drawing on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT), the study adopts a qualitative exploratory design and uses semi-structured interviews with PR practitioners in selected mining firms. The findings show that fake news typically focuses on environmental practices, corporate social responsibility, and employment issues, often amplifying pre-existing community concerns. Its effects are multi-dimensional, leading to reputational harm, strained stakeholder relations, operational disruptions, and financial costs. PR professionals respond with defensive, accommodative, and relational strategies, though their efforts are constrained by the speed of digital virality, limited media literacy, and entrenched mistrust.

The study concludes that building reputational resilience requires proactive, transparent, and evidence-based communication, supported by strong stakeholder engagement and professionalised PR practice. These insights enrich the application of SCCT and IRT in Ghana's context and provide practical guidance for organisations navigating the risks of digital misinformation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

The authenticity of information has been a critical issue of concern for organizations across both digital and traditional environments (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017). However, the recent rise of new communication technologies has fundamentally brought some changes to how fake news interacts with society, amplifying its reach and impact.

Today, fake news operates with unprecedented sophistication, speed, reach, and diversity, ranging from text, images, videos, infographics, memes, and bots (McGonagle, 2017). Its speed of reach and manipulative effectiveness mean misinformation spreads rapidly, often in distorted or exaggerated forms, very faster than facts.

This phenomenon poses a serious threat to organizations of all kinds: from political, commercial, and nonprofit. The failure or inability to verify or clarify false information can shape stakeholder perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017), making reputational resilience more critical than ever.

In the digital era, the widespread circulation of fake news has become a significant issue impacting public relations (PR) management. Fake news, often defined as misleading or fabricated information presented as factual, undermines public trust, damages reputations, and distorts perceptions (Lazer et al., 2018). While misinformation has historically existed, the digital age, particularly the emergence of social media, has amplified its speed and reach (Shu et al., 2017).

Lion, Kropotov, & Yarochkin, (2017), as cited by Paola Castellani and Marina Berton (2017), stated that the term “fake news” is often linked with a range of related concepts, including false information, targeted disinformation, cyber propaganda, distorted reality, disinformation campaigns, cognitive hacking, and information warfare. However, underlying this term is a broader and more concerning issue: the manipulation of public opinion to influence real-world outcomes. Due to the factors mentioned above, it has become increasingly easy to distort public perception and thought processes, leading to a surge in fake news that not only spreads online but also impact the physical world and people’s everyday lives .

The proliferation of fake news in the digital age has become a significant challenge for public relations (PR) professionals. Fake news, defined as false or misleading information presented as legitimate news (Lazer et al., 2018), has the potential to distort public perception, damage reputations, and undermine trust in institutions. Kai Shu et al,2017 in defining what fake news is said that Fake news has existed for a very long time, nearly the same amount of time as news began to circulate widely after the printing press was invented in 1439. Same way, Althuir and Haiden (2018) point out that although the spread of lies has been a growing challenge since the invention of the printing press in 1439, the term is relatively new in the English language. Its origin dates to the late 19th century in America, when this kind of printed lies were described simply as “false”. The recent popularity of the term fake news began in 2010, after David Roberts used it in one of its blog entries, although the largest expansion of the term occurred after it was used by President Donald Trump, in 2016.

In modern day’s very hyperconnected digital ecosystem, the rapid dissemination or spread of information, both accurate and misleading, has reshaped how individuals and organizations communicate and engage with one another. In this regard, the most concerning development which has become a great concern to the public is the spread of fake news, which is described as the deliberately false, fabricated or misleading information presented as legitimate news,

often intended to deceive or manipulate public opinion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The proliferation of online platforms, particularly social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, tweeter(X) and now Ticktok, has provided a fertile ground for the swift and widespread circulation of such content.

In Ghana, the rapid adoption and access to mobile internet and the explosive growth of social media usage among the publics have amplified the risk of reputational crises for corporate bodies and organizations. According to Data Reportal (2024), 7.4 million Ghanaians are active social media users with a total of 38.95 million cellular mobile active connections. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter (now X), and TikTok are serving as primary channels for news consumption.

Public relations (PR) professionals are increasingly finding themselves on the frontlines of this digital battleground. Their role has expanded beyond traditional media relations to include realtime monitoring of online discourse, crisis communication management, digital media engagement, and strategic reputation repair. The immediacy and virality of fake news demand that PR practitioners respond swiftly and strategically to limit reputational damage and restore public trust (Coombs, 2007).

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the impact of fake news on corporate reputation in Ghana, through the lens of public relations. It aims to investigate how PR professionals perceive and manage these challenges and what strategic tools and frameworks are most effective in mitigating damage and restoring brand credibility in the corporate environment in Ghana.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Corporate reputation is a very important intangible asset that directly influences stakeholder trust, customer loyalty, investor confidence in an organisation, and overall organizational

performance. However, in the digital communication age, this asset is increasingly threatened by the prevalence of fake news: deliberately fabricated or manipulated information circulated as genuine news content (Tandoc et al., 2018). The speed, reach, and viral nature of social media have made it easy for such content to spread rapidly, often outpacing official responses or corrections from affected organizations or corporate bodies.

The rapid dissemination of false information via digital platforms has significantly disrupted the PR landscape. PR professionals are now required to respond to misinformation quickly to protect organizational reputations and maintain public trust (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Fake news, by skewing public understanding, has redefined traditional approaches to crisis communication and stakeholder engagement.

In real-world scenarios, fake news has caused public confusion, damaged reputations, and instigated crises across multiple sectors—including politics, business, and non-profits. A vivid example was seen during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where false stories were shared more than factual reports, highlighting the scale and influence of digital misinformation (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). For PR practitioners, combating fake news demands constant vigilance, ethical clarity, and effective communication strategies.

Recent scholarly attention has been given to the proliferation of fake news and its consequences:

Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) categorized different types of fake news and evaluated their influence on public knowledge.

Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) showed that fake news spreads more rapidly than truth, particularly in digital spaces.

Freelon and Wells (2020) highlighted how fake news shapes audience responses more significantly than verified information.

Schwarz and Löffelholz (2017) explored trust restoration during crisis communication in an age of misinformation.

Bruns et al. (2020) advocated for digital preparedness and media literacy as key tools in misinformation management.

In Ghana, the convergence of increased mobile internet usage and unregulated online information sharing has created fertile grounds for the spread of fake news. As of 2024, more than 18 million Ghanaians use the internet, with over 6 million active social media users (DataReportal, 2024). John Demuyakor and Vivian Adjeikaa Doe (2021) in their study on social media, democracy, and freedom of expression.

Some evidence from Ghana, concluded that even though social media as a tool has contributed to consolidation of democracy in Ghana, it has also contributed to the spread of fake news in the form of misinformation and disinformation. Despite the mounting threat of fake news, many companies in Ghana appear to lack formal frameworks for detection, management, and recovery during misinformation crises. International research suggests that even in wellresourced settings, organizations often struggle to implement proactive communication plans for digital misinformation (Coombs, 2007). Similarly, PR professionals worldwide frequently find themselves without adequate strategic tools or institutional backing to address fast-moving digital falsehoods, an issue likely mirrored in Ghana (Waters & Williams, 2016). Moreover,

UNESCO's regional assessment underscores the dearth of academic studies detailing how

Ghanaian organizations and PR practitioners respond to fake-news crises, particularly in the absence of comprehensive frameworks for such high-stakes communications (UNESCO/UNDP, 2023).

The lack of localized studies has created a knowledge gap, leaving PR professionals without empirical benchmarks to inform their strategies. While international theories like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) offer valuable frameworks (Coombs, 2007; Benoit, 1997), their application in the Ghanaian media and cultural context remains underexplored.

This study seeks to address this problem by investigating the impact of fake news on corporate reputation in Ghana and exploring how PR professionals manage and respond to such challenges. By filling this gap, the study will provide actionable insights for practitioners, organizations, and policymakers, and contribute to the growing body of knowledge on strategic communication in the digital misinformation era.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate how fake news affects corporate reputation in Ghana from the perspective of public relations practitioners and to explore the strategies public relations (PR) professionals use to respond to such reputational threats. Specifically, the study seeks to;

Evaluate the impact of fake news on the reputation of corporate entities.

Analyse the Crisis Communication and Image Restoration strategies employed by PR practitioners in response.

It also seeks to apply and contextualize Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) within the Ghanaian corporate environment to determine their relevance and effectiveness.

Ultimately, the research intends to provide practical insights and recommendations that can guide PR professionals and corporate leaders in enhancing their preparedness, response, and recovery mechanisms in the face of fake news crises.

1.3 Research Questions

How do public relations professionals in Ghana perceive the impact of fake news on the reputation of mining firms?

What crisis communication strategies are employed by PR practitioners in Ghana to counteract fake news?

How effective are the current PR strategies in managing and restoring corporate reputation after fake news incidents?

These questions will guide the development of the research instruments and analysis framework, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and conceptual underpinnings.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The growing threat of fake news in today's digital world presents a serious challenge to corporate reputation, especially in emerging markets like Ghana. This study is significant as it examines how public relations (PR) professionals working in the corporate environment in Ghana respond to and manage the reputational risks posed by fake news. It provides both theoretical insights and practical solutions tailored to the Ghanaian context.

From an academic viewpoint, this research expands the body of knowledge on crisis communication and reputation management in Ghana. While foundational theories such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) have been extensively applied in developed countries (Coombs, 2007; Benoit, 1997), their use in Ghanaian contexts remains limited. This study seeks to bridge that gap by contextualizing these models within Ghana's unique media and cultural landscape

In terms of practical relevance, the study offers valuable guidance for PR practitioners in Ghana. By identifying the types of fake news that most commonly affect corporations and evaluating the effectiveness of different response strategies, it helps professionals better prepare for and manage reputational threats. As internet and social media use continues to rise in Ghana; with over 6 million active social media users as of 2024 (DataReportal, 2024), the role of PR in safeguarding organizational image has become more critical than ever.

For corporate entities, the research provides insights that can inform strategic communication planning, crisis preparedness, and stakeholder engagement. In a competitive business environment where reputation influences consumer trust and investor relations, being equipped to manage misinformation effectively can offer a significant advantage (Agyeman, 2021). The study also has policy implications, offering evidence-based recommendations that can assist media regulators, communication agencies, and advocacy groups in developing frameworks to combat fake news. These insights can support media literacy campaigns, strengthen online platform accountability, and promote ethical standards in corporate communication.

In summary, this study holds significance not only for enriching academic literature but also for empowering PR professionals, enhancing organizational resilience, and supporting policy efforts to combat misinformation in Ghana's evolving digital space.

1.5 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on examining the impact of fake news on corporate reputation from the perspective of public relations professionals in Ghana. The scope is limited to selected corporate organizations across key industries such as banking, telecommunications, mining, and manufacturing sectors that are particularly vulnerable to reputational threats due to their high public visibility and stakeholder engagement.

Geographically, the research is confined to Ghana, specifically to regions which houses the headquarters of most major corporations and PR consultancies, which make them ideal for accessing experienced practitioners.

The study is delimited to exploring the perceptions, strategies, and experiences of PR professionals in managing fake news crises. It does not investigate the broader public's views on fake news, nor does it analyse political misinformation or state-owned entities. The emphasis is placed on non-political, corporate-related fake news incidents.

1.6 Definition of Terms

Fake News: Deliberately false or misleading information presented as news, typically disseminated through digital platforms with the intent to deceive or manipulate public perception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Corporate Reputation: The collective perception stakeholders hold about an organization's credibility, reliability, and social responsibility, often influencing trust, brand loyalty, and financial performance (Fombrun, 1996).

Public Relations (PR): A strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics, particularly through managing information flow, reputation, and crisis situations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Crisis Communication: A subset of PR practices focused on protecting and defending an individual, company, or organization facing a public challenge to its reputation, often during or after a crisis event (Coombs, 2007).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT): A theory developed by W.T. Coombs that outlines how organizations should match their communication strategies to the type of crisis they face to protect reputational assets (Coombs, 2007).

Image Restoration Theory (IRT): A theory proposed by W.L. Benoit that categorizes strategies organizations can use to restore public image following reputational damage, such as denial, apology, and corrective action (Benoit, 1997).

Stakeholders: Individuals or groups who can affect or are affected by the actions, decisions, or policies of an organization, including customers, employees, investors, regulators, and the media (Freeman, 1984).

Media Literacy: The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms, often considered a key skill in identifying and resisting fake news (Potter, 2013).

1.7 Organisation of the study.

This study will be presented in five chapters. Chapter One will deal with the introduction aspect of the study which will highlight the background of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives, the research questions, significance of the study, delimitation and limitations. definition of terms. Chapter Two will capture the literature review, which deals with the theoretical framework, conceptual review, empirical review, and summary of literature review of the research topic. Chapter Three will treat the research design which includes the choice of methodology and the justification for same. They will also discuss the sampling procedure and sampling techniques, data collection instrument, data collection procedure, and data analysis procedure. The presentation of results and discussion of findings will be

presented in Chapter four. Chapter five will present summary of the study, conclusion and recommendation for the study.

Conclusion

This study will contribute to strategic PR management of corporate reputation in selected Ghanaian firms by analysing fake news and its impact on corporate reputation and evaluating response mechanisms. The findings will aid PR practitioners, corporate leaders, and policymakers to employ the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Image Restoration Theory (IRT) in mitigating reputational risks in an era of digital misinformation.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter introduction.

This chapter will present an overview of the related literature on fake news and its impact on corporate reputation. The chapter will be developed along four thematic areas: theoretical framework, conceptual review, empirical review and conceptual framework and chapter summary.

2.1 Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT). Together, these frameworks provide a structured approach for analysing how public relations professionals in Ghana respond to fake news and manage post-crisis reputational recovery.

2.1.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

SCCT, developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007), posits that the type of crisis an organization faces should determine the most appropriate communication response. The theory categorizes crises based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization: victim, accidental, or preventable and recommends different response strategies (e.g., denial, apology, corrective action) accordingly. SCCT emphasizes the importance of matching crisis response strategies to stakeholder perceptions to protect organizational reputation.

In the context of fake news, which typically positions organizations as victims of external misinformation, SCCT suggests that defensive strategies such as denial or bolstering

(reminding stakeholders of the organization's good works) may be most effective (Coombs, 2007). However, when fake news is believed to have some element of truth or when organizations have a history of similar controversies, accommodative responses such as apology and corrective action may be more suitable.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007), helps us understand how organizations should respond to crises based on how much responsibility the public believes they hold. The theory breaks down crises into three main types: Victim crises, where the organization is seen as innocent (like being targeted by fake news), Accidental crises, which involve unintentional mistakes or technical problems; and, Preventable crises, where the organization is clearly at fault due to negligence or misconduct. Each type of crisis requires a different communication approach. For example, in victim situations (which is often the case with fake news), strategies like denial or bolstering (reminding people of the company's good track record) might be appropriate. SCCT also reminds us that how people react to a crisis depends not just on the current issue, but also on the organization's past reputation and how it has handled previous crises. In Ghana, where trust in institutions and media is often fragile, SCCT offers a useful lens to explore how PR teams manage blame and protect reputations, especially when misinformation spreads quickly online. Applying SCCT to Ghana's PR landscape allows the study to analyse how practitioners assess reputational threats posed by fake news and how they select context-appropriate responses in a media environment where public trust is often fragile (Nyarko & Mensah, 2022).

2.1.2 Image Restoration Theory (IRT)

Image Restoration Theory, introduced by William Benoit (1997), focuses on the strategies organizations use to repair damaged reputations. IRT outlines five major categories of image repair: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The theory is particularly useful in post-crisis analysis, as it evaluates how organizations attempt to rebuild credibility and restore public trust.

In fake news scenarios, even when a company is not at fault, stakeholders may still expect a response. IRT provides insight into how PR professionals frame their communication to reduce harm and reestablish the organization's standing (Benoit, 1997). For instance, Ghanaian companies may use strategies like corrective action (fact-checking and media clarification), denial (categorically rejecting false claims), or bolstering (highlighting corporate social responsibility efforts) to counter reputational damage.

2.1.3 Integrated Framework

By combining SCCT and IRT, this study will analyse both real-time response and post-crisis recovery. SCCT guides the immediate tactical responses to reputational threats, while IRT evaluates the long-term strategic communication efforts for image restoration. This integrated approach is particularly relevant in the Ghanaian context, where companies face challenges like media sensationalism, low digital literacy, and delayed institutional responses (Owusu, 2020).

The theoretical framework will guide the development of research instruments, data interpretation, and analysis of PR strategies employed in response to fake news incidents in Ghana's corporate environment.

William Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (IRT), introduced in 1997, focuses on what organizations do after a crisis hits, especially when their image has been damaged. It offers five

main strategies for repairing reputation: Denial :Saying the accusation is false or blaming someone else, Evasion of responsibility : Admitting something happened but saying it wasn't their fault, Reducing offensiveness : Trying to soften the impact by pointing out good intentions or past achievements, Corrective action : Promising to fix the issue and prevent it from happening again, Mortification : Offering a sincere apology.

IRT is especially useful for understanding the post-crisis phase, when companies try to rebuild public trust. In Ghana's fast-paced digital space, where rumours can spread within minutes; this theory helps assess whether corporate responses resonate with the public and meet their expectations.

Together, SCCT and IRT give us a fuller picture: SCCT helps explain how organizations react in the moment, while IRT helps us understand how they repair their image after the dust settles.

2.2 Conceptual Framework for This Study

This study brings both theories together to explore how PR professionals in Ghana deal with the challenges of fake news and misinformation. The framework is built around three key areas:

Understanding the Crisis Type and Public Reaction (from SCCT) Is

the company seen as a victim, or at fault?

How much blame do stakeholders assign?

How the Company Responds (using both SCCT and IRT)

What immediate crisis communication strategies are used (e.g., denial, clarification)?, What post-crisis image restoration strategies are employed (e.g., apology, corrective action)?,

Whether Reputation Is Restored : Do people trust the organization again? How does the public respond emotionally and behaviourally?

Other Influencing Factors

Experience and readiness of the PR team, Support from leadership and available resources and the digital and media environment in Ghana (speed of fake news, platform used, etc.)

This dual-theory approach allows the research to explore not just what strategies are used, but why they are chosen, how effective they are, and what challenges professionals face along the way. It also helps highlight the unique dynamics of the Ghanaian context, where digital misinformation, media trust, and public perception often evolve in complex ways.

2.3.1 PR Professionals' Perceptions of Fake News Impact (RQ1)

Understanding how public relations (PR) professionals perceive the impact of fake news is crucial for assessing their preparedness, strategic orientation, and institutional responsiveness to reputational threats. Fake news is not only a communication challenge but a strategic concern that influences trust, brand equity, and stakeholder relationships.

Coombs (2007), through the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), argues that the stakeholder attribution of responsibility, whether an organization is seen as a victim, a contributor, or the primary cause of a crisis, plays a central role in how reputational damage is assessed. Effective crisis management requires a solid understanding of how communication strategies can safeguard an organization's reputation during times of crisis. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) serves as a valuable framework for analysing this process. It helps predict stakeholder perceptions of a crisis by evaluating the potential reputational threat involved. Additionally, SCCT provides insights into how stakeholders are likely to respond to

the organization's chosen communication strategies, enabling more informed and strategic crisis responses.

PR professionals, therefore, must not only evaluate the factual content of a fake news item but also anticipate how the public will interpret blame and responsibility. If stakeholders believe an organization could have prevented the incident (e.g., by addressing earlier complaints or providing transparent information), the perceived damage can be more severe, even when the core information is false. This highlights a key perceptual challenge for PR practitioners, who must navigate both the content and the context of fake news.

Building on this, DiStaso et al. (2015) explore the increasing anxiety among PR practitioners globally about digital misinformation and its far-reaching reputational implications. Their study found that many PR professionals view fake news as one of the most significant threats to modern corporate communication, largely because of its unpredictability, speed of spread, and the erosion of trust in traditional media gatekeepers. Importantly, many practitioners report a lack of institutional preparedness, with insufficient tools and training to manage reputational attacks fuelled by misinformation. This perception aligns with the reality that reactive communication strategies often come too late, especially in digital environments.

False information, propaganda, distorted realities, targeted disinformation, and what is increasingly referred to as “fake news” present a significant threat to democracy, the right to information, corporate image, and corporate reputation, placing a high responsibility on public relations practitioners to act with tact to save the reputation of their organisations, Paola

Castellani and Marina Berton (2017)

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing prevalence of fake news in Ghana, there remains a significant research gap in understanding its impact on corporate reputation from a PR standpoint. Most existing

studies are either media-focused or political in nature, neglecting the role of PR professionals in organizational crisis management.

Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of different crisis response strategies in the Ghanaian corporate context. The need to contextualize SCCT and IRT within Ghana's socio-cultural and media environment represents another gap that this study seeks to address.

With PR officers in both public and private organizations. They revealed that while there is widespread recognition of the risks posed by fake news, particularly rumours on social media, many PR units operate without formal crisis communication frameworks. Respondents cited examples where fake news about staff misconduct, price hikes, or product safety led to customer backlash and media inquiries, yet the absence of structured protocols hindered a timely or strategic response. These perceptions reflect a gap between awareness and institutional readiness in the Ghanaian PR landscape.

Kemp (2024) provides more recent evidence by examining trends in digital media usage and misinformation in Ghana. He observes that many organizations underestimate the business implications of viral misinformation, often treating it as a temporary PR issue rather than a long-term reputational and operational risk. PR professionals in his study expressed frustration with executive leadership that fails to allocate sufficient resources to combat fake news, despite recognizing its growing frequency. This underlines a disconnect between PR teams' perception of urgency and broader organizational priorities.

2.3.2 Crisis Communication Strategies Against Fake News (RQ2)

Effectively responding to fake news requires more than a basic rebuttal—it demands strategically crafted crisis communication rooted in audience perception, organizational

reputation, and media dynamics. In the face of growing misinformation, particularly in the digital space, PR professionals must carefully select and implement response strategies that mitigate damage and rebuild stakeholder trust.

Coombs (2007), through his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), provides a structured taxonomy of crisis response strategies tailored to the level of reputational threat and stakeholder attribution. He classifies responses into three broad categories:

Deny strategies (e.g., denial, attack the accuser) for cases where the organization is wrongly accused.

Diminish strategies (e.g., excuse, justification) when there is some perception of minimal responsibility.

Rebuild strategies (e.g., apology, compensation) when responsibility is clear or when stakeholder outrage is high.

In the context of fake news, which typically casts organizations as victims of external misinformation, Coombs suggests denying strategies such as categorical rejection or attacking the source may be appropriate. However, if the organization has a history of related controversies, more accommodative strategies, like corrective action or even limited apologies, may be more effective in maintaining long-term credibility. In Ghana, this decision-making process is often underdeveloped or reactive, limiting strategic impact.

Benoit (1997) complements this with his Image Restoration Theory (IRT), offering a detailed framework of five strategic categories: Denial, Evasion of responsibility, Reducing offensiveness, Corrective action and Mortification (apology).

These strategies are particularly relevant in post-crisis communication, as they help shape how organizations respond to reputational damage even when they are not at fault. However, Benoit's framework remains under-utilized in Ghanaian PR practice and scholarship, with few empirical studies exploring its strategic application. Most Ghanaian PR responses to fake news focus on surface-level rebuttals without leveraging the nuanced options Benoit outlines for rebuilding credibility over time.

Borah et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of proactive crisis communication in the digital age. They argue that organizations must engage in real-time monitoring, rapid response, and proactive transparency, including prebaking (pre-emptive clarification) and debunking (factbased correction) to counter fake news. Their findings show that the speed and tone of the initial response heavily influence public perception, with delays often interpreted as guilt or incompetence. Ghanaian PR strategies, however, tend to lack this proactive element. The emphasis remains on reactive denial rather than strategic foresight.

However, there are emerging examples of strategic improvement. Arthur and Asare (2023) document instances where some Ghanaian firms successfully employed media clarification campaigns and bolstering strategies rooted in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For example, in one documented case, a telecommunications firm used a combination of a press briefing, social media clarification posts, and a public CSR campaign to counter a fake report about poor network quality and data theft. This multi-channel, values-driven approach helped shift the narrative and reestablish public goodwill. Nonetheless, such strategic responses remain the exception rather than the norm.

A key issue highlighted across the literature is the lack of structured evaluation of which strategies work best under specific conditions in Ghana's media landscape. Many organizations do not systematically assess the effectiveness of their responses to fake news, nor do they

document lessons learned for future crises. There is limited use of audience feedback, media analytics, or sentiment analysis to evaluate the success of a crisis communication plan. This knowledge gap undermines institutional learning and hampers the evolution of crisis communication practices in the country.

By examining these perceptions, this study aims to understand how PR practitioners assess risk, mobilize resources, and advocate for institutional change, thereby providing insight into both the strengths and limitations of Ghana's current corporate communication strategies in the face of fake news.

2.3.3 Effectiveness of PR Strategies (RQ3)

The success of public relations (PR) strategies in mitigating the reputational damage caused by fake news is not solely determined by whether an organization issues a response, but by how timely, transparent, and audience-appropriate that response is. The effectiveness of crisis communication strategies hinges on a complex interplay between message delivery, media context, stakeholder perception, and institutional readiness.

Ulmer et al. (2017) assert that post-crisis reputation recovery depends heavily on the immediacy and transparency of organizational messaging. Their research emphasizes that stakeholders often judge a company not merely on the content of its message, but on the speed and sincerity of the response. Delays or evasiveness, even in situations where the organization is not at fault, can significantly erode public trust. This insight is particularly relevant in Ghana, where institutional responses to fake news are often slow, allowing rumours to gain traction before corrective action is taken.

Frandsen & Johansen (2011) offer a compelling argument in favour of dialogic communication strategies, which involve open, two-way engagement with stakeholders. They contend that in

high-trust or socially cohesive societies, dialogic approaches—such as live forums, Q&A sessions, and interactive media posts—are more effective than traditional one-way, defensive communications. While Ghana’s media landscape does not always reflect high levels of institutional trust, certain organizations with strong community ties (e.g., public utilities or legacy banks) have had more success using dialogic methods, suggesting contextual trust can be leveraged for more effective fake news response.

However, the effectiveness of these approaches in Ghana has been inconsistent, as shown by Adjei-Brenyah & Osei (2020). They found that firm-led press statements and stakeholder forums often produce mixed outcomes. Some corporate press statements successfully clarified issues and prevented escalation, particularly when issued swiftly and backed by credible spokespeople. In other cases, especially where statements lacked emotional resonance or factual clarity, public skepticism persisted. Likewise, stakeholder engagement forums have sometimes devolved into combative sessions or been perceived as mere public relations theatre, rather than sincere efforts to address misinformation.

Despite these insights, a key issue persists there is very little localized, empirical data available to benchmark the success or failure of specific PR strategies in post-fake news scenarios in Ghana. Most assessments are anecdotal, relying on subjective evaluations or short-term media monitoring. This lack of data impedes the development of best practices and leaves many organizations guessing which strategies are most effective under which circumstances. Without structured post-crisis evaluations, Ghanaian PR practitioners are limited in their ability to learn from past experiences and refine their strategic toolkit.

2.4 Challenges Faced by PR Practitioners

Public Relations (PR) professionals in Ghana face a range of systemic, institutional, and personal challenges in their fight against the spread and impact of fake news. While global studies provide a foundation for understanding these challenges, the Ghanaian corporate context presents distinct limitations, many of which are under-researched or overlooked entirely in the literature.

In a broader context, DiStaso et al. (2015) observe that organizational resistance to digital training and the adoption of technological tools continues to hinder PR effectiveness. This global trend resonates deeply in Ghana, where many firms underinvest in PR technology, such as real-time analytics, social listening tools, or media monitoring software. As a result, PR practitioners are often forced to rely on manual tracking, word-of-mouth, or delayed reports, which slows their ability to respond strategically to fake news threats.

A key issue that emerges from the literature is the absence of localized, in-depth studies that explore the lived experiences of PR professionals in Ghana's corporate sector. While quantitative assessments of fake news impacts are emerging, there remains a critical gap in qualitative data capturing the day-to-day struggles, coping strategies, and institutional dynamics that shape the work of PR practitioners in this space. Without this insight, policy and practice will continue to lag behind the reality on the ground.

2.5 How This Research Fits In and Identifies the Knowledge Gap

This study is positioned at the nexus of digital misinformation, corporate reputation management, and strategic public relations (PR), three areas that have received increasing global scholarly attention in recent years (DiStaso et al., 2015; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011;

Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). However, the interplay between these domains remains underresearched in the context of developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, and especially within Ghana's corporate communication landscape.

By leveraging Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) (Benoit, 1997), this research bridges theoretical constructs traditionally applied in high-trust, well-regulated media environments with Ghana's hybridized and evolving media ecology, characterized by low media literacy, high digital penetration, and minimal regulatory oversight. This theoretical application offers empirical validation or adaptation of these frameworks to contexts marked by information asymmetry, limited factchecking infrastructure, and informal digital news networks (e.g., WhatsApp, TikTok).

Moreover, the study adds value by grounding its findings in qualitative insights from PR practitioners, thus complementing existing quantitative studies that focus primarily on user behaviour or fake news propagation patterns. It addresses the practical realities of organizational communication under reputational threat, a critical aspect often overlooked in mainstream crisis communication literature.

2.6 Identifying the Knowledge Gap

Despite growing concerns about misinformation globally, several critical gaps persist in the Ghanaian context:

Lack of Ghana-Specific Empirical Data on PR Responses to Fake News

While international studies document organizational responses to fake news and their impact on brand perception, Ghanaian-specific empirical evidence, especially from the perspective of PR professionals is scarce. Little is known about how PR teams within Ghanaian corporations

perceive, respond to, and recover from reputational crises fuelled by fake news, especially in key sectors like banking, telecommunications, and manufacturing.

Inadequate Documentation of Strategy Effectiveness in Reputation Recovery

Existing Ghanaian literature often describes what strategies are used (e.g., press releases, stakeholder forums), but rarely evaluates their relative success or failure in measurable terms, such as stakeholder trust restoration, media narrative shifts, or digital sentiment recovery. This study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of what works, under what conditions, and why.

Limited Exploration of the Constraints PR Practitioners Face in Digital Crises

There is limited research on the operational, institutional, and psychological challenges PR practitioners in Ghana face when navigating fake news crises. Factors such as resource limitations, exclusion from strategic decision-making, burnout, and the absence of verification tools remain under-explored in both academic and industry reports. This research seeks to surface these lived experiences and contextualize them within broader theoretical and policy frameworks.

Theoretical Underutilization in Emerging Media Contexts

SCCT and IRT have been widely applied in Western-centric studies but are seldom tested in environments where information flows are shaped more by social media virality than by formal news institutions. By applying these models to a Ghanaian setting, this study contributes to

theoretical pluralism and adaptability, highlighting the relevance or potential limitations of these theories in the Global South.

2.7 Chapter Summary

In sum, this research fills a critical empirical and theoretical void in the literature. It not only contributes localized, practitioner-oriented insights to the broader conversation on fake news and corporate reputation but also tests and extends crisis communication theories within an underrepresented context. The findings aim to inform both academic discourse and practical PR strategy development for organizations operating in environments with similar media, cultural, and institutional dynamics.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted to investigate the impact of fake news on the reputation of mining firms from the perspective of public relations professionals in Ghana. It details the philosophical foundation, research design, and methodological procedures

that guides the study. The chapter begins with the research philosophy, assumptions, and approach. It then explains the research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and research instruments. Additionally, it describes the techniques used for data analysis and the ethical considerations adhered to in conducting the research. The aim is to provide a clear, transparent, and replicable account of how the study was conducted.

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study is grounded in the interpretivist philosophy, which emphasizes understanding how individuals construct and interpret social realities, Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019. Interpretivism is appropriate for this research because the aim is to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of public relations (PR) professionals in Ghana as they confront and manage fake news crises. This paradigm recognizes that the reputation of mining firms are socially constructed and shaped by stakeholder perceptions, making qualitative inquiry suitable for this study.

Philosophical Assumptions

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is guided by philosophical assumptions:

Ontological Assumption (Nature of Reality): Reality is multiple and socially constructed. Different PR professionals may interpret and experience fake news differently depending on organizational context, sector, and personal expertise.

Epistemological Assumption (Nature of Knowledge): Knowledge is subjective and co-created through researcher–participant interaction. Insights will emerge from the lived experiences and stories of participants.

Axiological Assumption (Role of Values): The researcher's values inevitably influence the study. Reflexivity will be maintained throughout the study to ensure transparency in how personal perspectives shape interpretation.

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for this study that aim to generate insights and build understanding from the participants, Thomas, 2006. Instead of testing hypotheses, the qualitative approach allows patterns, categories, and themes to emerge from the participants' narratives. Theories such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) will be used to interpret findings, but they will not predetermine them.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design to capture in-depth insights into how fake news affects corporate reputation and how PR professionals in Ghana manage such crises. This design is appropriate because it enables the researcher to go beyond surface-level analysis and uncover the strategies, challenges, and contextual factors influencing PR practices in reputational crisis management, Creswell & Poth, 2018.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of public relations and corporate communication professionals working in Ghanaian mining firms. These sectors is chosen because of its visibility, high stakeholder engagement, and susceptibility to fake news attacks.

The sample will include 5 PR and communication officers drawn from a minimum of five mining firms. This sample size is considered sufficient for qualitative research, as the goal is depth rather than breadth, and data saturation can typically be achieved with this number (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants who have direct experience in managing crises and reputational threats associated with fake news in the mining sector. Selection will be based on professional role, years of experience, and involvement in crisis communication activities.

Data Collection Methods

Data will be collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. This method allows for flexibility in probing deeper into participants' responses while ensuring that core themes are consistently addressed.

Interview Guide: The guide will cover key themes such as the impact of fake news on corporate reputation, organizational strategies for responding, and applicability of SCCT and IRT in the Ghanaian context.

Recording & Transcription: With participants' consent, interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Research Instruments

The main instrument for data collection is the semi-structured interview guide. Questions will be open-ended to encourage detailed responses including:

How has fake news affected your organization's reputation?

What strategies has your organization used to counter fake news?

How effective do you consider these strategies to be?

What challenges do you encounter in combating misinformation?

How relevant are frameworks such as SCCT or IRT to your experience?

The instrument will be submitted to the research supervisor for review and pre-tested with a small number of PR professionals not included in the final sample. This will help refine questions for clarity and reliability.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data will be analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

Familiarization with the data.

Generating initial codes.

Searching for themes.

Reviewing themes.

Defining and naming themes.

Producing the final report.

This method will enable the identification of recurring patterns and insights, which will be interpreted in line with SCCT and IRT.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be sought from UNiMAC institutional review board. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants will be assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time of the interview. Pseudonyms will be used to anonymize responses, and all data will be securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework adopted for the study on fake news and its impact on reputation of mining firms in Ghana. Guided by an interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach, the research employs a qualitative exploratory design. The population of the study consists of public relations and communication professionals working in mining sectors, with a purposive sample of 5 participants selected for in-depth interviews. Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The chapter has also described the measures taken to ensure validity, reliability, and ethical compliance. The next chapter will present and analyse the findings that emerged from the data collection process.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.0 Chapter Introduction

This chapter of the study present the findings of the study, which examined the impact of fake news on corporate reputation and the response strategies employed by public relations professionals in Ghana's mining sector. In line with the qualitative research design adopted, the chapter draws on insights gathered from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with communication and public affairs professionals across three major mining companies. The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which provided a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the

data. This process involved familiarization with the interview transcripts, generating codes, developing initial themes, reviewing and refining them, and finally presenting the results in a coherent narrative. The findings are therefore not merely descriptive but are organized into themes that reflect the lived experiences, perceptions, and practices of participants.

This chapter gives voice to the participants by allowing their reflections and stories to illuminate the realities of dealing with fake news in a sector that is both highly visible and highly vulnerable to reputational risks. Mining companies in Ghana operate in a complex socioeconomic environment characterized by strong community expectations, active media scrutiny, and the increasing influence of digital misinformation. Against this backdrop, fake news emerges not only as a communication challenge but also as a potential threat to stakeholder relations, operational continuity, and long-term corporate credibility.

To provide a clear and meaningful account, the chapter is structured around five key themes that emerged from the data:

Prevalence and nature of fake news, highlighting the types of fabricated stories most faced by mining companies.

Impacts of fake news on corporate reputation, outlining both reputational and operational consequences.

Response and crisis communication strategies, exploring how organizations react and adapt to misinformation.

Challenges in managing fake news, shedding light on the barriers PR professional's encounter.

Reputation recovery and recommendations, emphasizing long-term strategies for rebuilding credibility and trust.

By weaving together these themes with direct participant quotations, this chapter seeks to capture not just what PR professionals do, but how they feel, interpret, and navigate the pressures of managing corporate reputation in the age of digital misinformation.

4.0.1. Theme 1: Prevalence and Nature of Fake News

The first theme that emerged from the interviews concerns the prevalence and character of fake news that mining companies in Ghana encounter. All three participants acknowledged that fake news is not an occasional anomaly but a recurring reality they must contend with. While the specific content of misinformation varied, the dominant threads cantered on allegations of poor mining practices, neglect of community development responsibilities, safety incidents, and unfair employment practices.

For Alpha Mining Company, fake news often manifested as accusations about how the company engaged with local communities and the environment:

“Largely, the issues of fake news have to do with claims about bad mining practices, bad community relations, stakeholder engagement and high expectations... mostly on social media and traditional media.”

Here, the participant highlights that misinformation tends to amplify existing community concerns. In contexts where stakeholders already hold expectations around corporate social responsibility (CSR), even unfounded claims can quickly gain traction.

At Bravo Mining Company, the growing role of digital platforms was seen as central to the proliferation of fake news:

“With the coming of TikTok and WhatsApp, people send out fabricated videos and audios that are misleading just to cause dissatisfaction for the company.”

This observation underscores the viral potential of digital misinformation. Visuals and voice notes, even when fabricated, carry an aura of authenticity that text alone may not. The speed at which such content circulates through WhatsApp groups or TikTok streams leaves organizations with very little time to react before narratives spiral beyond their control.

For Cover Mining Company, employment-related misinformation was particularly recurrent: “The recurring themes... frequently have to do with the youth accusing us of denying them jobs and employing outsiders.”

This reflects how fake news is often rooted in community tensions and economic frustrations. In areas where mining companies are seen as major sources of livelihood, rumours about unfair recruitment practices strike a sensitive chord. Even when baseless, such claims can fuel resentment, creating fertile ground for reputational crises.

The interview reveal that fake news in Ghana’s mining sector is rarely random. Instead, it tends to mirror existing socio-economic anxieties: environmental sustainability, community development, and employment opportunities. This suggests that fake news does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it attaches itself to issues where trust gaps already exist between corporations and stakeholders.

The prevalence of such narratives illustrates the pervasive vulnerability of mining companies to misinformation. Fake news is not just an occasional reputational nuisance but a systemic challenge that PR professionals must constantly monitor and respond to.

4.0.2. Theme 2: Impacts of Fake News on Corporate Reputation

The second theme that emerged from the interviews is the impact of fake news on corporate reputation and stakeholder trust. Across the three mining companies, participants consistently emphasized that fake news is not just a communication nuisance but a serious reputational and operational threat. While the effects varied in intensity, the common thread was that misinformation erodes trust, strains community relations, and disrupts organizational stability. For Bravo Mining Company, the stakes of misinformation were described as particularly high, with fake news having the potential to directly interfere with operations:

“Fake news can halt operations of the company... it can lead to regulatory interventions and create a toxic working environment for staff.”

This account highlights the far-reaching consequences of fake news — not only tarnishing public image but also triggering interventions from regulatory bodies, which can slow or even suspend operations. Beyond external stakeholders, misinformation was said to affect employee morale, creating uncertainty and a hostile working climate.

Cover Mining Company drew attention to the financial and resource strain involved in responding to misinformation:

“It also drains resources because when it happens you have to pull a lot of resources together to be able to counter.”

Here, the participant underscores that fake news imposes a hidden cost on organizations. Time, manpower, and financial resources that could have been channelled into core operations or proactive communication must instead be diverted into firefighting reputational crises. This reinforces the idea that fake news is not only a reputational problem but also an economic burden for companies.

At Alpha Mining Company, the reputational damage was described as primarily relational, particularly in dealings with host communities:

“The only thing it does is that it affects your stakeholder and community relations.”

This comment reveals that even when fake news does not directly affect core operations such as gold sales or production, it weakens community trust, which in turn undermines the company’s social license to operate. For mining companies in Ghana, where operations often intersect with local livelihoods, community trust is not a luxury but a necessity for long-term survival.

In all, these perspectives illustrate that the impact of fake news is multi-layered:

Reputational: Tarnishing brand image and eroding credibility.

Operational: Disrupting activities through community backlash or regulatory intervention.

Financial: Forcing companies to reallocate resources for damage control.

Social: Straining community relationships and employee morale.

What stands out from the participants' reflections is that fake news magnifies existing vulnerabilities. Mining companies already operate in sensitive contexts where community expectations are high, and public scrutiny is intense. Misinformation worsens these tensions by amplifying fears, doubts, and frustrations.

Ultimately, fake news was perceived as a powerful disruptor capable of undermining years of reputation-building efforts in a matter of days. As one participant from Cover Mining Company put it succinctly:

“If you have built a good name over years, one incident of fake news can destroy it.”

This quote captures the fragility of reputation in the digital age, where trust takes time to build but can be swiftly eroded by a single viral falsehood.

4.0.3. Theme 3: Response and Crisis Communication Strategies

The third theme highlights the range of strategies employed by PR professionals to counter fake news and manage reputational risks. Participants across the three mining companies described their responses as adaptive, situational, and often immediate, reflecting the urgency of misinformation in the digital age. Their accounts reveal a balance between defensive tactics (denial, clarification) and accommodative ones (apology, corrective action), consistent with the logic of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT).

For Alpha Mining Company, the priority was always stakeholder engagement before making public statements:

“The first thing you have to do is to explain to stakeholders... once they understand, you have solved half of your problem.”

This approach suggests that direct communication with key stakeholders — such as local chiefs, regulators, and community leaders — acts as a reputational buffer. By addressing stakeholders first, organizations aim to reduce the likelihood that misinformation will escalate or take root. It also reflects an understanding that reputation is relational; trust must be maintained where it matters most.

At Bravo Mining Company, speed and verification were emphasized as critical in crisis communication:

“When fake news emerges... we quickly come out to debunk it and restate the facts... because information spreads and if you delay, many people will believe the false story.”

Here, the participant highlights the time-sensitive nature of fake news. In a fast-moving media landscape, silence or delay is risky, as misinformation can spread widely before corrections are issued. Thus, rapid fact-checking and immediate rebuttals become essential tools in protecting corporate reputation.

Cover Mining Company revealed a more context-sensitive approach, adapting strategies depending on whether fake news was entirely false or partially true:

“If there was no accident, we categorically deny it. But if there was an accident with misreported details, we clarify and take responsibility where necessary.”

This illustrates a nuanced use of denial and corrective action. Rather than issuing blanket denials, PR professionals evaluate the situation and choose a strategy that best aligns with reality and stakeholder expectations. In cases where misinformation mixes truth with distortion, a combination of clarification and responsibility-taking is seen as more credible and effective. Beyond direct communication, all three companies reported collaborating with traditional media outlets and regulators to amplify their responses. In some cases, press releases, community meetings, and official statements were used to counter viral misinformation. Bravo

Mining Company also emphasized using social media as a corrective tool, acknowledging that the same platforms that spread fake news can also be leveraged for fact-checking and truth-telling.

The accounts reveal that PR professionals in Ghana's mining sector rely on a hybrid response strategy that combines:

Defensive actions: Denial and debunking false claims.

Accommodative actions: Apologies, corrective actions, and clarifications.

Relational actions: Engaging directly with stakeholders and communities.

Institutional support: Working with regulators and traditional media to legitimize responses.

The strategies reflect a situational awareness, an understanding that the effectiveness of a response depends on the nature of the fake news, the context in which it emerges, and the expectations of stakeholders.

As one participant from Bravo Mining Company stressed:
“If you delay, you lose control of the narrative.”

This insight underscores the central challenge of modern PR: in an environment where misinformation spreads rapidly, response strategies must be timely, credible, and tailored if they are to protect and restore corporate reputation.

4.0.4. Theme 4: Challenges in Managing Fake News

The fourth theme reveals the difficulties PR professionals face when attempting to manage fake news in Ghana's mining sector. While participants described several effective strategies for responding to misinformation, they also admitted that certain structural and contextual challenges make the task especially complex. These challenges include language barriers, the rapid spread of digital misinformation, limited media literacy, entrenched community mistrust, and the fragility of corporate reputation.

At Alpha Mining Company, the participant pointed to the language dimension of fake news, noting that misinformation is often spread through WhatsApp audio messages in local dialects: “Fake news comes mostly in local languages via WhatsApp audios... but as a corporate entity, you may not want to go on that line.”

This highlights a unique challenge in the Ghanaian context: while corporate communication is usually conducted in English or through formal media, misinformation spreads in local languages, making it more relatable and persuasive to community members. Yet, responding in local dialects is fraught with risks for organizations, as it may undermine corporate formality or introduce unintended misinterpretations.

From the perspective of Bravo Mining Company, the speed and virality of digital misinformation make it difficult for organizations to catch up:

“If you don’t react early, consumers are likely to spread it further, and by the time you respond, many may already believe it.”

This reflects a fundamental asymmetry between fake news and organizational response. False information spreads quickly because it is sensational, emotional, and unburdened by the need for verification. By contrast, organizations must first fact-check and seek approvals before issuing a statement, often losing valuable time.

Cover Mining Company emphasized the long-term reputational risks, noting that one viral incident of misinformation can undermine years of brand-building efforts:

“If you have built a good name over years, one incident of fake news can destroy it.”

This underscores the fragility of corporate reputation in the digital era. Trust, which is painstakingly built through CSR projects, stakeholder engagement, and consistent communication, can be shattered quickly by a single viral falsehood.

Another challenge highlighted by participants was the entrenched mistrust among communities. Fake news often thrives where there are pre-existing doubts about corporate

intentions, particularly regarding environmental practices, CSR investments, and employment opportunities. Even when organizations provide clarifications, scepticism remains. This makes it harder for PR professionals to completely dispel misinformation, especially in communities that already feel marginalized or neglected.

These reflections suggest that managing fake news in Ghana's mining sector is not just a technical communication challenge but a structural and relational struggle. PR professionals operate in an environment where:

Misinformation spreads faster than facts, Language gaps widen the credibility divide, Communities are primed to believe negative stories, Corporate reputation is highly fragile and easily damaged.

These realities mean that even the most skilled crisis response strategies face inherent limitations. As one participant aptly put it, misinformation “spreads like wildfire,” and once trust is compromised, regaining it is an uphill battle.

4.0.1. Theme 5: Reputation Recovery and Recommendations

The fifth and final theme that emerged from the interviews concerns how organizations attempt to recover their reputation after exposure to fake news, and the recommendations PR professionals believe are essential for sustaining credibility in the long term. While fake news often causes immediate reputational damage, participants emphasized that rebuilding trust is possible, but only through consistent transparency, credible communication, and strong professional PR practices.

At Alpha Mining Company, the participant stressed the importance of evidence-based communication in restoring trust:

“Now people want to see more than being heard. the greatest form of communication is what is evidential and not what is oral.”

This observation highlights a shift in stakeholder expectations: audiences no longer accept words alone. Instead, they demand visible proof, through projects, community initiatives, or transparent reports, that the organization is acting responsibly. In this sense, actions and demonstrable outcomes speak louder than statements.

From Bravo Mining Company, the central recommendation was to build and safeguard credibility over time, since credibility itself functions as a shield against misinformation:

“Once the public trusts your credibility, whatever comes out of your organisation, they accept it but if you develop the habit of lying, even truth will be doubted.”

This powerful reflection underlines that credibility is cumulative. Companies that consistently communicate honestly and align words with actions develop reputational resilience, making it easier to withstand fake news attacks. Conversely, a history of poor communication weakens credibility, leaving organizations vulnerable even when they are telling the truth.

Cover Mining Company emphasized the role of professional expertise in managing and recovering reputation, noting that PR cannot be treated as an afterthought:

“We must hire qualified PR professionals... reputation is all an organisation has. Once lost, it becomes difficult to regain.”

Here, the participant points to the importance of institutionalizing public relations within corporate strategy. Reputation management requires skilled professionals who can anticipate risks, craft strategic responses, and build strong stakeholder relationships. Without such expertise, organizations may falter in their recovery efforts.

Across the interviews, three key recommendations stood out:

Transparency and Accountability: Companies must go beyond denial and clarify falsehoods with verifiable facts, supported by evidence and consistent follow-up.

Proactive Stakeholder Engagement: Reputational resilience is strengthened when companies invest in long-term trust-building with communities, regulators, and media partners.

Professionalisation of PR: Organizations must prioritize hiring, training, and empowering qualified PR practitioners to manage reputation strategically rather than reactively.

Participants also stressed that prevention is as important as recovery. Companies should engage in continuous monitoring of online and offline narratives, anticipating potential reputational threats before they escalate. By maintaining strong community relationships and investing in credibility, organizations can reduce the likelihood that fake news will gain traction in the first place.

Weaved together, reputation recovery in the face of fake news is not a one-time event but a long-term process of rebuilding trust. As the participants' reflections suggest, organizations that are transparent, consistent, and proactive in their communication are more likely to weather the storm of misinformation and emerge with reputations intact.

4.2 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the study, based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with public relations professionals in Ghana's mining sector. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, five interconnected themes were identified that shed light on how fake news affects corporate reputation and how organizations respond to these challenges.

The first theme, prevalence and nature of fake news, revealed that misinformation is a persistent reality for mining companies, often taking the form of allegations about poor environmental practices, neglect of CSR responsibilities, workplace accidents, or unfair recruitment practices. These stories frequently exploit existing community concerns, demonstrating that fake news thrives where trust gaps already exist.

The second theme, impacts of fake news on corporate reputation, showed that misinformation has multi-layered consequences, damaging community trust, draining financial and human resources, disrupting operations, and undermining employee morale. Participants stressed that a single viral story could undo years of reputation-building, highlighting the fragility of corporate credibility in the digital age.

The third theme, response and crisis communication strategies, illustrated the adaptive and situational nature of organizational responses. PR professionals reported using a mix of defensive strategies: denial, debunking, accommodative strategies: apology, clarification, corrective action, and relational strategies: stakeholder engagement, collaboration with regulators and media. Across all responses, speed, credibility, and contextual sensitivity were seen as critical.

The fourth theme, challenges in managing fake news, highlighted structural barriers such as misinformation spread in local languages, the speed of digital virality, and entrenched community mistrust. These challenges make it difficult for organizations to fully neutralize misinformation, no matter how robust their crisis communication efforts may be.

Finally, the fifth theme, reputation recovery and recommendations, emphasized that restoring trust requires more than reactive crisis communication. Instead, organizations must invest in proactive reputation management through transparency, accountability, evidence-based communication, and the professionalization of PR practice. Building credibility over time was described as the most effective safeguard against the long-term damage of fake news. Collectively, these themes underscore that fake news in Ghana's mining sector is not merely a media issue but a reputational, operational, and relational challenge. PR professionals must navigate a complex environment where misinformation spreads faster than facts, community expectations are high, and reputation remains both a vital asset and a fragile one.

The findings provide valuable insights into the lived realities of practitioners on the frontlines of reputational defence. The next chapter discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, particularly Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT), offering deeper analysis and practical implications for corporate communication in Ghana.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter is the final stage of the study. It provides a summary of the key findings, drawing conclusions from them, and offering practical recommendations for both corporate practice and future research. Having examined the impact of fake news on corporate reputation from the perspective of public relations professionals in Ghana's mining sector, it is now important to reflect on what the findings mean, both for theory and practice.

The chapter begins with a summary of the study, which retraces the research objectives, design, and the major themes that emerged from the interviews. This is followed by the conclusions, which highlight the broader insights gained about how fake news undermines trust, strains community relations, and challenges corporate reputation management in a digital age where misinformation travels faster than facts. Finally, the chapter offers recommendations for corporate organizations, policymakers, and researchers on how to better manage and mitigate the risks associated with fake news.

More importantly, this chapter situates the voices of the PR professionals who participated in the study within the wider conversation about misinformation and corporate reputation. Their reflections remind us that fake news is not an abstract problem but a lived reality, one that threatens the hard-earned credibility of organizations and the relationships they build with stakeholders. For mining companies in Ghana, reputation is more than an intangible asset; it is a form of social license that determines whether they can continue operating in their host communities.

By weaving together, the findings and their implications, this chapter emphasizes that while fake news is a formidable challenge, it also presents an opportunity for organizations to strengthen trust, embrace transparency, and professionalise their communication strategies. In doing so, mining firms can transform moments of reputational vulnerability into catalysts for building stronger, more resilient relationships with stakeholders.

5.2 Summary of the Study

The study set out to explore the impact of fake news on corporate reputation from the perspective of public relations professionals in Ghana, with a focus on the mining sector. Mining was selected because it is one of the most scrutinized industries in the country, often operating under the watchful eyes of regulators, media, and local communities whose

livelihoods are closely tied to mining activities. In such a high-stakes environment, reputation becomes not only an intangible asset but also a crucial determinant of an organization's ability to survive and thrive.

Guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT), the study sought to understand how misinformation threatens corporate credibility, and the strategies organizations employ to counter and recover from it. Specifically, the objectives were to:

Evaluate the impact of fake news on the reputation of mining firms.

Analyse the crisis communication and image restoration strategies employed by PR practitioners in response to fake news.

Apply and contextualise Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Restoration Theory within mining firms in Ghana to determine their relevance and effectiveness. The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design, anchored in an interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with communication and public affairs professionals from three mining companies. This approach was chosen to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies of practitioners who are directly involved in managing reputational crises. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, which enabled the identification of patterns and the development of five core themes.

The findings revealed that fake news is pervasive and multifaceted, often taking the form of stories about poor environmental practices, inadequate corporate social responsibility (CSR), accidents at mining sites, and unfair recruitment practices. The impacts of fake news were found to be far-reaching, extending beyond reputational harm to include strained community relations, regulatory interventions, financial and resource strain, and lowered employee morale. PR professionals reported using a blend of defensive, accommodative, and relational strategies,

such as denial, clarification, apology, corrective action, and stakeholder engagement to manage these crises. The effectiveness of these strategies was closely tied to the speed of response, credibility of communication, and contextual sensitivity.

However, the study also uncovered significant challenges, including the rapid spread of misinformation on social media, the use of local languages in fake news narratives, entrenched community mistrust, and the fragile nature of corporate reputation. These challenges often made it difficult for organizations to fully counter the effects of misinformation.

Finally, the study found that reputation recovery depends on more than reactive crisis communication. Participants stressed the importance of long-term trust-building, through transparency, evidence-based communication, visible CSR initiatives, and the professionalization of PR practice. A consistent record of credibility was described as the most reliable safeguard against the destructive power of fake news.

In sum, the study paints a vivid picture of the realities faced by PR professionals in Ghana's mining sector. It shows that fake news is not just a communication problem but a systemic challenge that tests the resilience of corporate reputation. Yet, it also demonstrates that with proactive engagement, strategic communication, and sustained credibility, organizations can weather misinformation and protect their most asset, their reputation.

5.3 Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how fake news affects corporate reputation in Ghana's mining sector and how public relations professionals respond to these challenges. The findings make it clear that fake news is not simply a passing nuisance; it is a powerful disruptor capable of undermining years of reputation-building in a matter of hours or days. In an era where digital technologies amplify misinformation and communities are primed to distrust corporate motives, managing reputation has become both more urgent and more complex.

The study concludes that the impact of fake news is multi-dimensional. It damages not only an organization's public image but also its relationships with stakeholders, its operational stability, and its financial resources. For mining companies in Ghana, where operations intersect directly with local communities, reputation is more than a symbolic asset, it functions as a social license to operate. Fake news, therefore, poses an existential risk by threatening this delicate license. The study also finds that crisis communication strategies must be adaptive and context sensitive. Defensive strategies such as denial are effective only when misinformation is entirely false, while accommodative strategies such as clarification, apology, and corrective action are more appropriate when elements of truth are present. Relational strategies, particularly engaging with stakeholders before going public, emerge as critical in rebuilding trust. These approaches resonate strongly with both Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT), affirming the relevance of these frameworks in the Ghanaian context, though participants' insights also reveal the need for more culturally nuanced applications.

At the same time, the study highlights the limitations PR professionals face. Fake news spreads faster than facts, often in local languages that organizations may be reluctant or unprepared to use. Community mistrust, shaped by historical grievances and economic expectations, creates fertile ground for misinformation to thrive. These realities mean that even the most skilled and timely responses cannot always undo the damage once fake news has taken hold.

Ultimately, the study concludes that proactive reputation management is the most effective defence. Organizations that consistently communicate transparently, demonstrate accountability, and deliver tangible evidence of their contributions are better positioned to withstand misinformation. Credibility, once established, becomes a reputational shield; but when credibility is absent, even the truth may be doubted.

In closing, this research underscores that fake news is both a challenge and an opportunity. While it exposes the vulnerabilities of corporate reputation in a digital society, it also pushes organizations to rethink their communication practices, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and invest in the professionalization of public relations. For mining companies in Ghana, and indeed for corporations globally, reputation remains both their most fragile asset and their most enduring source of resilience.

5.4 Recommendations

The findings of this study show that fake news is both a persistent threat and a test of resilience for organizations in Ghana's mining sector. Based on the insights shared by public relations professionals, several recommendations can be made to strengthen the capacity of organizations to manage misinformation and protect their reputations. These recommendations are grouped into three areas: corporate practice, policy and regulation, and future research.

5.4.1 Recommendations for Corporate Practice

Invest in proactive monitoring and early detection:

Mining companies should establish robust media monitoring systems, including digital listening tools, to track misinformation as it emerges. Early detection gives organizations the chance to respond quickly before fake news spreads uncontrollably.

Communicate in multiple languages:

Since much fake news circulates in local dialects via WhatsApp audios or community radio, organizations should consider carefully crafted responses in both English and local languages. Doing so makes their communication accessible and more relatable, without sacrificing professionalism.

Prioritize stakeholder engagement as a first line of defence:

Fake news thrives where trust is weak. By building consistent and open relationships with community leaders, employees, regulators, and the media, organizations can strengthen their reputational “immunity.” When misinformation emerges, trusted stakeholders are more likely to defend the company rather than spread rumours.

Institutionalize professional PR practice:

Companies should not treat public relations as a peripheral activity. Instead, PR should be integrated into corporate strategy, led by trained professionals who understand crisis communication, stakeholder management, and reputation building. This professionalization enhances preparedness and credibility.

Leverage social media as a corrective tool:

The same platforms that spread fake news, such as Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, can also be used to counter it. Mining companies should maintain active, transparent, and responsive social media presences, using these channels not only for crisis response but also for sharing positive stories, CSR initiatives, and evidence of responsible practices.

Recommendations for Policy and Regulation

Strengthen collaboration with regulators and media:

Mining companies should build partnerships with regulators such as the Minerals Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as credible media houses. These partnerships can be leveraged to fact-check and publicly correct misinformation, lending authority and legitimacy to corporate responses.

Advocate for responsible digital media policies:

While protecting freedom of expression, government agencies should work with corporate stakeholders and civil society to develop policies that discourage the deliberate creation and

spread of fake news. Public education campaigns on media literacy can also empower communities to critically evaluate the information they receive.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

Conduct cross-sectoral studies:

Future researchers could examine how fake news impacts other high-profile sectors in Ghana, such as telecommunications, banking, and consumer goods. This would provide a broader understanding of misinformation's impact on corporate reputation.

Explore stakeholder perspectives:

While this study focused on PR professionals, future studies could investigate how different stakeholder groups, such as community members, regulators, or employees, perceive and respond to fake news about corporations.

Pursue comparative regional studies:

Comparative studies across African countries could provide insights into similarities and differences in how fake news emerges and how organizations respond. Such research would enrich theoretical applications of SCCT and IRT in diverse cultural and socio-political contexts.

5.7 Closing Remarks

These recommendations underscore that managing fake news requires more than just reactive crisis communication; it calls for a holistic, proactive approach that combines monitoring, transparency, stakeholder engagement, and professionalized communication practices. By adopting these measures, mining companies in Ghana and organizations more broadly, can

strengthen their resilience against misinformation, safeguard their reputations, and sustain the trust of the communities and stakeholders on whom their survival depends.

5.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has brought the study to its conclusion by presenting a summary of the research, the key findings, and the implications for practice, policy, and future research. The study set out to examine the impact of fake news on corporate reputation in Ghana's mining sector, guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT). Using a qualitative exploratory design, interviews with PR professionals revealed that fake news is not only widespread but also deeply disruptive to organizational credibility and stakeholder trust.

The chapter began with a summary of the study, restating its purpose, objectives, methodology, and findings. It then presented the conclusions, which emphasized that fake news is a multidimensional challenge, damaging reputation, straining community relations, draining resources, and disrupting operations. At the same time, the study concluded that contextsensitive and adaptive communication strategies, when grounded in transparency and credibility, can help organizations manage and recover from such crises.

The chapter also offered recommendations across three key levels. For corporate practice, it highlighted the need for proactive monitoring, multilingual communication, professionalized PR practice, and stronger stakeholder engagement. For policy and regulation, it called for deeper collaboration with regulators and the media, as well as the development of responsible digital media policies. For future research, it recommended exploring cross-sectoral impacts, stakeholder perceptions, and comparative regional perspectives on fake news and corporate reputation.

Finally, this chapter reinforces the idea that reputation remains both a fragile and indispensable corporate asset. Fake news threatens this asset, but it also compels organizations to rethink their communication strategies and recommit to credibility and transparency. For mining companies in Ghana, reputation is not just about image; it is about maintaining the social license to operate in communities where trust is hard-earned but easily lost.

This conclusion paves the way for future scholarship and practice by affirming that while fake news is a formidable challenge, it can also be a catalyst for stronger, more resilient communication practices.

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Appendix B: Interview Guide

Title: *Fake News and its Impact on the Reputation of mining firms: PR Perspective in Ghana*

Target Respondent: Corporate Affairs/Communication/PR Manager in a Mining Firm in Ghana.

IntroductionScript:

"Good day. My name is Mr. Simon Agana Blessing, Azongo, a postgraduate student at University of Media, Art and Communication (UNiMAC). I am conducting research for my thesis on the perspectives of Public Relations officers on The Impact of Fake news on the Reputation of mining firms. Your expertise and experience are invaluable to this study. This questionnaire will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary, and all responses will be kept strictly confidential and anonymized in the final report. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time you may feel to do so. Thank you for your time and contribution."

Target Participants:

Public Relations professionals working in mining firms in Ghana, particularly.

Section A: Demographic and Company Information

1. What is your current job title?
2. How many years of experience do you have in corporate communication/public relations?
3. How long have you worked specifically in the mining sector?

SECTION B: Background Information

1. Can you briefly describe your current role and how long you have worked in public relations?
2. What industry does your organization operate in?

3. Have you or your organization ever had to deal with fake news? If so, could you briefly describe the experience?
4. In your experience, what forms or types of fake news most frequently target your organization in Ghana?
5. Are there particular platforms (e.g., social media, blogs, traditional media) where these fake news stories are more prevalent?
6. What patterns or recurring themes have you noticed in such fake news reports?

SECTION B: Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions

RQ1: How do public relations professionals in Ghana perceive the impact of fake news on corporate reputation?

7. How would you describe the impact of fake news on your organization's reputation?
8. In your opinion, how seriously do PR professionals and executives in Ghana view the threat of fake news?
9. Have there been any long-term consequences of fake news incidents on your organization's brand or stakeholder trust?

RQ2: What crisis communication strategies are employed by PR practitioners in Ghana to counteract fake news?

10. When fake news emerges, what immediate steps do you take as a PR professional?
11. Could you describe any specific communication strategies or frameworks your organization uses to address fake news?

12. Do you collaborate with any external bodies (e.g., media houses, fact-checkers, regulators) when responding to fake news?

RQ3: How effective are the current PR strategies in managing and restoring corporate reputation after fake news incidents?

13. In your opinion, how effective have your strategies been in mitigating the damage caused by fake news?
14. Can you share a success story or a case where your crisis communication approach worked well?
15. Are there areas where you feel your organization's response could have been better?

SECTION C: Conclusion

19. What recommendations would you make to improve the PR industry's preparedness against fake news in Ghana?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding fake news and corporate reputation?

Selase Akyeamah

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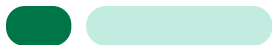
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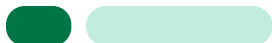
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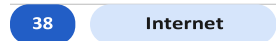
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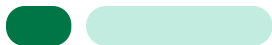
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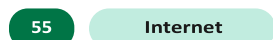


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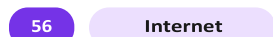


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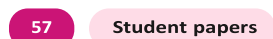


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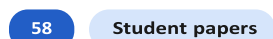


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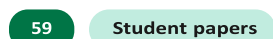


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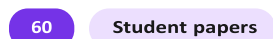


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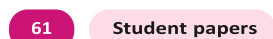


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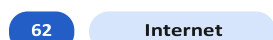


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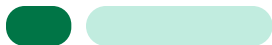


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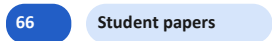
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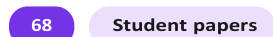
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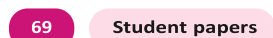
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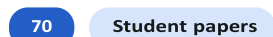
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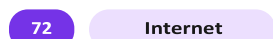
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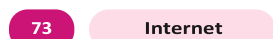
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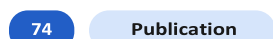
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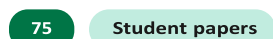
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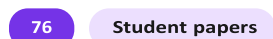
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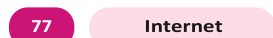
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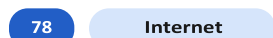
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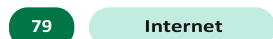
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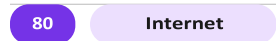
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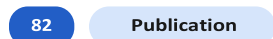
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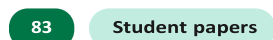


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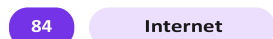
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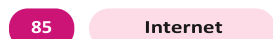
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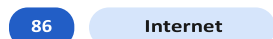
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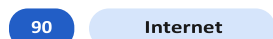
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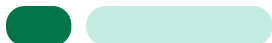


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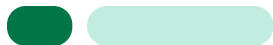


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