UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION (UniMAC)
INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM

COUNTERING FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION BY PUBLIC RELATIONS UNITS: PREPAREDNESS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

LAWRENCIA EMEFA DAGADU

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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BY

LAWRENCIA EMEFA DAGADU

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DECLARATIONS

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

………………………………….. 28/11/2025 …………………………………..

Lawrencia Emefa Dagadu Date

DECLARATION BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision in accordance with the guidelines for supervision and formatting of dissertations established by the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC).

………………………………….. 28/11/2025 …………………………………..

Dr. Noel Nutsugah Date

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering support, enduring sacrifices, and steadfast belief in my potential have been instrumental to my academic and personal development. Their guidance, encouragement, and prayers have provided the foundation upon which this accomplishment rests.

I also wish to extend this dedication to Dr. Noel Nustugah, whose exemplary mentorship, intellectual guidance, and commitment to academic excellence have profoundly shaped the direction and quality of this work.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how public relations units in Ghana prepare for, respond to, and manage the growing challenge of misinformation and fake news. It explores their internal systems, the obstacles that weaken their readiness, and the opportunities that can strengthen their role in information management. The study adopts a qualitative approach and draws on semi-structured interviews with practitioners across public, private, and quasi-public institutions. The findings also reveal several constraints. Practitioners face bureaucratic delays, inadequate technical resources, and limited institutional support. They also struggle with low digital literacy among audiences and inconsistent coordination with other departments. Despite these challenges, the study identifies clear opportunities. These include the adoption of digital tools, strategic collaborations, and targeted capacity building. The study concludes that public relations units require stronger internal systems, clearer protocols, and improved professional training to respond effectively to misinformation. It recommends sustained institutional commitment, cross-unit cooperation, and proactive preparedness to enhance communication resilience.

Keywords: Public Relations, Misinformation, Preparedness, Verification, Crisis Response.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI – Artificial Intelligence

AMI0 – Antecedents-Misinformation-Outcomes

DRID – Directorate of Research, Innovation and Development

MIL – Media and Information Literacy

RES# – Respondent codes (RES3, RES5, RES10 etc.)

SCCT – Situational Crisis Communication Theory

SoGSaR – School of Graduate Studies and Research

UniMAC–IJ – University of Media, Arts and Communication – Institute of Journalism

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the study and establishes the rationale for investigating how public relations units in Ghana respond to misinformation and fake news. The chapter draws attention to the rising concern about misinformation and its implications for institutional credibility and public trust. It recognises the evolving responsibilities of public relations professionals within contested information spaces. By examining key scholarly perspectives and highlighting contextual issues in Ghana's media and communication landscape, this chapter sets the stage for the study's core arguments. The introduction also signals the relevance of the research questions and outlines how the study seeks to address gaps in the current literature on misinformation management within institutional settings.

1.2 Background of the Study

The global spread of fake news and misinformation continues to destabilise both established and emerging democracies, with implications for governance, institutional legitimacy, and civic engagement (Nutsugah et al., 2025; Pomerantsev, 2019). These distortions in the information ecosystem have eroded public trust and generated scepticism towards traditional sources of authority (Sarfraz, 2025; Bhutto, 2024). In Ghana, the situation is further compounded by partisan media practices and fluctuating digital literacy levels, which create fertile ground for disinformation (Adisa et al., 2024; Mensah et al., 2021). In response, public relations units are increasingly recognised as frontline agents in protecting organisational credibility and restoring public confidence (Macnamara, 2022). Scholars such as Freelon et al. (2022) and, Freelon and Wells (2020) give the indication that public relations must now operate within a dynamic information terrain that requires strategic foresight, message agility, and institutional resilience.

This growing responsibility signals a marked shift in the role of public relations from reactive crisis response to proactive narrative construction. Public relations professionals are expected not only to defend their institutions but also to anticipate and counter harmful content before it takes root (Husain et al., 2023; Viererbl & Koch, 2021). As Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones (2022) emphasise, public relations practice must now incorporate monitoring systems, verification protocols, and cross-sectoral collaboration to remain effective. However, many interventions reported in literature focus narrowly on media literacy, reactive press statements, or post-crisis corrections (Akay, 2024; Freelon & Wells, 2020). These approaches often neglect the organisational infrastructure necessary for sustainable misinformation management. Without institutional capacity and strategic orientation, public relations efforts risk remaining fragmented and insufficient. This study, therefore, explores preparedness, challenges, and opportunities as a timely and necessary response to the complexity of misinformation in institutional settings.

This shift in responsibility highlights public relations' evolving function within strategic communication. Valentini (2021) acknowledges that public relations is not confined to image repair but is central to shaping discourse in contested media environments. In response, professionals are expected to develop communication infrastructures that anticipate and address misinformation threats. However, most interventions in existing literature emphasise crisis response mechanisms, media literacy campaigns, and reactive content verification strategies (Giordano et al., 2025; Tandoc et al., 2024). These efforts, while valuable, do not fully account for the internal institutional dynamics that influence how public relations units engage with misinformation.

The institutional relevance of public relations in this context cannot be overstated. Their ability to act swiftly, credibly, and strategically hinges on organisational capacity, internal protocols, and access to decision-making. Examining preparedness, challenges, and opportunities therefore becomes essential in understanding how public relations units navigate this changing terrain. This study recognises the urgency of that task and situates itself within a broader academic effort to evaluate public relations' role in complex information environments.

1.3 Problem Statement

Although research on misinformation has expanded, scholars differ in what they examine, and this creates several unresolved gaps. Studies such as Boman et al. (2024), Mehta et al. (2022), and Lambert et al. (2024) focus on the scale of misinformation and its social effects. Others, including Karinshak and Jin (2023) and López et al. (2024), emphasise platform dynamics and message correction. Despite their contributions, these studies rarely explore the internal workings of public relations units during misinformation episodes, exposing a distinct issue gap.

Further, another gap emerges from contextual differences across settings. In Western environments, studies (eg. Jahng et al., 2020; Mehta et al., 2021; Edwards, 2021) often assume stable institutions, predictable regulation, and high digital literacy, conditions that shape how public relations units prepare for misinformation. In contrast, work in Ghana highlights fragile credibility systems, uneven regulation, and inconsistent digital literacy levels (Afrobarometer, 2025; Ayoung et al., 2023; Nkansah and Oldac, 2024), indicating that insights from Western contexts cannot be directly transferred. Yet Ghanaian scholarship rarely treats misinformation as a central operational issue for public relations units (Ayoung et al., 2023; Tabong and Segtub, 2021; Media Foundation for West Africa, 2025), revealing a substantive context gap.

Another concern relates to the methodological tendencies that shape existing scholarship. Prior research draws heavily on campaign reviews (Barnoy, 2022; Giordano et al., 2025; Jahng et al., 2020), survey-driven datasets (Afrobarometer, 2025; Mensah et al., 2021; Babatunde, 2022), and retrospective crisis investigations (Mehta et al., 2021; Desai et al., 2022; Omojunikanbi, 2022), producing evidence that is largely quantitative. Although these approaches yield useful numerical patterns, they prioritise measurable outcomes while overlooking the internal dynamics of communication work.

This study responds to these gaps by examining the institutional conditions, organisational capacity, and strategic forms of preparedness that shape the functioning of public relations units in Ghana.

1.4 Research Objectives

To provide a focused direction for the study, the following research objectives were formulated. The study therefore intends;

1. To examine the level of preparedness of public relations units in identifying, responding to, and managing fake news and misinformation.
2. To investigate the challenges faced by public relations practitioners in countering misinformation.
3. To explore the opportunities available for public relations units to enhance their role in managing misinformation.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How prepared are public relations units to identify, respond to, and manage fake news and misinformation?

2. What challenges do public relations practitioners face in countering misinformation?
3. What opportunities exist for public relations units to enhance their role in misinformation management?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study adds to current knowledge on how public relations deals with misinformation. Most studies focus on media literacy or public reaction. This one shifts to what happens behind the scenes. It looks at how institutions prepare for false content before it spreads. It shows how systems, rules, and staff shape the outcome. These elements often go unnoticed in crisis studies. The Ghanaian case gives the work a wider scope. It highlights a setting that is not often included in global public relations studies. This change matters. It allows scholars to think about how place and structure influence strategy. It also opens space for fresh thinking on how public relations builds trust from within institutions.

Beyond academia, the findings offer important guidance for policy. As misinformation continues to erode institutional credibility, policy frameworks must respond to these shifts with updated strategies. This study informs the design of such strategies by identifying organisational gaps, resource limitations, and institutional constraints. It supports the development of communication policies that prioritise strategic capacity-building, cross-sector collaboration, and the integration of verification systems within public institutions.

For practitioners, the study provides concrete ways to strengthen public relations work against misinformation. It calls for internal communication systems that help teams respond quickly and consistently. It shows the importance of tools that track information in real time. It also stresses the need for better access to decision-making and stronger ties between public relations units and leadership. The study speaks to professionals managing public image, policy communication, and institutional trust. It applies to government communicators, corporate public relations teams, and university communication units. It is also relevant to media regulators who monitor the information space. Civil society groups that promote accuracy and transparency can also benefit. These organisations can draw lessons on how to structure campaigns and engage with state institutions. The study gives each stakeholder something useful to apply in their work.

Future researchers may draw on this study to extend investigations into other contexts or explore comparative insights between regions. The study opens space for longitudinal designs that track institutional readiness over time. It also invites deeper inquiry into the interplay between public relations, digital infrastructure, and political communication in emerging democracies. In doing so, it lays a foundation for further empirical engagement with the evolving challenges of public communication in the age of misinformation.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on public relations units in Ghana and their internal response to misinformation. It targets professionals in both public and private institutions who manage strategic communication. The research examines preparedness, challenges, and opportunities, without assessing audience views. It looks at current practices, organisational structures, and the national media context. The scope stays within institutional public relations work, offering lessons for communication strategy and resilience.

1.8 Organization of the Study

Chapter One outlines the background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, and scope of the study. It also defines key terms and establishes the context within Ghana's communication environment. Chapter Two reviews relevant theories and existing literature, identifies gaps, and provides the conceptual framework that informs the investigation. This foundation guides the analytical lens applied throughout the study. Additionally, Chapter Three describes the research methodology, including the design, sampling technique, data collection process, and analysis strategy. Ethical considerations are also addressed here. Then on to, Chapter Four presents the findings and offers a discussion that connects the data with previous scholarly work. Chapter Five concludes the study by summarising the main finding. This reflects on their policy and professional significance, acknowledging limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically engaged with existing academic perspectives on the intersection between fake news, misinformation, and public relations. It began by establishing precise definitions for each term, drawing on scholarly distinctions to clarify conceptual ambiguities that often blur analytical boundaries. The chapter then synthesised empirical findings from various contexts to show how misinformation disrupts strategic communication efforts. Current scholarly debates were reviewed to uncover how public relations practitioners respond to these disruptions, and the structural, ethical, and technological constraints they face. The chapter concluded by grounding the study in two theoretical frameworks both of which offered structured insight into crisis preparedness, strategic messaging, and media influence in managing misinformation.

2.2 Defining Fake News

Fake news denotes fabricated or deliberately misleading content presented as legitimate journalism. This term surged in prominence following the 2016 United States presidential election, capturing scholarly and public attention (Murphy, 2023; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) identify fake news as articles that are intentionally false and designed to mislead readers while mimicking the format and appearance of credible news media. Tandoc et al. (2018) suggest that fake news operates along a spectrum that includes satire, parody, fabrication, and manipulation, but is unified by its potential to deceive. These materials often aim to provoke emotional responses rather than convey facts. Unlike satire, fake news lacks disclaimers and clear indicators of fiction. The content may employ sensationalist language, manipulated visuals, and strategic dissemination through digital platforms.

Additionally, Bakir and McStay (2018) emphasise the economic and political motivations underlying such outputs, often driven by the pursuit of clicks, influence, or disruption. While the phrase itself is contested for its politicised use, it maintains analytical value when restricted to deliberate falsifications masquerading as journalism. Its proliferation has exploited digital ecosystems, enabling false narratives to circulate rapidly and widely without verification mechanisms. The consequences have proved significant, undermining trust in the media and polluting public discourse. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) recommend clearer typologies and media literacy interventions to combat its spread and impact. In academic and policy contexts, precision in distinguishing fake news from misinformation or propaganda remains critical to ensuring conceptual clarity and developing effective countermeasures.

2.3 Defining Misinformation

Misinformation refers to false or misleading information shared without intent to deceive. Unlike fake news, which is deliberately crafted to mislead, misinformation often circulates through error, misinterpretation, or misplaced trust. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2023) classify it as one of three categories within the information disorder framework, alongside disinformation and malinformation. Misinformation can emerge from various contexts including health, politics, science, and crisis communication. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) argue that misinformation persists due to cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and the continued influence effect. Individuals often cling to incorrect beliefs even after receiving corrections. This phenomenon is exacerbated by social media platforms that reward engagement rather than accuracy. Tandoc et al. (2018) further explain that misinformation spreads not just through content producers but through users who unintentionally amplify it. The effects are particularly harmful during public health emergencies or elections, where false beliefs can influence critical decisions.

Misleading data visualisations, out-of-context statistics, and misrepresented expert opinions are common vehicles for its spread. While the intention behind sharing misinformation may be benign, the outcomes can still erode public trust, confuse audiences, and weaken institutional credibility. Vraga and Bode (2023) recommend pre-bunking strategies and credible corrective information as ways to limit its influence. Clarifying the distinction between misinformation and fake news is essential to research and policy, especially as digital information consumption accelerates. Understanding the mechanics and psychology behind misinformation supports more targeted educational and technological responses.

2.4 Defining Public Relations

Public relations involves strategic communication processes that foster mutual understanding between organisations and their publics (Verčič, 2025; Page et al., 2023). Grunig and Hunt (1984) define public relations as the management function that establishes and maintains beneficial relationships between an organisation and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. This discipline extends beyond publicity and media relations. It incorporates research, messaging, relationship-building, and ethical advocacy. Botan and Hazleton (2006) view public relations as a social science rooted in persuasion and dialogue, not mere image management. The field includes various models such as press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical communication, each reflecting different power relations and organisational intentions.

Further, L'Etang (2008) asserts that public relations operates within cultural, political, and economic frameworks, shaping public discourse through framing and agenda-setting. The role of public relations has evolved to include crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, and corporate social responsibility. In digital environments, its scope now incorporates social media management, influencer collaborations, and content curation. Heath (2013) stresses the importance of ethical communication and transparency in building and sustaining public trust. Public relations practitioners serve as both boundary spanners and strategic advisors, often navigating complex organisational and societal terrains. Despite its contested reputation, the discipline remains vital in shaping public opinion, managing reputation, and aligning institutional actions with societal expectations. This vitality is reflected in recent academic contributions that sharpen definitional clarity and expand conceptual boundaries.

Tkalac Verčič (2025) for instance frames internal communication as a strategic core of public relations, essential for fostering cohesion and performance. Yue et al. (2024) highlight how transparency and employee engagement practices redefine relational communication. Page et al. (2023) introduce a more anticipatory crisis communication paradigm, aligning it with stakeholder responsiveness. Toth (2023) proposes feminist insights to foreground inclusivity and structural equity within public relations theory. Yang and Kim (2024) reinforce leadership's communicative functions as a pivotal axis in sustaining trust and institutional culture. These contributions enrich how the discipline is conceptualised, affirming its relational, ethical, and strategic orientation in contemporary contexts.

2.5 Fake News, Misinformation and Public Relations

Recent empirical scholarship has increasingly focused on the implications of fake news and misinformation for public relations, with studies offering a diverse range of insights into the patterns, effects, and contextual dynamics of the phenomenon. Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023) provide a comprehensive systematic review of 756 publications spanning 2014 to 2022, capturing key global developments such as populist political leadership and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study draws attention to the conceptual ambiguity surrounding terms like misinformation and disinformation, and the consequences of these for public trust, media authenticity, and public communication. It reveals that disinformation has significantly altered the media environment in democratic societies, thereby challenging the foundational assumptions of public communication strategies in public relations.

The work of Zhang (2024) complements this by examining how social media research is addressed in public relations scholarship. Through an analysis of 380 articles from 143 journals, Zhang notes the fragmented and uneven theoretical integration in public relations studies dealing with social media, including those focusing on misinformation. Significantly, nearly half of the articles surveyed offered only limited theoretical engagement. This reflects a broader concern regarding the underdeveloped conceptual basis for understanding misinformation in public relations and highlights a need for more robust theoretical grounding when addressing fake news phenomena within public communication.

Muhammed and Mathew (2022) add empirical specificity by focusing on misinformation within the contexts of disaster, health, and politics. Through their systematic review of 28 articles, they offer the Antecedents–Misinformation–Outcomes (AMIO) framework, which helps to map the causes, propagation patterns, and effects of misinformation. The framework also provides insight into the implications for public relations practitioners operating in risk communication and crisis contexts. Their study emphasises the importance of integrating information systems and data science approaches in public relations practice to address misinformation challenges effectively.

In the realm of political communication and diplomacy, Fjällhed (2021) explores Sweden's strategic response to false stories circulating about the country, particularly in the wake of the European migration crisis. The study uses agenda-setting theory to evaluate how public diplomacy actors, such as Swedish embassies, have adapted their communication strategies to identify, assess, and counter disinformation. It brings to light the shifting nature of stakeholder engagement in public relations, especially when misinformation undermines institutional credibility in transnational contexts. Extending this perspective, Desai et al. (2022) discuss the ethical and public health implications of misinformation on social media during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Their study underscores the public relations function in health communication, noting the responsibility of professionals to identify, refute, and mitigate misinformation. They propose tools and ethical guidelines for practitioners, reinforcing the link between misinformation management and effective public relations, especially in high-stakes health contexts.

These studies underscore the escalating role of fake news and misinformation as destabilising forces in public relations, threatening the coherence of strategic communication efforts. A recurring pattern is the strain placed on legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and the operational logic of public relations models. There is evidence of methodological inconsistency and conceptual vagueness, particularly in the integration of theory into empirical research. This reveals a disciplinary gap that demands more rigorous frameworks. Moreover, misinformation's embeddedness in political, health, and crisis contexts signals a need for public relations strategies to evolve beyond traditional message management. Adaptation to fragmented digital ecosystems and the recalibration of stakeholder engagement approaches emerge as critical imperatives for contemporary public relations scholarship and practice.

2.6 How to Manage Fake News and Misinformation in Public Relations

An increasing number of empirical studies have examined the strategies employed by public relations professionals to manage fake news and misinformation across various communication contexts. These studies, conducted in diverse national and institutional settings, reveal tested approaches to verification, narrative control, technological adaptation, and stakeholder engagement. Collectively, the findings inform current professional practices and highlight opportunities for more robust intervention frameworks.

To begin with, Jahng et al. (2020) explore the perceptions and verification strategies of public relations practitioners in the United States through thematic analysis. Fake news is described as a deliberate attempt to mislead, often targeting organizational reputation. Practitioners rely on traditional news outlets and crowdsourced content to verify authenticity and recommend a proactive stance. This ensures control of official narratives, upholding professional ethics, and avoiding controversy in messaging. These strategies aim to preserve the integrity and credibility of public relations outputs amid growing distrust in digital content.

Building on the role of crisis management, Mehta et al. (2021) introduce a process-oriented view of crisis misinformation management based on in-depth interviews with 31 public relations professionals. Findings reveal variability in crisis misinformation types and severity, influencing response approaches. Practitioners use internal vetting procedures to assess the urgency and scope of interventions. Their framework incorporates corrective actions, alternative narratives, and continuous evaluation during and after crises. This work strengthens the operational understanding of public relations responses in dynamic, misinformation-driven crises and emphasizes adaptive response mechanisms.

Extending the scope of inquiry, Roth-Cohen and Avidar (2022) examine a decade of public relations-focused journal publications, mapping trends in social media use, methodology, and theoretical engagement. While not focused exclusively on misinformation, their study identifies social media as a dominant public relations platform, raising ethical and strategic concerns regarding misinformation control. The authors call for more diverse theoretical applications and platform-specific strategies, noting the imperative for public relations scholarship to respond to emerging challenges in misinformation-prone environments.

In a different but related domain, Tsegyu et al. (2024) examine how misinformation obstructs sustainable development communication. Using a mixed-methods design, they demonstrate that misinformation undermines trust and delays policy implementation. Findings indicate that effective public relations practices must include tailored communication, strategic collaboration with scientists and policymakers, stakeholder partnerships, and media literacy campaigns. This underscores the broader social function of public relations in building informed consensus and policy legitimacy.

Advancing a proactive approach, Boman (2021) investigates the strategy of ‘prebunking’ (preemptively countering misinformation) through a quasi-experimental design involving Facebook users. Grounded in inoculation theory, the study finds that messages framed with autonomy support and factual specificity can defend reputational outcomes against misinformation attacks. These findings support proactive public relations interventions as viable tools to mitigate the impact of disinformation during crises.

Adopting a critical stance, Edwards (2021) argues that public relations itself must be interrogated as a site of disinformation. Based on UK industry publications, the article critiques how public relations firms simultaneously claim ethical authority while distancing themselves from disinformation, despite their active role in shaping public narratives. The tension between ethical posturing and operational practice suggests a need for internal reform if public relations is to effectively counter disinformation. From a technological perspective, Gradoń et al. (2021) address the rise of infodemics, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study emphasizes the application of data-driven technologies (such as machine learning, sentiment analysis, and network modelling) to monitor and mitigate false information. This interdisciplinary approach offers public relations professionals practical tools to pre-empt, disrupt, and respond to misinformation using scalable technological systems.

Drawing from the body of research, empirical evidence underscores the necessity for multifaceted strategies to address fake news and misinformation in public relations. These include ethical anchoring, digital literacy enhancement, technological adaptation, and stakeholder-inclusive communication. Developing resilient public relations systems requires the convergence of critical reflection, evidence-based practice, and institutional accountability.

2.7 Challenges in Countering Misinformation in Public Relations

A number of completed empirical studies have collectively illuminated the multifaceted challenges public relations professionals face in the effort to counter misinformation. These investigations span a range of sectors, from health to politics, and reflect the strategic, ethical, technological, and cognitive hurdles confronting contemporary public relations. By examining tested scenarios and evaluated interventions, these studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers inhibiting effective misinformation management and underscore the institutional and communicative limitations within public relations systems.

Omojunikanbi (2022) focuses on health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, situating misinformation as a critical obstacle to effective public relations. Drawing on the Public Relations Transfer Model and Health Belief Model, the study establishes the centrality of accurate information dissemination in combating disinformation. However, the findings also highlight systemic constraints such as limited communication channels and a fragmented media environment, which weaken coordinated public relations efforts in public health contexts.

Extending the analysis to organisational reputation, Vafeiadis et al. (2020) assess the effectiveness of denial and attack strategies in managing social media-based rumors. The experimental data reveal that these strategies vary in efficacy depending on audience involvement. While attacks may diminish credibility among highly engaged stakeholders, they risk reinforcing misinformation for less engaged audiences. The implication is that a one-size-fits-all response may prove counterproductive, underscoring the complexity of tailoring public relations strategies in volatile media spaces.

In the educational sphere, Adjin-Tettey (2022) explores the role of media and information literacy (MIL) in enhancing public discernment. Despite MIL's positive influence, the study identifies limitations linked to the depth and delivery of training interventions. Even trained individuals sometimes fail to recognize false content, suggesting that short-term initiatives may not suffice. This points to the need for sustained and inclusive MIL programs that are responsive to demographic disparities in education and access.

Shifting focus to broader societal concerns, Ganesh and Bright (2020) examine the challenges posed by extremist manipulation of digital platforms. Strategic communication and content moderation emerge as critical yet contested tools in curbing the spread of radical narratives. The study outlines the difficulty in balancing free expression with misinformation regulation, revealing tensions in policy design and execution. Multistakeholder collaboration is presented as a necessary but underdeveloped area in counter-extremist public relations strategies.

Transitioning to the technological dimension, Kreps et al. (2022) introduce the challenge of artificially generated misinformation, highlighting the role of AI in amplifying credible-seeming disinformation. The experimental findings show that AI-generated content is often indistinguishable from authentic material, complicating public perception and public relations monitoring processes. Moreover, political biases shape the reception of such messages, adding another layer of difficulty to counter-messaging and stakeholder trust-building.

Continuing with technological concerns, Gurney and Maresh-Fuehrer (2025) further interrogate the ethical tensions of AI usage in public relations practice. While generative AI enhances messaging capacity and audience engagement, it also blurs the line between authenticity and fabrication. The study raises concerns about the manipulation of visual and textual content and calls for ethical anchoring grounded in existing professional standards. Without such grounding, technological advances risk undermining public relations' credibility and transparency.

Across the reviewed studies, a recurring theme emerges: misinformation management in public relations remains constrained by competing demands of speed, precision, ethical coherence, and strategic consistency. The findings point to a communication landscape marked by intensifying technological disruptions, ideologically segmented audiences, and blurred lines between authenticity and fabrication. Inconsistent literacy levels, limited regulatory coordination, and an overreliance on reactive measures further exacerbate institutional vulnerabilities. These factors jointly contribute to reputational fragility, erosion of public trust, and an increasing difficulty in sustaining message integrity. A critical takeaway is the urgency to recalibrate public relations practice through structurally embedded, multi-level interventions focused on professional ethics, technological literacy, stakeholder inclusivity, and anticipatory communication planning.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

2.8.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Developed by W. Timothy Coombs in the 1990s, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emerged from efforts to provide a systematic approach to managing organizational crises. It expanded on attribution theory, specifically focusing on how stakeholders assign blame during crises (Coombs, 2007). The theory was formulated to guide organizations in selecting effective communication strategies based on the crisis type and perceived responsibility. SCCT is based on several assumptions. First, stakeholders react to crises by forming judgments about the organization's responsibility. Second, these judgments influence their emotional and behavioral responses. Third, communication strategies must align with these perceptions to protect or restore reputation (Coombs, 2015).

Key concepts include crisis types (victim, accidental, and preventable), responsibility attribution, and response strategies such as denial, diminish, and rebuild. The theory also emphasizes the role of prior reputation and crisis history in shaping stakeholder reactions. The model aims to minimize reputational damage by prescribing communication responses tailored to the specific crisis situation. It provides a framework for matching strategic messages with crisis characteristics. It also accounts for the varying degrees of responsibility stakeholders might assign to the organization during different crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Among its strengths, SCCT is praised for its practical relevance and adaptability across crisis scenarios. Its empirical foundation and structured strategy classification make it a valuable guide in real-world settings (Ma & Zhan, 2016). It also considers psychological elements of stakeholder judgment. However, critics highlight limitations. The theory may oversimplify public perceptions and over-rely on attribution as the core driver of stakeholder response.

Others argue it lacks cultural sensitivity and overlooks broader systemic influences that shape crisis meaning (Zhou & Ki, 2018). It is also viewed as reactive, with limited attention to proactive crisis preparedness or long-term stakeholder engagement.

2.8.2 Agenda-Building Theory

First introduced by Cobb and Elder in 1971, Agenda-Building Theory examined how social issues gain political and media attention. Unlike the earlier agenda-setting model, this theory shifts focus from media influence on public opinion to how public actors influence media and policy agendas (Cobb & Elder, 1971). The theory rests on the premise that agenda formation is a contested process involving multiple actors. It assumes that media do not independently set the agenda but are influenced by interest groups, elites, and social movements. It suggests that access to media space is not evenly distributed.

Central to the theory are ideas such as source influence, media gatekeeping, and agenda interaction. Public relations efforts, government actions, and civic activism are often studied as agenda drivers. Power dynamics and issue framing also feature prominently in agenda development (McCombs, 2005). The theory serves to explain how issues transition from the public arena to the media and policy spheres. It helps account for the political process behind issue visibility and highlights the role of strategic communication. It is especially useful in understanding the communicative tactics employed by different actors seeking attention for specific causes (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990).

Agenda-Building Theory's major strength lies in its flexibility and recognition of multi-directional influence. It captures the dynamic between various stakeholders, including the public, journalists, and policymakers. It also allows for empirical application in media studies and political communication (Kim et al., 2002). Nonetheless, scholars argue that it underestimates the autonomy of the media and assumes too much influence from elite sources. The theory also struggles to define thresholds for issue acceptance on media agendas. Some critics believe it is under-theorized and lacks explanatory precision in cross-cultural or digital contexts (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). Others note its limited predictive capacity when applied to fast-moving media ecosystems.

2.8.3 Relevance of the Theory to the Study

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Agenda-Building Theory both offer insightful lenses for examining how public relations units engage with misinformation and fake news. SCCT provides a strategic foundation for analysing how public relations professionals assess and respond to reputational threats brought on by misinformation. Given that the first research question explores the preparedness of public relations units in managing such crises, SCCT is particularly well suited to illuminate the range of response strategies available and how these are selected based on organisational responsibility, history, and crisis type. This theoretical lens facilitates an assessment of whether current preparedness levels align with effective crisis response principles, especially when threats emerge from disinformation campaigns.

In parallel, Agenda-Building Theory supports an understanding of how public relations efforts can shape media coverage. It highlights the deliberate strategies used to influence what becomes news. This is significant when dealing with misleading narratives. The third research question focuses on strategic opportunities. Agenda-Building Theory speaks directly to this concern. It shows how public relations units may go beyond crisis response to create forward-looking media strategies. These strategies may position organisations as authoritative sources. They may also help neutralise the effects of misinformation. Rather than reacting to existing narratives, public relations practitioners can assert new ones. In this way, the theory shifts attention to influence, timing, and long-term narrative planning.

The second research question considers the challenges that practitioners encounter. These challenges are best understood through the combined use of both theories. SCCT draws attention to the internal aspects of decision-making. It helps examine how communication choices are made under pressure. It also highlights the limits of institutional readiness when facing misinformation. On the other hand, Agenda-Building Theory draws focus to the external environment. It shows how media structures and gatekeeping practices can restrict public relations influence. Resistance from media platforms can weaken public relations messaging. The interplay between internal limits and external resistance paints a fuller picture. Using both theories allows for a balanced reflection on the structural and environmental barriers confronting public relations professionals today.

Building on these insights, the combined application of these theories offer more than conceptual tools; they represent critical vantage points from which the complex realities of misinformation management can be interrogated. SCCT not only explains how public relations units respond under pressure, but invites reflection on whether their defensive strategies are sufficiently adaptive in increasingly unpredictable media climates. Simultaneously, Agenda-Building Theory brings attention to the broader power dynamics that influence whose voices are amplified and whose narratives dominate public discourse. By drawing from both, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of public relations practice to a deeper interrogation of the institutional competencies and strategic foresight required to operate effectively in an environment saturated with falsehoods.

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined scholarly definitions of fake news, misinformation, and public relations. It highlights both their conceptual overlaps and distinctions. It analysed how these phenomena intersect in practice, particularly within digital communication environments, and reviewed empirical literature that revealed their implications for public relations strategy and stakeholder trust. The chapter also assessed professional and academic responses to misinformation, outlining tested mitigation strategies and challenges encountered within the public relations context. Finally, it justified the study's theoretical foundation by discussing SCCT and Agenda-Building Theory, showing how each framework illuminated the dynamics of crisis communication, media influence, and institutional readiness in addressing misinformation and fake news.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted for the study, detailing the research approach, sampling strategy, data collection methods, analytical techniques, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness measures. The chapter demonstrates the rigour and credibility of the research process by offering a systematic account of each methodological step. It begins by presenting the research approach and justification, followed by an explanation of the procedures used to collect and analyse qualitative data. Ethical protocols are also discussed to ensure the study adheres to established academic and professional standards. The chapter concludes with a summary of how the methodology supports the generation of credible and contextually relevant findings on the role of public relations units in misinformation management.

3.2 Research Approach

The study embraces the qualitative research as the underlying research approach. This is because Creswell (2021) argues that qualitative research centres on describing and interpreting human experiences, actions, and organisational processes through language rather than numbers. Qualitative inquiry values depth, contextual understanding, and interpretive insight. The approach according to Frost (2021) employs interviews, observations, document reviews, and reflexive analysis to uncover patterns that statistical procedures may overlook. The approach illuminates individual meanings, social interactions, and institutional cultures, thereby revealing the strategic thinking, ethical tensions, and procedural dynamics underlying professional practice (Bryman, 2022; Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). Its flexibility allows iterative refinement of questions and coding frameworks, which is vital when new themes emerge in fast-changing communication environments (Hatch, 2023). Essentially, Lichtman (2023) underlines that qualitative investigations present diversity, and complexity thereby yielding findings that are rich in depth and meaning.

Consequently, this foundation fits the present study because misinformation involves perceptions, evolving tactics, and institution-specific responses. By this, numbers alone would mask how practitioners interpret reputational threats and craft counter-strategies. Reason being that unlike quantitative methods focusing on numerical data (Silverman & Patterson, 2021), the qualitative approach enables a rich, descriptive exploration of how public relations professionals interpret, respond to, and navigate misinformation challenges in their day-to-day work. Moreover, as emphasized, qualitative research allows for a flexible and adaptive research design that accommodates emerging themes and patterns during data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2023). This adaptability proves useful, particularly as interviewees introduce diverse perspectives on institutional readiness, verification mechanisms, ethical tensions, and the influence of media systems on public relations strategies. As Patton (2020) argues, flexibility in qualitative studies ensures the relevance of findings even in fast-changing communication environments. Thus, the qualitative approach supplies the interpretive tools necessary for understanding how Ghanaian public relations units navigate a fluid digital landscape.

3.3 Research Design

In parallel, the study adopts the case study as its guiding research design. A case study constitutes an intensive, contextually grounded examination of a phenomenon within real-life settings (Yin, 2017). Case studies integrate multiple data sources (such as; interviews, documents, and policies) to develop a holistic portrait of complex organisational realities

(Hancock et al., 2021). This plural-method orientation strengthens validity through methodological triangulation, enabling researchers to compare perspectives and verify patterns across evidence streams (Schoch, 2020; Piekkari & Welch, 2018). By considering structural arrangements, decision processes, and external influences in concert, case studies reveal how diverse variables interact to shape outcomes (Remenyi, 2022). As Ridder (2017) and Brennen (2021) note, such comprehensive analysis uncovers motivations behind practitioner choices while illuminating the operational constraints that complicate strategic communication.

Accordingly, this design aligns precisely with the study's objectives. By this, the investigation requires attention to issues such as verification protocols, ethical guidelines, stakeholder relationships, media pressures, among others. The case study design permitted the researcher to map these interdependencies and trace the evolution of institutional readiness over time. Through triangulating interview narratives, internal documents, and public statements, the design captures convergences and divergences in how organisations protect reputation amid fake-news threats, thereby generating insights unavailable through broader surveys. This approach will be especially useful as the goal is to understand how various elements interacted within a specific context.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

When it comes to research, Turner (2020) underscores that a population is the wider group that shares characteristics relevant to a study. On this premise, the accessible population for the study comprised communication directors, or managers, and external consultants who hold responsibility for strategic messaging in Ghana-based public, private, and civil-society organisations. From this, sampling comes in. Sampling in qualitative inquiry seeks depth of insight rather than statistical representation (Berndt, 2020). For that reason the study employed non-probability sampling, choosing information-rich cases rather than drawing a random list.

Rahman (2023) argues that non-probability techniques are effective when the goal is to elicit specialised knowledge. Osafo (2023) further observes that complex communication issues often require participants who understand subtle institutional dynamics. Following these recommendations the study relied primarily on purposive sampling, targeting practitioners known to manage misinformation incidents or design relevant protocols. Lamm and Lamm (2019) contend that qualitative research gains explanatory strength when it explores the meanings that individuals attach to their practice; purposive sampling therefore aligned with the objective of uncovering practitioner-centred interpretations of preparedness and challenge.

3.5 Sample Size

Gill (2020) describes sample size as the number of participants selected to provide data. Although Kusi (2012) maintained that increasing sample size strengthens validity and reliability in qualitative inquiry, Nutsugah (2019) iterates that richness, depth, and analytic quality are equally decisive. In that light, for this study, twelve practitioners will be interviewed. This figure aligns with qualitative conventions that privilege analytical depth over numerical breadth (Campbell et al., 2020; Casteel & Bridier, 2021), thereby balancing Kusi's concern for credibility with Silverman's call for depth. This was done across two legs, firstly, purposive sampling was initiated to deliberately recruit participants by selecting individuals whose professional experience is germane to misinformation management (Palinkas et al., 2015). Invitations therefore targeted heads of communication in agencies, corporate firms, and non-governmental organisations, alongside independent public relations consultants who have led misinformation response campaigns. Subsequently, snowball sampling broadened the pool. As Sefcik et al. (2023) explain, referrals from initial participants help locate further informed voices, a strategy especially valuable when access is restricted by gatekeeping or confidentiality. After each interview, participants will propose additional colleagues until either fifteen interviews are completed or data reach theoretical saturation, defined by Shaheen et al. (2019) as the juncture at which no new analytic themes emerge.

3.5.1 Period of Study

The study spans a period of April to August 2025. This period allows adequate time for literature review, participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, and preliminary analysis. By spacing out interviews across several weeks, the researcher ensures that participants are engaged at times most convenient to them, which enhances the depth and quality of the data. Furthermore, the extended timeframe enables the researcher to reflect on emerging themes between interviews. This gives ample time for any necessary adjustments to the interview process to strengthen the study's analytical focus.

3.6 Data Collection Techniques

The study relied primarily on interviews (particularly, semi-structured interviews). This method was appropriate because it made it possible to explore participants' subjective perspectives, personal experiences, and interpretations regarding misinformation management in public relations. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that interviews capture the complexity of human perceptions and interactions, an advantage that aligns with the qualitative aim of understanding diverse practitioner views.

3.6.1 Interviews

To guide each discussion, the researcher developed an interview guide that reflected the study objectives and drew on established methodological recommendations (Patton, 2014). By beginning with clearly defined core questions the guide-maintained consistency across interviews. At the same time, it remained flexible, which allowed new themes to surface naturally during conversation. Building on this structure, the researcher applied follow-up prompts whenever participants introduced ideas that warranted deeper exploration. Roller (2020) suggests that such adaptability helps reveal hidden layers of meaning. Consequently, participants could clarify points, elaborate on emerging issues, and share examples that illustrated their institutional practices.

To enrich these verbal accounts, field observations were introduced. Observing workplace settings provided contextual cues such as organisational culture, behavioural patterns, and non-verbal communication. Combining interview data with observational notes produced the methodological triangulation that Schoch (2020) regards as essential for enhancing credibility. Before launching the main study, the interview guide underwent a pilot test with a small group of practitioners. Feedback from the pilot highlighted questions that needed clearer wording, and revisions were made accordingly. In addition, interviewers completed training that covered ethical protocols, consistent questioning techniques, and effective probing strategies. Simulated interviews and role-play exercises, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2017), sharpened interviewer skills and strengthened data reliability.

3.7 Data Collection Processes

Once the instruments were finalised the researcher followed a structured protocol designed to uphold rigour and consistency. At the outset each participant received a plain-language statement explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. This step fulfilled the informed-consent expectations outlined by Greenspan et al. (2021) and underscored the voluntary character of participation.

3.7.1 Interview Processes

Data collection will span four (4) weeks. Each interview is expected to last between forty-five and sixty minutes, a timing window that enables meaningful dialogue without causing respondent fatigue. Appointments will be scheduled at the convenience of participants, and reminder messages were sent in advance to confirm attendance. In cases when circumstances allow face-to-face conversations, they will takek place in neutral, private settings that minimises distractions and safeguarded confidentiality. Where physical meetings are impractical, video-conferencing platforms will be facilitated for virtual interviews. Technical assistance will be offered to participants unfamiliar with such platforms, thereby widening access.

With explicit consent, every session will be audio-recorded. These recordings will ensure fidelity to participants' words and supported verbatim transcription. After each interview the researcher will checkd transcripts against the audio files to verify accuracy. A coding system will replace personal identifiers with pseudonyms, preserving anonymity. Further, to reinforce trustworthiness the study incorporates member checking. Participants will be allowed to review the transcripts and confirm that the content reflects their intended meaning. In parallel all digital files and hard-copy notes will be stored securely. These steps meet data-protection requirements and reduced the risk of unauthorised access. Finally, interview transcripts will be triangulated with field notes and researcher memos. This cross-source verification will strengthen analytic rigour and produced a more complete representation of the data collected.

3.8 Data Analysis

To interpret the interview material, the study follows the six-phase thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This systematic approach enables the researcher to identify, organise, and explain recurrent patterns relating to public relations practice and misinformation.

The process begins with data familiarisation, which involves repeatedly reading each transcript while revisiting the audio recordings. During this immersion, the researcher writes reflective notes, capturing initial impressions about strategic responses, organisational constraints, and stakeholder pressures. These observations provide the foundation for the next phase. Moving into coding, the researcher works through each transcript line by line, assigning descriptive labels to meaningful data segments. A provisional coding framework emerges and is refined as new insights surface. Manual coding facilitates close engagement with the data, while qualitative software ensures consistency and minimises the risk of missing relevant patterns.

Subsequently, the researcher clusters related codes to develop candidate themes. Thematic maps assist in visualising how preliminary themes relate to each other and to the research questions. At this stage, themes such as crisis preparedness, verification practices, and ethical tension begin to take form. Once provisional themes are developed, the researcher conducts a detailed review to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. Themes lacking sufficient evidence are either merged with stronger ones or removed. A second reviewer assesses the thematic structure independently, which strengthens credibility through external verification.

Following the review, each theme is clearly defined and named. Representative quotations from participants are selected to illustrate key points, and where needed, sub-themes are introduced to capture more specific patterns within broader categories. This detailed structuring deepens the narrative and enhances analytical clarity. Finally, the researcher prepares a comprehensive analytical report that aligns the themes with the study's objectives and connects the findings to established literature on crisis communication and misinformation in public relations. Direct quotations are incorporated to retain the participants' voices and to demonstrate how the findings reflect their lived experiences.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation. This is consistent with the guidance offered by Sieber and Tolich (2013), who emphasise the importance of protecting participants from harm and ensuring that their autonomy is respected throughout the research process. Silverman (2020) similarly underscores the need for ethical mindfulness, particularly in qualitative research where participants often share personal or sensitive information. In line with these ethical standards, all participants received detailed information sheets explaining the purpose of the study, their role in it, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Consent was obtained in writing before interviews commenced, and pseudonyms were used to safeguard identities. Data were stored securely, with access restricted to the researcher, and recordings were deleted after transcription. These procedures were reviewed and approved by the Directorate of Research, Innovation and Development (DRID) at the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC), ensuring full compliance with institutional research ethics protocols.

3.10 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, the concepts of validity and reliability are not approached in the same manner as in quantitative studies but are nonetheless crucial for ensuring research integrity (Coleman, 2022). Validity in this context refers to the credibility and accuracy of the findings, which are achieved through careful design, systematic procedures, and transparent reporting. To enhance validity, the study employs triangulation by gathering data from multiple public relations practitioners across different sectors. This approach helps verify the consistency of perspectives and ensures that conclusions are grounded in a broad and representative set of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking is also applied during the data collection phase. Participants are given the opportunity to clarify and confirm their contributions, which further strengthens the authenticity of the data and reduces the likelihood of misrepresentation (Morse, 2015).

Reliability, on the other hand, is concerned with the consistency and dependability of the research process. This study ensures reliability by clearly outlining each step of the data collection and analysis process, allowing for transparency and traceability. As Nowell et al. (2017) explain, documenting methodological decisions and analytical procedures is essential for demonstrating that the findings are not arbitrary but derived through a coherent and replicable process. Coding decisions are recorded in a detailed log, and thematic development is subjected to peer debriefing to cross-check interpretations. Through these strategies, the researcher maintains rigour and establishes a dependable framework for exploring the study.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter has set out the methodological framework used to investigate how public relations units in Ghana prepare for and respond to misinformation. A qualitative case study design justified the in-depth focus, while purposive and snowball sampling yielded fifteen information-rich interviews. Semi-structured interviewing, supplemented by field observations, generated detailed data that were examined through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure. Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, confidential handling of data, and institutional approval, ensured that the research upheld professional standards.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered for the study. It explains how each research question was addressed and shows how the findings relate to existing scholarship in public relations and misinformation studies. The chapter organises the results into major themes that reflect preparedness, challenges, and opportunities within public relations units. Through this structure, it offers accounts of how institutions respond to misinformation pressures.

To realise this, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants and the institutions they represented. Each participant was assigned a code (RES1 to RES10). These labels made it possible to present clear accounts while ensuring that no individual or organisation could be traced. The use of pseudonyms also supported ethical research standards by safeguarding participants from reputational or professional risk, especially because the topic involved sensitive organisational processes.

4.2 RQ1: How prepared are public relations units to identify, respond to, and manage fake news and misinformation?

This section reviews how institutions detect and verify misleading content, showing uneven preparedness shaped by a mix of structured procedures, partial routines, and improvised monitoring practices.

4.2.1 Monitoring and early detection

The findings showed that monitoring and early detection were essential but uneven across public relations units. The findings reported structured routines that mixed manual checks with digital tools, while others relied on ad hoc scanning driven by instinct. This contrast reflected the tension between calls for institutionalised listening systems (Macnamara, 2022) and evidence of limited investment in systematic monitoring (Roth-Cohen & Avidar, 2022). Within this range, RES4 outlined a more organised approach, noting that "the day basically started with scanning," which involved quick checks of news portals, radio programmes, and trending topics on X and TikTok. When "anything suspicious appeared," especially content mentioning the institution or its leadership, it was "moved immediately to a smaller internal platform" for quick assessment. Although "not perfect," the routine "helped the team pick things before the mainstream media picked them up."

That description reflected a relatively proactive posture that resonated with Jahng et al.'s (2020) observation that practitioners who treated fake news as a deliberate reputational threat tended to prioritise continuous monitoring of both legacy and social media. The reference to an internal discussion platform also resonated with Muhammed and Mathew's (2022) recommendation that organisations needed internal information flows capable of quickly flagging potential misinformation within risk-sensitive contexts.

By contrast, RES7 presented a more constrained scenario in which monitoring occurred largely as a side activity, heavily dependent on personal initiative and the chance encounter of harmful content. The depiction suggested limited institutionalisation of early detection, as the following data segment demonstrated:

> "Most of the time monitoring happened in passing. During breaks or after work, staff scrolled through social media and sometimes stumbled on serious false claims about the organisation. There was no dedicated monitoring desk or officer; the whole process depended on who happened to be online at the

> right time and whether that person considered the information serious enough to report." (RES7, Interview, October, 2025)

That experience contrasted sharply with the more organised practice noted by RES4 and suggested a level of vulnerability that echoed findings by Ayoung et al. (2023) and Media Foundation for West Africa (2025), where institutional actors in Ghana frequently operated without formal structures for tracking misinformative content. The absence of a designated monitoring function also conflicted with recommendations made in disaster and crisis communication studies, which emphasised systematic scanning as essential for early warning and rapid response (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Desai et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the findings revealed a departure from purely structured or purely improvised systems, showing hybrid arrangements where individual vigilance worked in tandem with procedural guidance. RES2 explained that a monitoring schedule existed on paper, but practical implementation relied on staff enthusiasm. The description suggested partial institutionalisation, captured in the following account:

> "Officially monitoring formed part of the communication strategy, so names appeared on a rota indicating who should watch which platforms at what times. In practice, the schedule functioned more as a reminder than a strict system. Staff who enjoyed social media did most of the heavy lifting. Others only checked when workloads were lighter, so detection sometimes depended on personality and interest more than formal assignment." (RES2, Interview, October, 2025)

That narrative reflected a middle ground between the systematic and the improvised. Monitoring existed as a formal expectation yet lacked the resourcing and enforcement that might have translated the schedule into a consistently effective system. Such partial arrangements corresponded with Lambert et al.'s (2024) discussion of "watchful waiting" strategies, where organisations kept an eye on emerging narratives without committing substantial resources to full-scale surveillance. The data also was consistent with Mehta et al.'s (2021) observation that crisis misinformation management frequently depended on discretionary efforts rather than fully embedded routines.

Extending these observations, the data revealed contextual pressures that continued to undermine monitoring capacity. RES9 pointed to "staff shortages and competing communication tasks", noting that campaign planning and routine publicity regularly displaced early detection. The participant explained that leadership prioritised visible activities because "press releases, media appearances, and social media campaigns" could be easily reported upwards. In contrast, early detection work such as "quietly watching hashtags" or checking community WhatsApp groups did not appear as tangible output. As the RES9 put it, staff therefore invested energy in what could "be measured and praised," even though more silent scanning might have prevented several crises.

That experience reflected arguments advanced by Valentini (2021) and Macnamara (2022), who noted that symbolic, outward-facing activities frequently received more recognition than listening-oriented tasks, despite the latter's importance for strategic communication. The comment also echoed Fjällhed's (2021) account of public diplomacy practitioners who struggled to secure institutional support for systematic monitoring of false stories targeting national reputation.

Despite such constraints, the data also revealed inventive adaptations. RES6 emphasised how informal networks with journalists and civil society actors functioned as early warning channels. When misleading content began circulating, contacts in newsrooms or advocacy groups sometimes alerted the unit, allowing pre-emptive engagement. That experience resonated with Agenda-Building Theory, which foregrounded source–media relationships in shaping issue visibility (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990; Kim et al., 2002). In a similar vein, RES1 explained that "professional WhatsApp and Telegram groups" occasionally served as spaces where practitioners shared screenshots of suspicious posts, thereby extending monitoring beyond the organisational boundary.

Building on earlier points, the findings underscored the value of networked vigilance, reflecting arguments by Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023) and Ganesh and Bright (2020) that cross-actor collaboration is crucial as misinformation spreads quickly across platforms. At the same time, the accounts showed gaps in technological capacity, with limited use of tools such as automated dashboards or machine learning systems (Gradoń et al., 2021; Karinshak & Jin, 2023). As a whole, the experiences of RES1, RES2, RES4, RES6, RES7, and RES9 suggested a spectrum of monitoring practices, from structured routines to sporadic, individually driven efforts, echoing concerns by Nutsugah et al. (2025). From a theoretical view, SCCT offered the stronger explanation because it stresses early recognition and timely assessment of potential crises (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). By contrast, the more improvised monitoring patterns did not align well with these expectations. Although Agenda-Building Theory sheds light on how professional networks help surface issues (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008), the core issue here was the capacity to detect problematic narratives in the first place, making SCCT the more suitable frame.

4.2.2 Verification systems

The findings revealed that verification systems constituted another key dimension of preparedness, closely linked to but distinct from monitoring and early detection. Whereas monitoring concerned the identification of potentially problematic content, verification concerned the processes used to assess accuracy, confirm facts, and decide whether communicative intervention was warranted. The data reported a variety of practices, ranging from structured multi-step checks to informal consultations with trusted insiders. These accounts reflected, and sometimes challenged, academic arguments that called for institutionalised verification protocols as a central pillar of misinformation management (Jahng et al., 2020; Vraga & Bode, 2023; Lambert et al., 2024).

RES3 describes a comparatively elaborate system in which any suspicious content triggered a defined sequence of checks. The account emphasised cross-departmental collaboration and documentary evidence, as captured below:

> "When a story or post looked suspicious the communication unit did not rush out immediately. First the team traced the original source, grabbed screenshots, and logged the link. Then colleagues in legal, operations, or the relevant technical department confirmed whether the claims were grounded in any real incident. No statement went out unless those units had completed that verification form. That approach sometimes slowed the process, but at least messages were consistent and defensible." (RES3, Interview, October, 2025)

That practice reflected the emphasis on careful fact-checking found in health and crisis communication scholarship, where verification systematically drew on internal expertise before external engagement (Desai et al., 2022; Omojunikanbi, 2022). The reference to a verification form and cross-unit collaboration echoed recommendations by Gradoń et al. (2021) and Tsegyu et al. (2024), who advocated integrated information management systems that linked communication units with technical and policy specialists.

In contrast, RES10 reported a far looser arrangement, where verification depended mainly on senior leadership's intuitive judgment. The description pointed to a centralised yet opaque process:

> "Whenever something negative appeared, staff sent the link to the head of communication and sometimes to the chief executive. Those officers then decided whether the story looked fake or exaggerated, usually based on personal knowledge and conversations with a few close advisers. There was no structured checklist or standard timeline. If the leaders felt unconvinced that the content posed danger, the matter quietly died there without further investigation." (RES10, Interview, October, 2025)

That pattern raised questions about preparedness, because reliance on informal judgment risked both underreaction and overreaction. The account contrasted sharply with SCCT's emphasis on systematic appraisal of crisis responsibility and intensification factors (Coombs, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of clearly documented procedures conflicted with calls in the literature for transparent, repeatable verification processes to avoid arbitrary decision-making (Jahng et al., 2020; Karinshak & Jin, 2023). The experience presented by RES10 therefore reflected a vulnerability that contradicted the more rigorous approaches outlined by RES3.

RES5 offered another perspective, describing a collaborative yet time-pressured model. Verification involved simultaneous checking across several fronts because misinformation tended to evolve rapidly, especially on social media. The respondent explained that staff often had to balance speed with accuracy:

> "Verification usually happened under serious time pressure. While some team members worked on checking facts with internal departments, others called journalists, industry associations, or community leaders to see whether the story had spread there. Decisions about whether to issue a clarification or rely on quiet engagement had to be made within hours. That pace meant the process could not always go as deep as desired, but waiting longer risked letting the falsehood dominate the space." (RES5, Interview, October, 2025)

That account resounded the dilemma documented in several studies, where practitioners struggled to reconcile the need for rapid response with the need for rigorous verification (Mehta et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2024). The balance between speed and accuracy also reflected Lewandowsky et al.'s (2012, 2023) concern that delays in correction allowed misinformation to harden in public memory, while rushed responses carried the risk of errors that further undermined credibility.

In some organisations, verification drew heavily on external fact-checking bodies and media partners. Similarly, RES8 observed how the unit consulted independent fact-checking organisations whenever misinformation touched politically sensitive issues. The participant noted that these groups offered "external confirmation" that strengthened the institution's position and ensured that corrections did not appear self-serving. This collaboration aimed to bolster credibility by linking institutional statements to "trusted third-party validation." Such arrangements aligned with Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) and Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones's

(2022) argument that multi-stakeholder coalitions provide a stronger foundation for countering disinformation within complex media ecosystems.

In addition, the data highlighted resource-related constraints that weakened verification, with RES1 noting that the absence of specialised data tools limited the team's ability to trace source networks or detect coordinated manipulation. The participant explained that staff relied on "manual checking of screenshots and URLs," a slow process that echoed concerns raised by Kreps et al. (2022) and Gradoń et al. (2021) about how sophisticated, AI-generated misinformation outpaces institutions dependent on manual methods. RES6 reinforced these challenges by pointing to weak internal cooperation, observing that verification required input from departments that did not prioritise communication work and often responded with "delays" or "evasive answers," especially when the misinformation involved sensitive internal issues, further undermining timely verification. That pattern appeared similar to Barnoy's (2022) description of strained public relations–journalist relations under conditions of epistemic crisis and extended the concern to internal organisational relations, where gatekeeping and defensive behaviour could obstruct timely verification.

At the same time, the findings suggested that verification processes became more structured as institutions confronted repeated crises. RES2 explained that "experiences with damaging rumours" had compelled the organisation to formalise protocols. The participant noted that recurrent exposure to misinformation accelerated learning and institutionalisation. Comparable observations appeared in Muhammed and Mathew's (2022) review of misinformation in disaster settings, where repeated exposure fostered more refined processes, even under resource constraints.

A further dimension involved ethical reflection. RES9 emphasised that fact-checking sometimes revealed internal shortcomings rather than purely external falsehoods. In such instances, the verification process forced the institution to confront uncomfortable truths about service delivery or governance, rather than simply rebutting external misinformation. That experience resonated with Edwards' (2021) argument that public relations practice needed to address its own complicity in shaping distorted narratives, not only to contest external disinformation. The data therefore suggested that verification systems had the potential to function as internal accountability mechanisms as well as defensive tools.

Considered collectively, the accounts from RES1, RES2, RES3, RES5, RES6, RES8, RES9, and RES10 suggested a varied landscape. Some organisations had moved toward codified procedures involving documented forms, cross-unit collaboration, and engagement with external fact-checkers, reflecting recommendations in public relations and communication research (Jahng et al., 2020; Tsegyu et al., 2024; Desai et al., 2022). Other organisations still depended heavily on discretionary judgments by senior officials, informal consultations, and improvised checking, which contradicted the structured verification frameworks advocated in the literature (Gradoń et al., 2021; Karinshak & Jin, 2023; Vraga & Bode, 2023).

The theoretical framing offered further insight into these patterns. SCCT underscored the necessity of carefully assessing the nature and source of potentially crisis-inducing information before selecting response strategies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2015). Verification systems such as those pointed out by RES3 and RES5 reflected that logic, because multi-step fact-checking, cross-departmental collaboration, and documentation created a basis for determining perceived responsibility and for choosing either corrective, adaptive, or accommodative responses. Agenda-Building Theory, by contrast, drew attention to how verified information then entered media and policy agendas through strategic communication (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Kim et al., 2002). However, the findings in this subtheme concentrated primarily on the internal process of establishing factual accuracy and institutional understanding prior to outward communication.

Consequently, SCCT provided the more convincing theoretical match for the observed verification practices, because the core concern involved the evaluation of situational factors and reputational risk under conditions of informational uncertainty. Where verification remained weak or highly personalised, as in the account of RES10, the data illustrated how theoretical guidance had not yet translated into practice. Where verification appeared more structured and collaborative, as in the account of RES3, the findings reflected a closer relationship with SCCT's emphasis on systematic crisis appraisal. The degree of preparedness displayed by public relations units in relation to misinformation therefore depended heavily on the maturity and robustness of verification systems, which either strengthened or undermined the capacity to respond credibly once false narratives surfaced.

4.3 RQ2: What challenges do public relations practitioners face in countering misinformation?

This section examines the obstacles that weaken organisational responses, highlighting how bureaucratic delays, limited resources, and audience distrust collectively undermine timely and credible misinformation management.

4.3.1 Structural and bureaucratic limits

The findings also showed that structural and bureaucratic constraints strongly shaped how practitioners managed misinformation, as institutional procedures, approval hierarchies, and rigid systems often slowed both decision-making and strategic coherence. These patterns reflected wider arguments in communication governance research that bureaucratic structures can stabilise processes yet hinder rapid action in volatile information environments (Heath, 2013; Macnamara, 2022; Valentini, 2021), and echoed studies highlighting how delays allow false narratives to spread more easily in fast-moving digital spaces (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Mehta et al., 2021).

The data repeatedly noted these pressures, with several describing how routine interventions became complicated by procedural bottlenecks. RES4, for example, explained that even simple clarifications stalled because the unit depended on "multiple administrative signatures" before issuing any statement, a situation consistent with Yang and Kim's (2024) observation that heavily tiered structures weaken organisational responsiveness. RES4 further described the experience in the following way:

> "In many situations the team detected false information early, but the process that followed made things difficult. A draft statement required clearance from the departmental head, then from the legal office, and finally from the chief executive. Each office had its own priorities, and because these individuals were often occupied with other obligations, the communication unit sometimes waited hours before receiving approval. By the time authorisation arrived, the false story had already gained additional attention on social media, making the organisation appear slow or uninterested in addressing the matter." (RES4, Interview, October, 2025)

That account reflected the bureaucratic delays clarified by Lambert et al. (2024), who noted that organisations frequently underestimated the operational consequences of prolonged administrative processes, especially when dealing with fast-moving misinformation. The description also demonstrated the tension documented by Fjällhed (2021), who explained that although bureaucratic procedures were intended to preserve accuracy, they often clashed with the rapid response expectations generated by contemporary media logics.

In contrast to RES4's emphasis on procedural bottlenecks, RES7 set out a different but equally challenging bureaucratic structure. In that organisation, communication decisions required not only formal approval but also political balancing between influential internal actors. This created hesitancy and strategic inconsistency, particularly when sensitive issues were involved. The complexity illustrated the organisational politics highlighted in studies of administrative communication, where authors argued that internal power struggles frequently shaped, delayed, or redirected communication decisions (Edwards, 2021; Young & Welch, 2022). RES7 stated:

> "The challenge was not limited to signatures. Sometimes different departments insisted on reviewing the draft themselves because of the possible political implications. When the misinformation involved issues that certain leaders considered sensitive, they preferred silence or a delayed response to avoid internal conflict. The communication unit found itself waiting for decisions that depended not on the facts of the misinformation but on how internal stakeholders interpreted the political atmosphere at the moment." (RES7, Interview, October, 2025)

This experience reflected how bureaucratic cultures influenced communication outcomes, a pattern consistent with Omojunikanbi's (2022) argument that misinformation management required decisiveness and transparency, both of which weakened under politically cautious administrative structures. It also was compatible with the challenges documented by Nutsugah et al. (2025), where public institutions in Ghana struggled to respond quickly to misinformative content due to internal political sensitivities.

Further complexity emerged in the account shared by RES3, who illustrated the bureaucratic system as hierarchical rather than collaborative. Instead of encouraging cross-departmental teamwork, the structure concentrated communication authority at the top, limiting input from technical experts who possessed relevant knowledge. This observation reflected concerns raised by Gradoń et al. (2021) and Carla and Owusu-Ansah (2023), who argued that misinformation often required multidisciplinary verification, making highly centralised systems ineffective. RES3 explained:

> "Even though the information needed verification from technical units, communication decisions were often made before consulting those experts. Management preferred to maintain control, so the communication team received instructions without the opportunity to cross-check technical details with departments that understood the issue better. This approach created the risk of miscommunication because messages were drafted based on incomplete or outdated information." (RES3, Interview, October, 2025)

This description reflected the challenges analysed by Mehta et al. (2021), who showed that crisis misinformation required integrated organisational communication models rather than top-down decision-making. The absence of a collaborative structure contradicted scholarly recommendations for shared information systems that supported verification, coordination, and responsiveness (Tsegyu et al., 2024; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The findings also showed that although many participants saw bureaucratic structures as restrictive, some pointed out that these same systems could occasionally enhance accountability. RES6 explained that although the approval process took time, the structure ensured message consistency and reduced the likelihood of errors. This perspective echoed Coombs' (2015) argument that accuracy and consistency were central components of crisis communication credibility. Yet, even in such cases, timeliness remained a problem, illustrating the delicate balance between accuracy and speed also articulated by Lambert et al. (2024). RES6 noted:

> "The time it took to approve a communication product helped the organisation avoid mistakes because different departments reviewed the message carefully. However, the same process slowed the team during urgent situations. This sometimes left the organisation appearing reactive rather than proactive, even though the final communication was accurate and well-tested." (RES6, Interview, October, 2025)

This observation reflected the dual role of bureaucratic systems conveyed by Mehta et al. (2021), where procedures strengthened reliability but simultaneously undermined responsiveness.

In addition, the data indicated that bureaucratic procedures both delayed communication and influenced the level of seriousness attached to misinformation. RES10 explained that in certain cases, leadership expected the communication team to follow rigid protocols even when the situation demanded swift action. This pattern echoed arguments presented by Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones (2022), who noted that procedural rigidity often intensified institutional vulnerability to false narratives. RES10 stated:

> "In some cases leadership insisted that the communication unit follow the usual chain of command even though the misinformation was spreading rapidly. This meant submitting drafts, waiting for comments, making

> revisions, and resubmitting. While such procedures worked well for planned communication campaigns, they did not match the speed required to address fast-moving fake news. The team found itself following protocols designed for slow processes while dealing with an issue that developed within minutes." (RES10, Interview, October, 2025)

This account tracked closely with the concerns highlighted by Lewandowsky et al. (2023), who emphasised that misinformation gained persuasive strength when institutions reacted slowly.

Considering the findings collectively, structural and bureaucratic constraints mirrored patterns identified throughout crisis communication literature. The dependence on rigid procedures reflected the challenges noted by Page et al. (2023), who argued that crisis contexts required flexible decision-making. The delays and internal politics described by participants were consistent with Heath's (2013) depiction of bureaucratic communication cultures, where control and caution overshadowed responsiveness. The findings also reflected how institutional procedures sometimes contradicted the anticipatory posture advocated by crisis researchers such as Boman (2021) and Coombs (2007).

In theoretical terms, the patterns observed followed the pattern of key propositions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. SCCT emphasised that crisis response effectiveness depended on timely situation assessment and strategic intervention (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Structural and bureaucratic limits directly hindered both timeliness and strategic clarity. Although Agenda-Building Theory offered insights into how public relations practitioners sought to influence media narratives, the constraints conveyed in the findings related more to internal organisational processes than to external agenda negotiation. Consequently, SCCT provided the more convincing frame for interpreting how structural systems shaped practitioners' capacity to counter misinformation because the theory underscored that delayed responses weakened stakeholder trust and reduced message credibility.

4.3.2 Resource and technological gaps

The findings demonstrated that resource and technological limitations substantially shaped how public relations practitioners navigated misinformation pressures. The data suggested that organisations experienced uneven technological preparedness, limited budgets, and outdated monitoring tools, which collectively weakened institutional response capacity. These patterns reflected arguments advanced in communication infrastructure research, where scholars described the intersection of resource deprivation and digital acceleration as a persistent barrier for organisations attempting to manage fast-moving misinformation (Schiffrin & Cunliffe-Jones, 2022; Kreps et al., 2022; Lambert et al., 2024). The data accounts also ran parallel to the observations of Babatunde (2022) and Ayoung et al. (2023), who explained that inadequate technological readiness frequently placed practitioners at a strategic disadvantage in information environments defined by speed, fragmentation, and algorithmic amplification.

The data further revealed that gaps in digital tools remained a consistent barrier. RES5 explained that monitoring and verification depended heavily on manual searches due to the absence of automated dashboards capable of detecting coordinated false narratives. This description reflected concerns expressed in scholarship about the widening gap between sophisticated misinformation systems and the basic tools available to many communication units (Ganesh & Bright, 2020; Gradoń et al., 2021). As RES5 mentioned:

> "The team often found itself copying links into search bars and scrolling through endless timelines because there was no analytic software to track conversations. The absence of an automated system meant that patterns were detected slowly, sometimes only after falsehoods had gained traction. Staff tried to compensate with long hours, but the sheer volume of information made it impossible to monitor everything effectively, especially during politically sensitive periods when misinformation increased sharply." (RES5, Interview, October, 2025)

The challenges recounted was in harmony with the arguments presented by Karinshak and Jin (2023), who noted that misinformation evolved rapidly due to AI-driven content production, making manual efforts insufficient for effective detection and analysis.

At a broader level, the findings revealed clear financial pressures that held back organisations from acquiring or sustaining the digital tools they needed. RES2 explained that the communication unit had recommended subscriptions to monitoring software and fact-checking databases, but these requests were repeatedly deferred due to competing budget priorities. This reflected broader analyses in public sector communication research, where scholars explained that resource scarcity often forced institutions to prioritise visible communication outputs over foundational technological infrastructure (Valentini, 2021; Macnamara, 2022). RES2 noted:

> "Budget discussions always prioritised activities that leadership considered more essential, such as public events and media engagements. Tools like monitoring software were described as expensive luxuries. Because of that, the team depended on free trials or outdated versions that lacked important features. Even when the need for such tools became clear during misinformation surges, leadership argued that funds could not be found in the middle of the fiscal year." (RES2, Interview, October, 2025)

This account reflected the findings of Omojunikanbi (2022) and Tsegyu et al. (2024), who explained that budgetary neglect often weakened institutional vigilance and delayed effective intervention.

Furthermore, the data showed that limited human resources intensified existing technological constraints. RES1 explained that although the organisation had a communication team, only a small number possessed the technical competence needed to interpret digital analytics or verify manipulated content. This dependence on individual skills rather than institutional systems echoed arguments made by Mehta et al. (2021), who stated that institutional reliance on a few digitally literate staff created operational vulnerabilities. RES1 stated:

> "Only a couple of officers could interpret analytics or use advanced search functions. When those individuals were unavailable, the remaining staff

> struggled to track misinformation effectively. The organisation had not invested in training that would have spread these skills across the team, so institutional readiness depended on personal interest rather than collective capacity, which created inconsistency during high-pressure moments." (RES1, Interview, October, 2025)

These observations reflected the deficiencies outlined by Ayoung et al. (2023), who found that uneven digital literacy within communication units undermined institutional capacity to manage digital misinformation.

In addition, the data showed that technological gaps extended beyond monitoring tools, with RES8 highlighting the absence of digital archival systems needed to retrieve past messages and verify recurring historical claims that often resurfaced as misinformation. This challenge converged with arguments presented by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who indicated that misinformation often recycled old content, making archival systems essential for understanding the history and context of circulating narratives. RES8 explained:

> "Several misinformation cases involved recycled stories from previous years. Without a proper digital archive, the team struggled to check what had been said earlier, which slowed verification. Staff sometimes depended on memory or informal notes, which were not always accurate. A central archive would have saved time, but the organisation had never invested in such a system." (RES8, Interview, October, 2025)

This issue reflected concerns documented by Babatunde (2022) and Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023), who highlighted archival weaknesses as a recurring challenge in misinformation management.

Some practitioners specified technology gaps rooted in infrastructural limitations such as unstable internet connectivity or outdated devices. RES7 remarked that slow internet speeds and limited bandwidth undermined the team's ability to conduct timely monitoring and verification. This experience mirrored studies conducted in developing contexts, which cited infrastructural instability as a major impediment to effective communication work (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2025; Schiffrin & Cunliffe-Jones, 2022). RES7 described:

> "Internet connectivity was sometimes slow during peak hours. When misinformation began spreading quickly, the team struggled to load videos,

> open links, or fact-check images because pages did not load properly. Staff restarted devices repeatedly, and this slowed the verification process even further. These problems sounded minor until a crisis occurred, at which point every minute mattered." (RES7, Interview, October, 2025)

This reflected arguments by Ganesh and Bright (2020), who explained that technological fragility compounded institutional vulnerability to disinformation.

Despite these constraints, the data revealed a range of creative improvisations. RES6 noted that when institutional tools proved inadequate, staff used personal devices, private data bundles, and unofficial applications to perform verification tasks. While these practices demonstrated professional commitment, they also illustrated institutional gaps, as scholars such as Gradoń et al. (2021) and Kreps et al. (2022) explained that informal technological patchwork solutions risked inconsistency and exposed institutions to security vulnerabilities. RES6 explained that these improvised practices were unpredictable and unsustainable during extended crises.

The data collectively reflected a set of challenges that closely showed similarity to academic discussions about digital inequalities and resource scarcity in crisis communication contexts. The lack of adequate monitoring technologies contradicted recommendations by Lambert et al. (2024) and Lewandowsky et al. (2023), who emphasised that rapid misinformation cycles required equally rapid detection mechanisms. Furthermore, the data reflected Mehta et al.'s (2021) argument that misinformation management required not only human expertise but also technologically supported systems capable of responding to the volume and velocity of digital falsehoods.

The theoretical implications of the findings suggested a strong connection to Situational Crisis Communication Theory. SCCT emphasised the importance of timely recognition and accurate assessment of crisis signals (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Resource and technological gaps directly weakened both recognition and assessment capacities, making SCCT a more fitting interpretive frame than Agenda-Building Theory for this subtheme.

Although Agenda-Building Theory examined how communicators influenced issue visibility, the challenges described here centred on internal capacity deficiencies that undermined the ability to detect and verify misinformation in the first place. Consequently, SCCT provided a more compelling explanation for how technological and resource constraints hindered timely strategic decision-making.

4.3.3 Public and media resistance

The findings demonstrated that public and media resistance constituted a significant challenge for public relations practitioners attempting to counter misinformation. The evidence pointed to a communication environment in which audiences exhibited scepticism, polarisation, and hostility toward institutional statements, even when such statements were grounded in evidence. These dynamics reflected scholarship indicating that misinformation persisted not only because of false content but also because of affective, social, and ideological commitments that shaped audience reception (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Vraga & Bode, 2023). The findings also reflected observations by Ganesh and Bright (2020), who argued that distrust in institutions often amplified the persuasive force of misinformation.

Even so, the data pointed to public scepticism as a major obstacle. RES3 explained that even when the organisation corrected false stories, certain audience groups dismissed official statements as propaganda or public relations spin. This corresponded to arguments in the literature, where researchers explained that misinformation correction often failed when audience mistrust overshadowed factual content (Lewandowsky et al., 2023; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). RES3 stated:

> “There were people who no longer believed anything that came from the institution. Even when the team provided evidence and explained the matter clearly, those individuals insisted that the organisation was simply covering up wrongdoing. Their reactions made it difficult to counter false stories

> because the correction itself became another target of suspicion, especially during politically sensitive moments." (RES3, Interview, October, 2025).

In addition, the findings showed resistance from media actors who circulated misinformation without adequate verification. RES9 noted that certain media outlets prioritised speed over accuracy, often publishing unverified claims that later required extensive institutional correction. This pattern reflected academic discussions on the pressures of contemporary news production, where competition for attention encouraged rapid dissemination at the expense of verification (Tandoc et al., 2018; Chakravartty & Roy, 2022). RES9 remarked:

> "Some media houses preferred being first rather than being accurate. They picked up stories from social media without checking with the institution, and once the story appeared on their platforms it became harder to correct. Even after issuing clarifications, some journalists refused to update their stories, which left the false version circulating for days and sometimes weeks." (RES9, Interview, October, 2025)

This description reflected concerns raised by scholars such as McDevitt (2021) and Ali et al. (2020), who explained that newsroom resource constraints and commercial pressures frequently resulted in inadequate verification practices.

The findings further revealed acute resistance during politically charged periods, when misinformation aligned with partisan narratives. RES10 noted that during such moments, attempts to correct misleading content triggered accusations of bias, even when the organisation presented documentary evidence. This reflected scholarship suggesting that partisan identity often shaped audience interpretation of factual corrections (Flynn et al., 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). RES10 mentioned this dynamic in detail:

> "During election periods or other political controversies, even factual statements triggered backlash. People accused the institution of taking sides or trying to manipulate public opinion. The team sometimes avoided issuing corrections immediately because every post attracted hostile comments, threats, or long threads misrepresenting the institution's intentions. It became clear that the resistance came not from the message itself but from the political meaning people attached to it." (RES10, Interview, October, 2025)

This perspective echoed discussions in the literature where scholars explained that misinformation correction became more difficult when audiences interpreted communication through ideological lenses rather than factual content (Vraga & Bode, 2023; Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Additionally, the findings showed emotional resistance among members of the public who favoured sensational narratives over official explanations. RES4 noted that certain false stories spread quickly because they were dramatic, emotionally charged, or entertaining. This experience reflected arguments by Tandoc et al. (2018) and Weeks (2015), who explained that misinformation gained traction partly because emotional content increased engagement. RES4 stated:

> "Some misinformation spread faster simply because it was exciting. People shared stories before checking because the content was sensational. When the institution posted factual explanations, those corrections received far less engagement. The team eventually realised that truth lacked the emotional appeal that made false stories travel so widely." (RES4, Interview, October, 2025)

This observation reflected the broader scholarship indicating that emotional salience influenced sharing behaviour, making factual corrections less compelling in digital environments (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Beyond public and media resistance, the data revealed challenges in engaging influencers who helped spread misleading content. RES8 explained that "some high-profile social media users" circulated misleading stories without verifying their accuracy, and when contacted by the institution, these individuals refused to retract the content. This reflected literature discussing the role of digital influencers in accelerating misinformation cycles (Mourão & Robertson, 2019). RES8 again indicated that "influencer resistance created reputational challenges because their large followings amplified false narratives beyond the institution's immediate communication reach".

The findings reflect a communication environment shaped by distrust, polarisation, and emotional engagement, all of which complicated misinformation correction. These patterns aligned with arguments by scholars such as Kreps et al. (2022) and Lambert et al. (2024), who explained that institutional responses often failed not because they were inaccurate but because audience perceptions, media incentives, and ideological commitments shaped message reception. In effect, the data revealed that public and media resistance consistently blunted efforts to re-establish clarity, even in situations where accurate information was easily accessible.

The theoretical implications of these findings indicated that Agenda-Building Theory offered a particularly relevant interpretive frame. Unlike structural or technological challenges, which were more consistent with SCCT's focus on internal preparedness, the challenges described in this subtheme centred on external audience dynamics and media behaviours. Agenda-Building Theory emphasised that communication actors negotiated influence with audiences, journalists, and digital intermediaries (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Kim et al., 2002). The evidence revealed that this resistance limited institutional influence over narrative visibility in contexts shaped by audience distrust and strong media pressures. Consequently, Agenda-Building Theory provided a compelling explanation for how public and media resistance constrained institutional attempts to correct misinformation because it emphasised the contested nature of message prominence and credibility in contemporary information environments.

4.4 RQ3: What opportunities existed for public relations units to enhance their role in misinformation management?

This section outlines avenues for strengthening institutional capacity, emphasising the value of targeted training, strategic partnerships, and improved digital tools for enhancing detection, verification, and coordinated action.

4.4.1 Capacity Building and Professional Development

The findings further indicated that capacity building and professional development offered important opportunities for strengthening institutional responses to misinformation. The data highlighted the need for sustained learning systems that build analytical competence, digital literacy, and ethical judgement, echoing Valentini (2021) and Macnamara's (2022) view that rapid digital change demands ongoing skill development. This emphasis also aligned with Lewandowsky et al. (2023) and Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who argued that structured understanding of misinformation lifecycles improves institutional resilience. Several participants added that professional development could shift organisational culture itself. RES6, for instance, noted that formalised skills training would reduce dependence on a small group of digitally adept staff, reflecting concerns raised by Ayoung et al. (2023) about uneven digital competence weakening coordinated institutional responses. As RES6 detailed:

> "If the organisation invested in regular skills training, the communication team would not depend on one or two people to interpret analytics or verify images. Such training would spread competencies more evenly and ensure that no matter who was on duty, the unit could detect and correct harmful stories quickly. The absence of training made the team reactive, but proper development could create a more confident and technically grounded workforce." (RES6, Interview, October, 2025)

Extending this point, the data indicated that capacity building played a vital role in strengthening analytical judgement, particularly when practitioners confronted more sophisticated forms of misinformation. RES3 noted that training workshops that combined digital forensics, fact-checking, and ethical reasoning could help practitioners understand not only the content of misinformation but its structural origins. This description reinforced Tsegyu et al. (2024), who emphasised the importance of reflective professionalisation in strengthening institutional preparedness. RES3 explained:

> "Training that reviewed manipulated videos, recycled narratives, and coordinated disinformation networks helped staff understand how falsehoods were produced. It also encouraged critical thinking rather than automatic

> reactions. Such programmes showed the team that misinformation was rarely random; it often had patterns that could be studied and anticipated." (RES3, Interview, October, 2025)

Furthermore, the data suggested that some participants viewed capacity building as having strategic implications for institutional decision-making. RES4 stated that training created opportunities for more coherent crisis responses because staff gained confidence in presenting evidence-based assessments to leadership. This observation reflected Mehta et al. (2021), who noted that well-trained teams were better positioned to negotiate strategic authority within hierarchical communication systems. RES4 indicated:

> "After attending specialised workshops, the team became more assertive when briefing management. Staff could explain why fast intervention mattered and could provide evidence to support recommendations. This strengthened the unit's influence because leadership appreciated the clarity and competence that came with these explanations." (RES4, Interview, October, 2025)

Across the findings, capacity building emerged as an opportunity that mirrored the anticipatory posture documented in Situational Crisis Communication Theory. SCCT stressed the value of pre-crisis preparation and knowledge acquisition (Coombs, 2007), and the data reflected this reasoning. Training did not only enhance technical fluency but also strengthened institutional readiness for rapid, evidence-based intervention.

4.4.2 Partnerships and Collaboration

The findings portrayed partnerships and collaboration as significant opportunities for reinforcing institutional capacity in misinformation management. The data described inter-agency coordination, media partnerships, academic collaborations, and engagements with civil society groups as avenues for expanding resources, knowledge, and strategic influence. These accounts reflected literature by Gradoń et al. (2021) and Lambert et al. (2024), who emphasised that misinformation often transcended institutional boundaries and therefore required multi-sector cooperation.

Additionally, the data showed that some participants stressed the importance of media partnerships. RES8 explained that forging strong relationships with journalists helped accelerate verification and correction processes. This perspective agreed with Tandoc et al. (2018), who emphasised media–institution collaboration as crucial for ensuring that corrections received adequate visibility. RES8 stated:

> "When journalists trusted the institution, they checked with the communication team before publishing stories that sounded suspicious. These relationships prevented misinformation from spreading, and when false stories did appear, journalists who valued the partnership updated their articles quickly. Such cooperation reduced the time the institution spent managing unnecessary crises." (RES8, Interview, October, 2025)

In addition, the findings pointed to cross-sector partnerships with fact-checking organisations. To illustrate this, RES1 explained that collaborations with independent fact-checkers provided third-party verification that enhanced the credibility of institutional corrections. This reflected arguments by Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones (2022), who argued that external fact-checkers strengthened the legitimacy of institutional communication. RES1 explained:

> "Working with recognised fact-checking groups helped the institution because their confirmation of the facts carried weight. When they reviewed a story and declared it false, the public reacted differently than when the institution made the correction alone. Their involvement reduced accusations of bias and made the correction process more credible." (RES1, Interview, October, 2025)

Collaboration also extended to technical ministries and specialised agencies. RES9 described partnerships with technical departments that provided expert knowledge during verification. This resembled Mehta et al.'s (2021) argument that multidisciplinary collaboration strengthened crisis decision-making. RES9 noted:

> "Sometimes misinformation involved technical questions beyond the communication team's expertise. When the team collaborated with specialised departments, the verification process became more accurate. These partnerships enabled the communication unit to issue detailed and reliable corrections supported by expert explanation." (RES9, Interview, October, 2025)

Partnerships with academic institutions also emerged as an opportunity. RES7 explained that universities offered training, analytical tools, and research support that improved institutional literacy on misinformation trends. This perspective reflected Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023), who noted that academic–institution collaboration enhanced evidence-based communication practice.

The findings collectively reflected the propositions of Agenda-Building Theory. The theory emphasized that institutional influence depended on strategic relationships with actors who shaped public attention (Kim et al., 2002). Partnerships enabled institutions to extend their communicative reach, strengthen message legitimacy, and negotiate visibility. Thus, collaborative networks served as opportunities for enhancing institutional influence in contested information environments.

4.4.3 Adoption of Digital Tools

The findings demonstrated that the adoption of digital tools constituted a major opportunity for improving institutional readiness for misinformation management. The findings showed that opportunities created by analytic dashboards, automated monitoring software, digital verification tools, and archival systems. These descriptions resounded with arguments advanced by Ganesh and Bright (2020) and Lewandowsky et al. (2023), who noted that misinformation systems were technologically sophisticated and therefore required equally advanced tools for detection and response.

Moreover, the data indicated that some participants identified advanced monitoring software as essential for improving institutional vigilance. RES2 explained that automated systems capable of tracking keywords, hashtags, and content clusters would reduce manual workload and increase response speed. This reflected Lambert et al. (2024), who argued that automated systems strengthened early detection processes. RES2 stated:

> "If the institution invested in monitoring software, the team could detect false stories much earlier. Automated alerts would allow staff to intervene before misinformation gained widespread attention. Manual searching took too long and sometimes caused the team to miss important developments." (RES2, Interview, October, 2025)

In addition, the data showed that verification tools such as reverse-image search applications, deepfake detectors, and metadata analysers created important opportunities for improving accuracy and strengthening institutional response. RES10 noted that these tools could significantly enhance accuracy during verification. This view reflected Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who emphasised that technical verification tools were essential for navigating complex misinformation ecosystems. RES10 indicated:

> "Digital verification tools could help the team examine images, videos, and documents more accurately. Such tools would expose manipulated content, making it easier to debunk stories confidently. Without them the team depended on slow, manual checks that were not always reliable." (RES10, Interview, October, 2025)

Moreover, the evidence revealed openings tied to digital archival systems. In support of this, RES4 explained that archives made it easier to retrieve earlier statements, speeding up verification when misinformation drew on recycled narratives. This reflected Babatunde (2022) and Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023), who emphasised that digital archiving strengthened institutional memory.

Furthermore, the findings showed differing perspectives, with AI-powered tools viewed as offering new opportunities but also raising questions about their practicality. RES5 noted that "AI could predict misinformation trends, identify coordinated networks, and map the origins of false narratives". This perspective mirrored Karinshak and Jin (2023), who observed that AI-assisted analysis improved pattern detection.

Collectively, the findings reflected core propositions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. The theory emphasised that effective crisis management depended on timely assessment and strategic intervention (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Digital tools strengthened early detection, supported verification, and enabled institutions to intervene before false narratives solidified. While Agenda-Building Theory provided insight into how institutions negotiated influence with media actors and audiences, the opportunities explained in this subtheme centred primarily on internal enhancement of technical capacity. Consequently, SCCT offered the more compelling interpretive lens because it emphasised operational preparedness, anticipatory capability, and the timely execution of corrective action as determinants of communication effectiveness.

4.5 Chapter Summary

The chapter examined how public relations units prepared for misinformation, the challenges they faced, and the opportunities that supported better response systems. The analysis showed that monitoring and verification practices differed across institutions, with some adopting structured routines and others depending on informal or individually driven efforts. It also showed that bureaucratic delays, resource limitations, weak digital capacity, and audience resistance made response work more difficult. At the same time, the review highlighted opportunities tied to capacity building, partnerships, and digital tool adoption. Together, the findings illustrated a mixed landscape in which preparedness, constraints, and emerging possibilities shaped institutional responses to misinformation.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter brings the study to its concluding stage. It offers a clear summary of the main elements of the research and highlights the key findings that emerged from the data. It then draws conclusions that speak to the broader meaning of the results. The chapter also sets out recommendations for practice, institutional policy, and future research. Through this structure, the chapter ties the entire study together and shows how the work contributes to ongoing discussions about misinformation and public relations practice in Ghana.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The findings reveal that preparedness for misinformation management within public relations units is uneven and shaped by structural, cultural, and resource-related conditions. Monitoring and early detection practices differed widely across institutions. Some units had routines that blended manual checks with digital scanning, while others relied on sporadic and individually driven efforts. The presence of informal networks, including journalists and professional groups, strengthened early warning systems in certain cases. However, inconsistent investment in technology and limited institutional support weakened systematic vigilance. Verification processes also varied. A few organisations used structured, multi-step procedures that drew on internal expertise, but others depended on intuitive judgments by senior officers. These contrasts show that preparedness is shaped not only by formal protocols but also by internal decision cultures and access to technical knowledge.

The findings further show that practitioners encounter significant challenges when addressing misinformation. Bureaucratic delays were a persistent obstacle. Multi-layered approval chains slowed communication, especially during urgent cases. In addition, political sensitivities introduced caution that often overshadowed strategic considerations. These pressures weakened the timeliness of institutional responses and created gaps that allowed false narratives to spread. Resource constraints compounded these challenges. Limited access to analytic tools, outdated technology, and uneven digital competence placed significant strain on public relations teams. Human-resource shortages further widened these gaps, as teams depended heavily on a few individuals with advanced technical skills. Public and media scepticism added another layer of difficulty. Even verified corrections encountered resistance from audiences who distrusted official communication. Some segments dismissed institutional messages as defensive or self-serving, which complicated efforts to restore credibility during misinformation surges.

Opportunities also emerged across the data. Institutions that used internal collaborations, cross-departmental verification, and external partnerships demonstrated stronger coherence in their responses. Lessons drawn from repeated misinformation incidents encouraged some organisations to refine their protocols and strengthen institutional learning. The presence of professional networks, digital communities, and civil society actors created pathways for early alerts and collaborative verification. These opportunities suggest the potential for more integrated communication systems that combine institutional procedures with network-based intelligence. The findings also indicate scope for investments in technological tools, digital training, and streamlined decision-making processes that could support more proactive and coordinated misinformation management.

5.3 Conclusions

The study shows that misinformation management within Ghanaian public relations units is shaped by an intricate combination of institutional capacity, organisational culture, and environmental pressures. Preparedness is not simply a matter of having monitoring systems or verification checklists. It is rooted in how institutions structure authority, distribute expertise, and value communication work within their broader operational frameworks. Units that integrated early detection into routine practice demonstrated stronger situational awareness. However, many depended on improvised or individually driven vigilance, which placed the institution at risk during high-volume misinformation cycles. This variation makes clear that preparedness is an organisational condition rather than an individual attribute.

The findings further show that verification practices reveal internal power dynamics. Where cross-departmental collaboration was encouraged, verification yielded more accurate and timely assessments. Where decision-making was centralised around senior officers, verification became narrower, slower, and more prone to subjective judgment. These patterns show that institutional design can either support or constrain effective crisis interpretation. They also illustrate how crisis communication is tied to internal accountability systems, especially when verifying information that implicates operational weaknesses.

The limitations identified in the study align strongly with the expectations of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. SCCT stresses the value of early recognition and accurate appraisal of crisis signals. The study shows that delays caused by bureaucratic procedures, limited technology, and uneven digital competence weaken both recognition and appraisal. These constraints hinder the ability of institutions to select timely and appropriate response strategies. Consequently, SCCT provides a suitable frame for understanding how structural gaps undermine strategic communication outcomes.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that managing misinformation extends beyond crisis response and includes efforts to influence public discourse. Agenda-Building Theory becomes relevant at this point. It helps explain how public relations units attempt to insert verified information into media and policy spaces. The data show that institutions with stronger networks across journalism, civil society, and professional groups were better positioned to amplify their corrections and shape broader narratives. Through this lens, the study positions misinformation management not only as a defensive activity but also as an exercise in long-term agenda influence.

In all, the conclusions point to a sector that is striving to adapt to fast-moving communication risks but remains held back by systemic constraints. The findings emphasise the need for integrated organisational processes, stronger technological capacity, and more agile decision structures. They also show that misinformation management requires both internal discipline and external strategic reach. The study therefore concludes that the effectiveness of public relations units in Ghana hinges on how well institutions align their internal systems, technological resources, and networked relationships to confront the shifting realities of digital misinformation.

5.4 Recommendations of the Study

5.4.1 Recommendations for Public Relations Practice

Public relations units should embed routine monitoring and verification into their daily workflow by assigning clear responsibilities and reducing dependence on the personal initiative of individual staff. Structured verification protocols would help practitioners assess suspicious content with greater consistency and limit the variability caused by intuition-based judgments. public relations teams would also benefit from stronger collaboration with technical departments, since cross-unit consultations improve accuracy when misinformation touches sensitive operational areas. In addition, practitioners should invest in professional networks with journalists, civil society actors, and peer institutions, because such relationships support early alerts and help verified information gain wider visibility in the public domain.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Institutions

Institutions need to prioritise investment in digital tools that allow real-time monitoring of online spaces, because manual scanning cannot match the speed of contemporary misinformation flows. Training programmes should accompany these tools to ensure that multiple members of the communication team can interpret analytics and apply them during crises. Bureaucratic procedures should also be reviewed to create rapid-response pathways that shorten approval times for verified statements, particularly when false narratives escalate quickly. Leadership must recognise communication as a core strategic function and allocate adequate resources, staffing, and decision-making access to public relations units so that they can operate with greater agility and precision.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Policy and Regulation

Policy frameworks should introduce national guidelines that support coordinated misinformation responses and ensure that institutions apply verification and communication standards with some level of uniformity. Regulatory actors can strengthen the communication environment by promoting collaboration between state agencies, media houses, and independent fact-checking organisations, especially during high-risk periods. Shared monitoring infrastructures would also reduce the financial burden on smaller institutions and improve national readiness. Policymakers should invest in sector-wide training initiatives that enhance digital literacy among communicators, since uneven competence weakens collective capacity to respond to misinformation.

5.4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should extend the scope of this study by comparing how different sectors experience misinformation pressures, since patterns of preparedness may vary across institutional contexts. Longitudinal designs would help scholars trace how public relations units adapt to repeated misinformation incidents and how organisational learning evolves over time. Quantitative studies could add value by measuring the extent of resource gaps, approval delays, and technological limitations identified in this study. It would also be useful to examine audience reception more closely, since resistance to verified corrections remains a key obstacle in misinformation management. Research that integrates perspectives from public relations, political communication, and digital media studies would deepen academic understanding of misinformation in emerging democracies.

5.5 Contributions of the Study

This study advances understanding of how Ghanaian public relations units confront misinformation within demanding institutional settings. It shows that preparedness is shaped by internal culture, decision structures, and access to expertise rather than by tools alone. The work extends SCCT and Agenda-Building Theory into a context that is often overlooked in global public relations scholarship. It also demonstrates the value of qualitative case study research for revealing organisational processes that surveys may not capture. The findings offer practical guidance for institutions that seek to strengthen verification systems, streamline decision-making, and improve communication credibility. These contributions help close the gap between theory and practice in environments where misinformation spreads quickly and institutional trust is unsettled.

5.6 Areas for Future Research

Future research should compare how different sectors experience misinformation, since each sector operates under distinct pressures and expectations. Studies that explore audience reactions to verified corrections are needed, because scepticism remains a major obstacle to effective communication. Longitudinal research could show how organisations refine their systems over time, especially after repeated exposure to false narratives. Quantitative work may also help measure the scale of resource gaps and approval delays identified in this study. There is further value in research that links public relations, political communication, and digital media analysis to explain how algorithms, media structures, and institutional messaging shape the spread of misinformation in Ghana.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Icebreakers

1. Can you describe your current role and experience within your organisation's public relations or communication team?
2. What does a typical day look like for you in managing information flows?

Objective 1: Preparedness of public relations Units

1. From your perspective, how different is misinformation from fake news?
2. How does your team monitor and detect potential misinformation before it affects your organisation?
3. Have you or your team received any form of training or preparation to manage misinformation? If so, what did it entail?

Objective 2: Challenges in Countering Misinformation

1. What are the most common obstacles you encounter when trying to respond to misinformation?
2. How do internal structures, leadership decisions, or organisational protocols affect your ability to act quickly in such situations?
3. Have you faced public or institutional resistance when trying to correct misinformation? How was it handled?

Objective 3: Strategic Opportunities

1. What strategies or tools do you believe could help improve how your organisation deals with misinformation?
2. Are there any opportunities for partnerships, capacity building, or innovation that could strengthen your public relations team's response?
3. How do you see the future role of public relations evolving in a misinformation-heavy environment like ours?

End of Session