



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

**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN SHAPING  
BRAND LOYALTY: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO STRATEGIC  
PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES IN THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY**

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**DECEMBER, 2025**

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Master of Arts Degree in Strategic Public Relations Management**

**DECEMBER 2025**

## DECLARATION BY STUDENT

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.

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## CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication-Institute of Journalism, UniMAC-IJ.

Rev. Yaw Odame Gyau



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13/12/2025

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to God Almighty, whose grace, wisdom, and strength guided me through every step of this academic journey.

I also dedicate this research to my beloved family, and my daughter Carol Jones-Mensah, for their endless love, patience, and encouragement that kept me focused even in challenging times.

To my friends and mentors who believed in me and inspired me to give my best, this achievement reflects your support and faith in my abilities.

Finally, I dedicate this work to all aspiring public relations professionals, whose passion for truth, ethics, and communication continues to shape the world for the better.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of crisis management in shaping brand loyalty within the automobile industry, with particular attention to the mediating function of strategic public relations practices. Using a qualitative, case study design, the research explores how automobile firms operating in Ghana plan, communicate, and recover during crisis situations, and how these practices are interpreted by customers. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with twenty-four (24) participants, comprising organisational managers and customers, and supplemented with document analysis of crisis-related communication materials. Thematic analysis revealed that crises were understood by organisations as reputational and relational threats rather than purely technical failures. Leadership visibility, cross-unit coordination, and disciplined timing emerged as central elements of effective crisis response. From the customer perspective, clarity, transparency, and speed of communication strongly shaped judgements of credibility, trust, and continued brand commitment. Defensiveness and delayed responses were consistently associated with trust erosion and weakened loyalty. The findings demonstrate that brand loyalty in crisis contexts is not sustained by product performance alone but is reconstructed through communicative conduct that signals accountability, respect, and corrective intent.

**Keywords:** crisis management; public relations management; stakeholder management; brand loyalty; automobile industry

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

CU – Customer Participant

DRID – Directorate of Research, Innovation and Development

IRT – Image Restoration Theory

M – Management-Level Participant

PR – Public Relations

RQ – Research Question

SCCT – Situational Crisis Communication Theory

UniMAC – University of Media, Arts and Communication

VW – Volkswagen

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the study on crisis management and brand loyalty in the automobile industry. It explains how crises such as product recalls, safety failures, and ethical scandals affect consumer trust and brand reputation. The chapter highlights the importance of strategic public relations in managing crises and maintaining loyalty. It provides the background of the study, identifies the problem, and states the research objectives and questions. It also explains the study's justification, significance, scope, and organization.

### 1.2 Background to the Study

Crisis management refers to the structured set of strategies, processes and frameworks that organisations employ to anticipate, respond to, and recover from events that threaten their operations, reputation or stakeholder relationships (Vašíčková, 2019). It involves both proactive and reactive phases: prevention and preparedness before a crisis, response during the crisis, and recovery and learning afterwards (Oizumi et al., 2015; Vašíčková, 2019). In organisational contexts, a crisis is often defined as a low-probability, high-impact event that stakeholders perceive as threatening the viability of the organisation (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crisis management thus centres on minimising damage, restoring stability, and learning from the event to strengthen future resilience (Vašíčková, 2019; Bundy, Pfarrer, Short & Coombs, 2017). In the automobile industry, crisis management is critical because the sector is inherently exposed to high stakes: product safety, regulatory compliance, global supply chains, brand image and consumer trust all matter.

Crisis management has become a central issue in modern organizational strategy, especially in industries where consumer trust defines market survival. The automobile industry faces constant exposure to crises linked to product defects, environmental concerns, and ethical scandals. Global

brands operate under intense public scrutiny, where a single incident can destroy decades of reputation and customer loyalty. The need to understand how organizations manage such crises and rebuild loyalty has made crisis management a critical subject within public relations and brand communication research.

Globally, the automobile industry has experienced multiple crises that have redefined public expectations of corporate responsibility. The 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal, where the company manipulated environmental test results, cost the firm more than 30 billion dollars in fines and compensation and reduced its reputation index by over 40 per cent in key markets (Bachmann et al., 2019). Similarly, Toyota's 2009 recall crisis due to acceleration defects led to a decline in consumer trust and a temporary drop in global market share (Xia et al., 2022). Tesla has also faced crises involving battery fires and autopilot failures, raising ethical and regulatory questions about technology transparency (Forbes, 2023). These examples reveal that the global automobile industry is crisis-prone and that an organisation's ability to communicate effectively during crises determines how consumers interpret brand integrity and loyalty afterwards.

Crisis management is no longer about mere damage control but a long-term public relations strategy that protects organisational reputation (Kanso et al., 2020). Studies show that consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that respond swiftly, transparently, and responsibly to crises (Bundy et al., 2017). In this context, crisis communication and stakeholder engagement are the strategic tools through which public relations practitioners influence how consumers reconstruct trust and commitment after a crisis. Brand loyalty, therefore, depends not only on product performance but also on how the organization handles moments of failure.

In Africa, the automobile industry is expanding, yet vulnerable to crisis and trust deficits. Issues such as poor customer service, defective imports, and low recall awareness affect consumer perceptions of quality and brand reliability. Studies in Kenya and Nigeria shows that consumer loyalty in the automobile market is highly sensitive to perceptions of corporate honesty and responsiveness to complaints (Ibidunni et al., 2021; Lagat, 2021). Ghana's automobile industry shares similar patterns. Although it has grown through global partnerships and the introduction of assembly plants such as

Toyota Ghana and Kantanka, trust remains fragile. Instances of delayed recalls, limited crisis disclosure, and inconsistent public communication weaken consumer confidence.

Recent studies in Ghana indicate that automobile customers value transparency and responsiveness as much as product quality (Adusei & Tweneboah-Koduah, 2019). Yet, little is known about how automobile companies in Ghana manage crises and how these strategies shape brand loyalty. Public relations units often focus on promotion and marketing rather than crisis preparedness or stakeholder engagement. This gap shows that crisis management is under-researched as a loyalty-building mechanism within Ghana's automobile sector.

Understanding the strategic relationship between crisis management and brand loyalty is therefore crucial. The study explores how automobile companies operating in Ghana use crisis management to maintain or rebuild brand loyalty. It investigates the role of strategic public relations in crisis communication, consumer trust reconstruction, and reputation recovery. This background provides the rationale for studying crisis management not only as a corrective tool but as a proactive mechanism for sustaining long-term brand-consumer relationships.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Crises have become an inevitable aspect of organizational life, especially in industries that depend on consumer confidence and brand image. The automobile industry, being technologically intensive and highly competitive, faces frequent product-related and reputational crises that test corporate resilience and strategic communication capacity. Despite decades of research on crisis communication and management, the relationship between crisis management practices and brand loyalty remains inadequately explored within the context of developing economies. While studies in advanced markets have demonstrated that effective crisis management can rebuild consumer trust and sustain loyalty (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs & Holladay, 2021), little empirical evidence exists on how these dynamics unfold in emerging markets such as Ghana, where both the institutional framework and consumer expectations differ substantially.

Globally, automobile companies such as Volkswagen, Toyota, and Tesla have experienced major crises that reshaped their public reputation. The Volkswagen emissions scandal of 2015, for instance, revealed deep weaknesses in corporate ethics and transparency, resulting in a dramatic decline in customer trust and market valuation (Bachmann et al., 2019). Toyota's 2009 vehicle recall crisis, caused by acceleration defects, exposed gaps in crisis preparedness and stakeholder engagement, forcing the company to adopt a global transparency and safety campaign to regain consumer confidence (Amin, 2018). Tesla has also faced repeated controversies related to autopilot accidents and communication mismanagement, which have challenged its reputation for innovation and safety (Forbes, 2023). These examples illustrate that the way organizations manage crises directly influences how consumers interpret brand credibility and long-term loyalty.

In developed markets, firms have institutionalized crisis management within broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) and brand communication frameworks. Yet, in Africa, however, the study of crisis management within the automobile sector remains limited. African automobile industries face additional structural and institutional constraints, including weak regulatory oversight, low consumer awareness of rights, and limited media transparency. Existing research tends to focus on customer satisfaction and service quality rather than crisis communication or post-crisis loyalty (Imroz et al., 2023; van Batenburg & Verhoeven, 2024). Many automobile firms across the continent still treat crisis response as a reactive measure rather than a strategic function of public relations. This reactive posture often leads to delayed communication, inconsistent information, and erosion of public confidence. Consequently, even after product recalls or service corrections, many brands continue to face long-term image challenges due to weak relationship rebuilding efforts.

In Ghana, the automobile industry is evolving rapidly with the establishment of local assembly plants by brands such as Toyota and Volkswagen. Despite this growth, there is limited evidence of structured crisis management policies or frameworks guiding corporate communication during crises. Local firms often rely on ad hoc media responses rather than systematic crisis management strategies, resulting in consumer skepticism about brand transparency and accountability (Adusei & Tweneboah-Koduah, 2019). While global automobile companies have introduced safety campaigns and recall

programs, their local subsidiaries in Ghana often communicate these initiatives ineffectively, creating information gaps between firms and consumers. The absence of clear crisis communication strategies raises questions about how such firms manage crises, maintain reputation, and foster customer loyalty in a highly competitive environment.

The problem, therefore, lies in the insufficient understanding of how crisis management, as a public relations strategy, shapes brand loyalty in Ghana's automobile industry. Most studies have emphasized marketing communication and service delivery but have overlooked the role of crisis communication in sustaining consumer trust after negative publicity or product failure. This gap in research knowledge limits the ability of automobile firms to design strategic crisis response frameworks that align with consumer expectations and enhance brand resilience.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the role of crisis management in shaping brand loyalty within Ghana's automobile industry. It investigates how strategic public relations practices influence consumer perceptions, trust reconstruction, and post-crisis brand relationships. Through a qualitative inquiry, the study aims to provide insights that bridge the theoretical understanding of crisis communication and its practical implications for brand loyalty in emerging market contexts.

#### **1.4 General Objectives**

The aim of this study is to examine how crisis management influences brand loyalty within the automobile industry, with a focus on strategic public relations practices. The research explores the link between organizational crisis response, communication strategies, and consumer perceptions that shape trust and loyalty.

##### **1.4.1 Specific Objectives**

1. To explore how strategic public relations practices are employed in managing crises.
2. To examine how crisis management communication influences customers' perceptions of brand trust and loyalty.

3. To understand how post-crisis recovery strategies contribute to rebuilding and sustaining brand loyalty.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

1. How are strategic public relations practices employed in managing crises?
2. In what ways does crisis management communication influence customers' perceptions of brand trust and loyalty?
3. How do post-crisis recovery strategies contribute to rebuilding and sustaining brand loyalty?

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study holds significant importance in field of crisis management with brand loyalty through the lens of strategic public relations. The findings will have academic, professional, and policy relevance. Firstly, the study contributes to communication and public relations scholarship by linking crisis management to consumer loyalty in a developing market context. It fills a gap in existing literature that often focuses on Western industries while paying limited attention to Africa, particularly Ghana. The study also provides a qualitative understanding of how crisis communication practices influence brand trust and long-term consumer relationships.

Secondly,for public relations and marketing professionals, the study provides insights into effective crisis communication strategies that sustain consumer loyalty during organizational crises. It will help managers understand how transparent and timely communication can restore confidence after a brand's reputation is damaged. Automobile companies can use the findings to strengthen their crisis response systems and improve consumer engagement.

Thirdly, the study offers relevant implications for policymakers and regulatory bodies in Ghana's automobile and communication sectors. It will help shape policies that encourage accountability, ethical communication, and brand responsibility during crises. Government agencies and industry

associations can adopt the insights to develop national guidelines on corporate crisis communication and consumer protection.

Lastly, Consumers benefit indirectly from the study through improved corporate responsiveness and transparency. Strengthened crisis management practices promote consumer protection, trust, and satisfaction, which contribute to stable and ethical market relationships.

### **1.7 Justification of the Study**

The justification for this study stems from both theoretical and practical needs to understand how crisis management shapes brand loyalty through strategic public relations practices in the automobile industry. Firstly, existing literature has concentrated heavily on developed economies, with limited attention to how crisis communication functions within African markets. Studies by Coombs (2019), Claeys and Coombs (2020), and Lee and Kim (2023) highlight the critical role of communication in crisis recovery, yet their contexts do not reflect the economic and institutional realities of developing countries. Ghana's automobile industry, which includes multinational and local brands, operates within a dynamic environment where consumer perceptions are influenced by both cultural expectations and communication effectiveness. This context presents a gap that warrants scholarly attention.

Secondly, crisis management within the Ghanaian automobile industry remains largely reactive rather than strategic. Many firms lack structured frameworks that integrate public relations into their crisis response processes. When crises occur, communication is often inconsistent, delayed, or defensive, which undermines consumer trust and damages brand credibility. Addressing this gap is crucial because, as studies show, effective crisis management directly contributes to consumer loyalty, corporate resilience, and market competitiveness (Alshebami, 2025; Lee & Quan, 2020). This study, therefore seeks to explore how strategic public relations practices can shift the focus from damage control to long-term relationship management in crisis situations.

Thirdly, the study is justified by the growing significance of consumer trust and loyalty in sustaining business performance. The automobile industry depends heavily on brand perception, yet reputational damage from crises often results in long-term sales decline and customer attrition. Exploring how communication strategies restore consumer confidence provides valuable insights for firms aiming to strengthen loyalty post-crisis. This aligns with emerging evidence that transparent and empathetic communication is a key determinant of brand resilience (Coombs, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2023).

Lastly, the study holds relevance for policymakers and industry regulators seeking to improve corporate communication standards and consumer protection in Ghana. Insights from the research can support the development of policies promoting accountability and ethical practices in crisis management. By situating the analysis within Ghana's evolving automobile market, the study adds both theoretical depth and practical solutions to the broader discourse on crisis communication and brand loyalty in emerging economies.

### **1.8 Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The scope of this study is defined by its thematic, geographical, and methodological boundaries. Thematically, the study focuses on the relationship between crisis management and brand loyalty, emphasizing the mediating role of strategic public relations in shaping consumer trust and perception. The study examines how communication strategies employed during crises influence brand recovery, reputation, and loyalty within the automobile industry. It integrates theoretical perspectives from crisis communication and relationship management to understand how organizations manage stakeholder expectations during and after crises.

Geographically, the study is confined to Ghana, where the automobile industry is characterized by both multinational operations and indigenous firms such as Kantanka Automobile. Ghana provides a relevant context for examining crisis management practices due to its growing automobile market, evolving corporate communication landscape, and increasing consumer awareness. The focus on Ghana also allows the study to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on crisis communication

and brand loyalty in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions differ from those in developed economies.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the depth and complexity of communication practices within the industry. This approach is appropriate for understanding lived experiences, professional perspectives, and strategic decision-making processes that quantitative methods may not adequately reveal. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with communication managers, brand executives, and public relations practitioners, supplemented by document analysis of corporate crisis responses and media reports.

Despite its comprehensive design, the study has certain limitations. Firstly, it focuses on a limited number of firms within Ghana's automobile industry, which may affect the generalizability of findings to the broader African or global context. Secondly, access to corporate data and executives may pose challenges, as organizations often treat crisis-related information as confidential. Thirdly, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal or institutional bias. However, methodological rigor, triangulation, and ethical standards will be applied to minimize these limitations and ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings.

## **1.9 Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research by presenting the background of the study, the problem statement, objectives, research questions, justification, significance, and scope. It establishes the link between crisis management, strategic public relations, and brand loyalty within the automobile industry. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature, examining theoretical and empirical studies on crisis management, brand image, consumer trust, and loyalty, while identifying gaps that this research seeks to fill. Chapter Three details the research methodology, describing the qualitative design, population, sampling methods, data collection tools, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations that ensure the study's credibility. Chapter Four focuses on data presentation, analysis, and discussion, interpreting findings in relation to the research objectives and

situating them within existing scholarly debates on crisis communication and consumer behaviour. Chapter Five concludes the study by summarizing the major findings, drawing key conclusions, and providing recommendations for automobile firms, communication professionals, and policymakers. It also highlights directions for future research on crisis management and brand loyalty.

### **1.10 Chapter Summary**

Chapter One provides an overview of the entire study and lays the foundation for the research. It begins with the background of the study, which examines the relationship between crisis management, brand loyalty, and strategic public relations within the automobile industry, drawing on both global and Ghanaian contexts. The problem statement highlights the growing frequency of corporate crises and their effects on consumer trust and brand image, emphasizing the need for effective crisis management strategies. The research objectives and questions are developed to guide the study in exploring how communication practices during crises influence brand loyalty. The justification explains the academic and practical importance of the study, identifying existing gaps in literature and the contribution of the research to crisis communication scholarship, particularly within the African context. The significance of the study discusses its potential value to public relations practitioners, brand managers, and policymakers. The organization of the study is then outlined to provide a logical flow of chapters. Overall, this chapter establishes the rationale, relevance, and direction of the study, setting the stage for the subsequent review of related literature in Chapter Two.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The automobile industry, characterised by high competition, technological innovation, and complex global supply chains, often faces crises ranging from product recalls to ethical misconduct. Such events directly affect consumer perceptions, loyalty, and long-term brand sustainability. This chapter reviews scholarly literature on the link between crisis management, strategic public relations, and brand loyalty, focusing on the automobile industry within global, African, and Ghanaian contexts. It begins by defining key concepts such as crisis, crisis management, brand image, consumer trust, and brand loyalty. It then discusses theoretical models including the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Restoration Theory, and Relationship Management Theory, which provide analytical grounding for understanding how organizations manage crises to maintain or rebuild trust. The chapter further presents empirical evidence from prior studies that demonstrate how effective communication strategies shape consumer responses and brand outcomes during crises.

#### **2.2 Conceptual Review**

##### **2.2.1 Crisis Management in the Automobile Industry**

Crisis management encompasses the strategies and actions organizations employ to respond to and recover from events that threaten their operations, reputation, or stakeholder relationships. In the context of the automobile industry, crises can arise from product defects, safety issues, regulatory non-compliance, or ethical scandals. The ability to effectively manage such crises is crucial, as mismanagement can lead to significant reputational damage and loss of consumer trust.

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of proactive crisis management strategies. For instance, a study by Coombs (2019) emphasizes the need for organizations to anticipate potential crises and develop comprehensive response plans. Additionally, research by Claeys and Coombs (2020) underscores the role of crisis communication in mitigating negative impacts and restoring stakeholder confidence.

### **2.2.2 Strategic Public Relations and Crisis Communication**

Strategic public relations involves the planned and deliberate management of communication between an organization and its stakeholders to build and maintain positive relationships. During a crisis, effective public relations strategies are essential in conveying accurate information, demonstrating accountability, and managing public perception.

Public relations plays a central role in managing crises by shaping stakeholder perceptions and maintaining trust during and after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Firstly, communication strategies such as timely announcements, public apologies, and corrective messaging influence how stakeholders interpret crises. Secondly, stakeholder engagement ensures that consumers, regulators, media, and investors receive accurate and consistent information. Thirdly, reputation repair focuses on demonstrating accountability, addressing the root causes of the crisis, and reinforcing organizational credibility. In the automobile sector, public relations interventions are critical for maintaining long-term brand-consumer relationships, particularly when product defects, recalls, or ethical scandals occur. In the digital age, the role of public relations has expanded beyond traditional media relations to include social media management, influencer engagement, and real-time communication. A study by Kim and Atkinson (2021) explores the evolving landscape of public relations in crisis situations, highlighting the need for organizations to adapt to new communication channels and technologies.

### **2.2.3 Brand Loyalty in the Automobile Sector**

Brand loyalty represents the degree to which consumers consistently prefer and repurchase a brand over time, comprising attitudinal and behavioural dimensions (Aaker, 1991; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand loyalty refers to the tendency of consumers to continue purchasing the same brand's products over time, influenced by factors such as satisfaction, trust, and perceived value. In the automobile industry, brand loyalty is a significant determinant of market share and profitability. Attitudinal loyalty reflects psychological commitment to a brand, while behavioural loyalty is measured by repeat purchases and continued engagement. In the automobile industry, brand loyalty is influenced by product quality, service reliability, and corporate reputation. Crises can undermine loyalty by eroding trust and damaging brand image, whereas effective crisis management, guided by strategic public relations, can restore confidence and reinforce consumer commitment (Lee & Kim, 2023).

Recent research indicates that brand loyalty can be significantly affected by how an organization manages crises. A study by Garcia-Collart (2024) found that consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that demonstrate transparency and responsiveness during crises. Conversely, poor crisis management can lead to a decline in brand loyalty, as consumers may perceive the organization as untrustworthy.

### **2.3 Theoretical Frameworks**

This study is grounded in three key theoretical frameworks that elucidate the relationship between crisis management and brand loyalty in the automobile industry: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Restoration Theory (IRT), and Stakeholder Theory.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)** posits that organizations should tailor their crisis response strategies to the type of crisis and their level of responsibility for the event. By aligning responses with the crisis situation, organizations can mitigate reputational damage and

maintain stakeholder trust (Coombs, 2007). In the context of the automobile industry, SCCT provides a framework for understanding how different crisis types such as product recalls or safety failures require distinct communication approaches to preserve brand loyalty.

**Image Restoration Theory**, developed by Benoit (1995), outlines strategies organizations can employ to repair their image following a crisis. These strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. In the automobile sector, effective application of these strategies can help restore consumer confidence and loyalty after incidents like safety recalls or ethical controversies.

**Stakeholder Theory** emphasizes the importance of identifying and managing relationships with all parties affected by an organization's actions. During a crisis, engaging with stakeholders through transparent and empathetic communication is crucial for maintaining trust and loyalty (Freeman, 1984). In the automobile industry, stakeholders include consumers, employees, regulators, and the media, all of whom play a role in shaping the organization's reputation during a crisis.

## **2.4 Crisis Management in the Automobile Industry**

importance of systematic crisis management and credible communication strategies. One widely examined case is Volkswagen's emissions scandal, in which the company admitted to manipulating test data to misrepresent vehicle emissions levels. The incident resulted in severe reputational harm, financial penalties, and regulatory sanctions across multiple countries. Coombs (2015) argues that the company's delayed acknowledgement and defensive framing worsened public reaction and intensified stakeholder mistrust, reinforcing the importance of transparency and accountability as fundamental conditions for effective crisis response.

Toyota's unintended acceleration crisis represents another instructive example within the industry. The recall of millions of vehicles due to safety concerns compelled the company to engage in public apologies and implement corrective measures. According to Astvansh et al. (2024), Toyota's response demonstrated how prompt acknowledgement and visible remedial action could assist in restoring

stakeholder confidence. Coombs (2015) further observed that transparent communication in this instance helped limit long-term reputational damage and contributed to the gradual recovery of customer trust.

The expansion of electric and autonomous vehicles has introduced new crisis management challenges, particularly surrounding technology failure and safety assurance. Tesla's involvement in Autopilot-related accidents has generated debate around accountability, innovation, and consumer protection. Coombs (2015) notes that crisis communication within technology-driven industries is especially complex because uncertainty surrounding emerging systems magnifies risk perception and stakeholder anxiety. Tesla's public statements and internal investigations following incidents highlight the difficulty of balancing technical explanation with public reassurance in technologically evolving markets.

In emerging economies, automobile firms encounter additional crisis management pressures due to differences in institutional strength, regulatory enforcement, and consumer expectations. Rim and Ferguson (2020) argue that organisations operating in these contexts often lack formal crisis communication systems, which increases vulnerability when disruption occurs. Proactive communication strategies are therefore necessary to compensate for institutional gaps and to maintain customer trust where formal oversight structures may be weak or inconsistently applied.

Within Ghana, the automobile sector continues to expand through increased market liberalisation and global brand participation. However, crisis management within the industry remains largely reactive. Public relations practices are frequently limited to immediate response rather than long-term strategy. Nnindini and Dankwah (2022) contend that many firms rely on unsystematic communication during crises, which weakens their capacity to preserve brand loyalty. This observation suggests the necessity of embedding crisis communication within organisational strategy rather than treating it as temporary intervention.

## **2.5 Brand Loyalty in Emerging Economies**

Brand loyalty in emerging economies is shaped by conditions that extend beyond product satisfaction to include trust in corporate behaviour and communication. In Ghana, consumers have shown sensitivity not only to product quality and pricing but also to the conduct of organisations during periods of disruption. Chen et al. (2021) note that crisis communication contributes significantly to customer evaluation and loyalty formation in emerging markets, where trust in institutions is often uneven. Similarly, Tanveer et al. (2021) emphasise that ethical communication influences customers' willingness to continue relationships with brands during and after crisis situations.

Cultural context also plays a significant role in shaping brand relationships within emerging economies. Ethical behaviour and accountability frequently occupy a central place in consumer judgement. Geysi et al. (2020) argue that corporate actions during crisis situations become moral indicators in societies where trust is shaped through interpersonal and communal networks. Thakur and Hale (2022) further explain that firms that demonstrate responsibility, openness, and consumer sensitivity during crises are more likely to preserve loyalty even when performance failure has occurred. Brand loyalty in such contexts is therefore relational rather than transactional and is shaped by perception of organisational integrity.

## **2.6 Public Relations Strategies in Crisis Management**

Public relations strategies play a central role in guiding organisational communication during crisis and protecting brand relationships. Effective communication requires the use of multiple and coordinated channels including press statements, social media platforms, and direct stakeholder engagement. Kuipers and Schonheit (2020) indicate that consistency in message delivery across platforms reduces confusion and curbs misinformation during rapidly unfolding crisis situations. Digital media in particular has altered expectations around speed and accessibility, thereby increasing the pressure on organisations to respond in real time.

Transparency and accountability remain critical principles in crisis communication. Organisations that openly acknowledge responsibility and provide clear explanations of corrective measures are more likely to be perceived as credible. Yang and Battocchio (2021) demonstrate that transparency significantly influences consumer trust and is associated with sustained loyalty following crisis events. Message framing that avoids deflection while demonstrating responsibility contributes to rebuilding confidence and controlling reputational decline.

Preparedness also remains a defining feature of effective crisis management. Abbas and Miller (2025) show that organisations with pre-established communication frameworks respond more coherently under pressure. Björck et al. (2024) further note that crisis planning structures promote internal consistency and reduce operational disorder during disruptive events. Public relations therefore functions not only as communication mechanism but also as organisational stabiliser, influencing perception through preparation and strategic planning.

## **2.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter synthesized literature on crisis management, brand loyalty, and strategic public relations, highlighting their interconnections and relevance to the automobile industry. The review demonstrates that effective crisis management supported by tailored communication strategies, transparency, and stakeholder engagement directly influences consumer trust and brand loyalty. Global case studies provide lessons on best practices, while emerging market and Ghanaian contexts reveal challenges and opportunities for firms in applying these strategies. The chapter identifies research gaps, particularly in Ghana, and establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundation for examining how strategic public relations practices mediate the relationship between crisis management and brand loyalty in the current study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodology used to investigate how crisis management influences brand loyalty in the automobile industry, with a focus on strategic public relations practices. It explains the research design, approach, population and sampling strategies, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness measures. The methodology aligns with Creswell's qualitative research framework, ensuring the study captures the complexity of organizational practices, consumer perceptions, and communication strategies in crisis contexts (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **3.2 Research Design**

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena in context (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research allows for in-depth investigation of participants' experiences and perspectives, capturing nuances in crisis management practices and consumer loyalty that quantitative methods may overlook. This design aligns with the study's aim of understanding how strategic public relations mediates the relationship between crisis management and brand loyalty in Ghana's automobile industry.

#### **3.3 Research Approach**

A multiple-case study approach is used, focusing on selected automobile companies operating in Ghana, including multinational firms such as Toyota and Volkswagen, and local firms such as Kantanka. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe case study research as an approach that explores real-life, bounded systems to provide deep insights into complex phenomena. This approach allows for a

comparative understanding of how different organizations respond to crises and how these strategies influence consumer trust and loyalty.

### **3.4 Population**

The population in this study comprises individuals whose roles and experiences are directly aligned with the study objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative inquiry, population is determined by conceptual relevance rather than numerical representation (Patton, 2015). The target population consists of two strands: organisational actors responsible for crisis planning and brand management, and consumers who engage with automobile brands during crisis situations. Accordingly, the population includes managers within selected automobile firms in communication, marketing, business development, and related functions, whose responsibilities involve the design and execution of crisis communication strategies and the protection of organisational reputation. It also includes customers and clients who have interacted with these brands during periods of crisis, as this group interprets organisational actions and forms evaluative judgments. The inclusion of both organisational and consumer groups enables examination of crisis communication from the perspectives of message production and public reception, thereby strengthening analytical depth and interpretive coverage.

#### **3.4.1 Sampling**

Sampling in this study follows a purposive strategy consistent with qualitative, problem-centred inquiry. Sampling refers to the deliberate selection of information-rich cases that can illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). In such designs, the primary concern is conceptual and experiential relevance rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling therefore provides a coherent fit with a study that seeks to understand how crisis communication is planned, executed, and interpreted within the automobile sector.

The sampling frame reflects the two-strand population structure outlined in Section 3.4. The first strand comprises organisational actors involved in crisis-related decision-making and communication.

This strand includes managers and executives in communication, marketing, public relations, business development, and other relevant roles within selected automobile firms. Inclusion will be based on direct involvement in crisis planning, message design, media engagement, or stakeholder coordination. These participants are expected to provide detailed accounts of organisational logics, internal deliberations, and strategic considerations during crisis episodes (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015).

The second strand comprises customers and clients of the selected automobile firms who have experienced or observed brand-related crises. Inclusion in this strand will be based on prior interaction with the brand during or immediately after a crisis event, whether through service encounters, digital platforms, or exposure to crisis communication messages. This group offers access to experiential accounts of message reception, credibility assessment, and reputational judgment. Combining these two strands enables systematic comparison between organisational intent and audience interpretation, and supports a multi-actor understanding of crisis communication dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The final sample comprised twenty-four participants drawn from both strands of the study, including customers and organisational actors within the automobile industry. Sample adequacy in qualitative research was determined by the principle of data saturation rather than by fixed numerical thresholds (Guest et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2015). Data saturation refers to the point at which further interviews no longer generate additional themes relevant to the study objectives (Guest et al., 2014). In this study, saturation was reached within the final phase of data collection, as accounts began to reflect recurring patterns across participants. The achieved sample size supported in-depth engagement with each account and enabled systematic interpretation through thematic analysis, consistent with guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2019).

### **3.5 Data Collection Methods**

Data is collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, which allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives freely while covering key research topics (Creswell, 2014). Interviews are conducted face-to-face or virtually, depending on participant availability. In addition, document analysis is used to examine corporate documents, press releases, and media reports on crisis events, providing contextual and triangulated data (Bowen, 2009). The combination of interviews and document analysis ensures a robust and comprehensive data set.

### **3.6 Data Analysis Techniques**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2006, 2019). All interview transcripts and documentary materials were first transcribed, read, and re-read to achieve familiarity with the content and to gain an overall sense of how crisis communication and brand-related experiences were narrated. During this phase, preliminary analytic memos were recorded to note early impressions about crisis planning, message framing, stakeholder engagement, and consumer reactions.

Initial coding was then conducted across the entire dataset. Codes were generated inductively, while remaining attentive to the research objectives on crisis management and brand loyalty (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Segments of text were coded at both semantic and more interpretive levels, capturing explicit descriptions of events as well as underlying assumptions about responsibility, trust, and organisational reputation. Organisational accounts (managers and executives) and consumer accounts (customers and clients) were coded separately in the first instance to preserve the integrity of each strand of the population.

In the next phase, related codes were collated and organised into candidate themes that reflected patterned meanings across participants. For organisational data, themes captured recurring logics of crisis planning, decision-making, and message justification. For consumer data, themes reflected perceptions of message credibility, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with organisational responses, and

implications for brand loyalty. These candidate themes were then reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure that each theme accurately represented the data and that the thematic structure reflected the breadth and complexity of experiences reported (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Subsequently, themes were refined, defined, and named. Overlapping or weak themes were merged, discarded, or reconfigured, while core themes were elaborated with clear definitions and boundaries. Organisational and consumer themes were then compared to identify convergences and divergences between crisis communication intent and audience interpretation. This cross-strand comparison enabled systematic examination of how crisis strategies were constructed by organisational actors and how these strategies were received, evaluated, and translated into brand-related attitudes by consumers. Final themes were written up with illustrative data excerpts, and each theme was interpreted in direct relation to the research objectives and relevant literature. Thereby, this provided a coherent and theoretically informed account of crisis communication and brand loyalty in the automobile sector.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study in line with Creswell's (2014) guidelines and institutional requirements. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Directorate of Research, Innovation and Development (DRID) at the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC) before data collection began. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, confidentiality safeguards, and the voluntary nature of participation, after which informed consent was obtained. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, identifying information was removed from all records, pseudonyms were used during reporting, and data were stored in secure, password-protected files in accordance with institutional data protection guidelines.

### **3.8 Trustworthiness of the Study**

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed through the application of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). Credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which participants were given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of accounts, and through triangulation of data sources. Peer debriefing further contributed to credibility by allowing external input into the interpretation process and reducing the influence of one-sided interpretation.

Transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual description of the research setting and participant characteristics, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was enhanced through the maintenance of an audit trail that documented the research process, methodological decisions, and analytical procedures. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive practice and the systematic documentation of analytical decisions, which reduced the influence of researcher predispositions and supported transparency in interpretation. Together, these measures enhanced the methodological integrity of the study and strengthened confidence in the findings.

### **3.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the methodology for investigating the role of crisis management in shaping brand loyalty in the Ghanaian automobile industry. A qualitative, case study approach was adopted, with purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis forming the primary data collection methods. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness strategies were detailed, ensuring the study's credibility and rigor. These methodological choices provide a strong foundation for analyzing how strategic public relations mediates crisis management outcomes and informs brand loyalty.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND ANALYSES**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents findings from interviews conducted with managers and customers in the automobile industry. The aim is to report how crises are managed, how communication is interpreted, and how loyalty is shaped after disruption. The chapter is organised around the three research objectives. Findings are reported thematically under each objective. Participant identities are protected through the use of coded labels. Direct quotations are used to show patterns in experience and judgment.

##### **4.1.1 Demographic Information**

The study involved a total of twenty-four participants, comprising four organisational participants and twenty customers (see Table 4.1). The organisational participants were drawn from four leading automobile firms operating in Ghana, namely Japan Motors (Nissan & Foton), Toyota Ghana (Toyota), Universal Motors (Volkswagen), and Silver Star Auto (Mercedes Benz, Citroen & Peugeot). These participants occupied management positions with responsibility for communication, operations, or customer engagement and participated in the study in their professional capacity as organisational representatives.

Additionally, customer participants consisted of vehicle owners, buyers, and users who had prior exposure to crisis-related communication within the automobile sector. Together, the two participant groups provided perspectives from both organisational and customer standpoints, enabling a balanced examination of crisis communication practices and interpretations.

In terms of gender, the participant pool included both male and female respondents. It is noteworthy, however, that all organisational participants were male, reflecting the gender composition of senior management roles within the participating automobile firms at the time of the study. Customer participants included both male and female respondents. Age distribution across the full sample ranged from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties, allowing the study to capture perspectives across different life stages. Years of experience were most relevant to organisational participants, all of whom possessed extensive industry experience, while customer experience reflected varying lengths of engagement with automobile brands.

To preserve confidentiality, participants are identified using pseudonyms rather than personal names. Organisational participants are coded M1-M4, where “M” denotes a *management-level participant* and the number distinguishes individual managers. Customer participants are coded CU1-CU20, where “CU” denotes a *customer participant* and the number differentiates individual customers. These codes are used consistently throughout the findings chapter to attribute statements and interpretations while maintaining anonymity.

**Table 4.1: Participant Demographic Profile and Coding Structure**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Notes
Participant Group	Managers (M1-M4)	4	Management staff from organisations
	Customers (CU1-CU20)	20	Vehicle owners, buyers, and users
Gender	Male	16	Includes all managers
	Female	8	Customers only
Age Range (Years)	25-34	6	Customers
	35-44	10	Customers
	45-55	8	Managers and customers
Years of Experience / Engagement	Below 5 years	5	Customers
	5-10 years	9	Customers
	Above 10 years	10	Managers and long-term customers
<i>Note: Years of experience refer to industry experience for organisational participants and duration of brand engagement for customer participants.</i>			

Source: Field Data (2025)

### 4.3 Strategic Public Relations in Crisis Management

This section examines how organisations deploy strategic public relations practices when confronted with crisis situations. It focuses on how crises are interpreted internally, how authority and coordination shape communication, and how timing decisions influence organisational credibility. The discussion foregrounds crisis management as a structured, strategic process rather than a reactive communication exercise.

#### 4.3.1 Crisis Framed as Organisational Threat

Crisis was consistently framed by organisational actors as institutional risk rather than as technical disruption. Accounts described crisis as exposure that threatened legitimacy, market confidence, regulatory standing, and employee morale at once. This pattern was consistent with Coombs (2007), who conceptualised crisis as a reputational condition embedded in stakeholder judgement rather than a single operational failure. It also reflected Fink's (1986) depiction of crisis as an instability point capable of redirecting organisational trajectory. Within the present data, crisis was therefore not treated as episodic but as structurally consequential. Table 4.2 summarises how managers interpreted the nature of crisis within their organisations. The distribution highlights the weight each strand of "threat" carried across the narratives and signals which interpretations dominated the data. It captures the structural concerns that shaped organisational decisions during crisis moments.

**Table 4.2: Frequency Distribution of Themes in "Crisis Framed as Organisational Threat"**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Multi-Platform Information Access	18	38.3%
2. Direct Public Accountability	15	31.9%
3. Simplifying Complex Information	14	29.8%

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

Another point was that the evidence positioned reputation as the most fragile asset during disruption. M2 referred to crisis as “a moment where the brand could either recover or collapse,” which clung closely to Benoit’s (1997) position that crisis messaging operated as identity defence. The same logic was reflected in the work of Heath (2010), who treated crisis communication as a component of organisational risk governance rather than a reactive publicity function. Across accounts, crisis activated immediate calculation concerning public trust, legal liability, and strategic resilience. Furthermore, M2 noted that

“crisis was never interpreted as a product issue alone. The concern immediately expanded to safety, public confidence, and the image we had built over time. Once a crisis emerged, the worry was not only about fixing fault but about whether customers would still trust us and whether regulators would start watching more closely. It became a question of survival rather than repair.” (*M2, Interview, November*)

In contrast, crisis was also framed as a governance matter that extended into regulatory vulnerability and market positioning. M4 described the organisation as operating “under multiple lenses at once” during crisis, which departed from representations of crisis as short-lived disorder. This position stood in tension with linear models that treated crisis as deviation from routine. Instead, crisis was described as condition-changing. This reading echoed Mitroff (2005), who portrayed crisis as exposure of organisational limits rather than isolated shock. In contrast M4 elaborated saying

“once pressure started, everything changed. Reporting systems tightened, procedures were examined, and management became visible. It did not feel like a passing issue. It felt like authority and compliance were being tested at the same time.” (*M4, Interview, November*)

Looked at another way, crisis was recounted as accumulation rather than rupture. M1 stated that failure often “started small and worsened through silence,” which mirrored Shrivastava’s (1993) argument that crises grew through institutional neglect as much as through sudden

error. This account also paralleled Burnett (1998), who explained crisis as misalignment between structure and environment rather than chance occurrence. Framed differently, M1 added that

“most crises did not explode. They grew. Strange complaints would start, media would ask questions, and suddenly people realised it was bigger than expected. Silence created fear, not correction.” (*M1, Interview, November*)

Similarly, the data showed that crisis altered relationships beyond customer interfaces. M3 explained that breakdowns affected “suppliers, dealers, and partners,” reaffirming Argenti’s (2013) argument that crisis disturbed corporate networks rather than direct consumers alone. This view remained consistent with Fearn-Banks (2017), who depicted crisis consequences as organisational-wide rather than sectional. In a comparable view, M3 illuminated that

“business operations became uncertain once crisis surfaced. Dealers could delay commitments, and partners hesitated. It was not only the public that reacted; institutions responded as well.” (*M3, Interview, November*)

This means that crisis functioned as reputational test rather than technical obstacle. The findings reinforced SCCT by showing that responsibility attribution shaped organisational action. Image Restoration Theory further accounted for why identity preservation overtook operational repair as primary concern. Stakeholder Theory explained the attention given to regulatory bodies, partners, and consumers simultaneously. Crisis therefore operated as exposure condition rather than mechanical failure within organisational meaning.

#### **4.3.2 Leadership as Message Authority**

Leadership emerged as the central gate through which crisis meaning passed. M1 indicated that decisions “never left management tables without approval,” which reflected Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) claim that leadership legitimation anchored institutional voice. Executive

presence was repeatedly described as positional authority rather than symbolic performance. Communication therefore functioned hierarchically rather than diffusely. As shown in Table 4.3, the thematic spread around leadership illustrates the layered influence executives had over meaning, tone, and timing during crisis episodes. The frequencies reflect the consistency with which participants emphasised leadership’s authority across communicative decisions. This mapping sharpens the earlier discussion by revealing which aspects of leadership carried the greatest interpretive weight.

**Table 4.3: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Leadership as Message Authority”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Communication gatekeeping	11	31%
2. Stabilising presence	9	25%
3. Timing control	7	19%
4. Ethical signalling	5	14%
5. Narrative steering	4	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

Of additional significance, leadership involvement extended beyond approval into visible accountability. M2 stated that when executives spoke, “public anxiety shifted,” reinforcing Kim and Reber’s (2011) interpretation that authority presence stabilised stakeholder interpretation. Leadership acted not only as strategic controller but as institutional signal.

Moreover, M2 hinted that

“when the leadership appeared in public communication, tension reduced. People paid attention. It did not feel like scripted messaging anymore. It became an admission that the matter was serious.” (M2, *Interview, November*)

In another instance, authority was tied to timing control. M4 explained that “nothing went public without executive consent,” which ran counter to decentralised communication

models. Instead, crisis messaging followed command routes. This view reflected Clampitt's (2016) position that legitimacy flowed from leadership authority rather than technical roles.

Approached differently, leadership appeared as ethical figurehead rather than managerial function. M2 described executive involvement as "proof that responsibility was not being avoided," which aligned with Ulmer's (2001) argument that leadership enacted moral credibility under pressure. This position also remained consistent with Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003), who linked communication authority with accountability.

In related terms, leadership determined narrative priority. M3 noted that leadership "redirected attention from blame to correction," reflecting Frandsen and Johansen's (2011) account of central voice as discourse stabiliser. This perspective was reinforced by Coombs (2015), who associated executive consistency with message persistence. In a related account, M3 makes the point that

"When management finally spoke, everything shifted. The rumours slowed down and the noise in the media reduced. The story stopped being about blame and started moving toward solutions. It felt like clarity had returned, and the situation no longer seemed as chaotic as it had before." (M3, *Interview, November*)

Across the accounts, leadership did not support crisis communication; it governed it. Meaning, authority, and accountability converged within executive voice. SCCT clarified this dominance by linking visibility with responsibility attribution. Image Restoration Theory explained why leadership identity shaped institutional recovery. Stakeholder Theory accounted for leadership engagement as obligation across audiences rather than image pursuit alone.

### 4.3.3 Coordinated Response Across Units

Coordination across internal units emerged as a defining feature of crisis practice. The data showed that crisis handling was not confined to the communication function but distributed across legal, technical, customer service, and executive offices. This pattern was consistent with Pearson and Clair’s (1998) characterisation of crisis as an organisational condition requiring cross-unit integration rather than functional insulation. It also reflected Jaques’s (2007) argument that effective crisis response depended on networked responsibility rather than departmental authority. Within the present accounts, coordination therefore functioned as infrastructure, not support. Table 4.4 distills the organisational dynamics that shaped coordination during crisis response. The distribution shows how collaboration, structured pathways, strain, consistency, and learning appeared across participants’ accounts. This reinforces the argument that coordination was both an operational requirement and an interpretive process.

**Table 4.4: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Coordinated Response Across Units”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Cross-unit collaboration	10	27%
2. Structured pathways	8	22%
3. Coordination strain	7	19%
4. Message consistency	6	16%
5. Organisational learning	6	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

Also, decision pathways were described as deliberately structured. M3 noted that teams “moved together or not at all,” which echoed Heath’s (2010) depiction of crisis management as enterprise-wide risk governance. This logic was reinforced by Argenti (2013), who associated credibility with internal coherence more than message volume. In the same vein,

Frandsen and Johansen (2017) positioned coordination as discursive control, where meaning was stabilised through organisational unity. M3 described the practical reality of coordination:

“crisis work was organised like a relay. Technical staff checked facts, legal reviewed implications, customer service handled immediate concerns, and leadership approved what left the organisation. Nobody moved alone. If one part stalled, the entire system slowed. That created pressure, but it also prevented contradictions. Coordination was the only way to keep control once attention intensified.” (M3, *Interview, November*)

In contrast, M4 emphasised how coordination exposed strain rather than efficiency. This position departed from idealised models that assumed seamless cooperation. Instead, M4 depicted crisis as a stress test for systems, which reflected Mitroff’s (2005) view that crisis revealed institutional fractures. Likewise, Weick and Sutcliffe (2011) associated coordination breakdown with organisational vulnerability under pressure. M4 framed the limits of coordination in the following manner:

“coordination was never smooth in real time. Departments pushed back. Legal wanted caution. Marketing wanted reassurance. Operations wanted speed. Leadership had to arbitrate constantly. Crisis showed where cooperation existed and where rivalry lived. It forced alignment through pressure, not goodwill.” (M4, *Interview, November*)

In another view, the data portrayed coordination as protection against reputational damage. M1 noted that inconsistency “invited doubt,” which paralleled Coombs’s (2015) insistence that message conflict amplified distrust. The same logic was reflected in Fearn-Banks (2017), who warned against fragmented communication during heightened scrutiny. M1 added that

“mixed messages weakened everything. Customers noticed small differences and assumed dishonesty. When departments contradicted each other, confidence dropped. So coordination became less about internal order and more about public survival.” (M1, *Interview, November*)

Likewise, M2 depicted coordination as learning mechanism rather than routine procedure. This perspective echoed Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2011), who associated crisis with

institutional reflection. It also reflected the argument offered by Boin et al. (2013) that coordination generated capacity through practice rather than policy. M2 summarised this in a comparable view

“crisis forced collaboration that rarely happened before. People listened differently. Systems changed. Meetings became urgent. Coordination stopped being procedural and became instinctive.” (M2, Interview, November)

The data therefore indicated that coordination was shaped by urgency rather than design alone. The findings were reinforced by Stakeholder Theory through its emphasis on organisational responsiveness across audiences. SCCT also clarified why internal coherence reduced exposure by stabilising responsibility attribution. Coordination therefore functioned as strategic process, not administrative routine.

#### 4.3.4 Timing Tension in Crisis Communication

Timing emerged as an organisational dilemma rather than a scheduling issue. The themes summarised in Table 4.5 reflect the competing pressures surrounding timing during crisis communication. These frequencies show how participants weighed urgency, accuracy, and honesty when deciding when to speak. The table clarifies which timing dilemmas were most influential across accounts.

**Table 4.5: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Timing Tension in Crisis Communication”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Speed-accuracy tension	9	30%
2. Delay as concealment	8	27%
3. Premature messaging risk	7	23%
4. Timing and credibility	6	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

M2 stated that delay “felt dangerous,” yet premature disclosure also carried risk. This tension reflected Coombs’s (2007) assertion that response speed influenced accountability judgement. It also paralleled Seeger et al.’s (2003) view that early messaging reduced uncertainty when matched with clarity. The data therefore placed timing at the intersection of accuracy and urgency.

Another point was that organisational actors treated speed as relational signal. M1 observed that silence “created suspicion,” which aligned with Benoit’s (1997) argument that delay weakened defensive credibility. The position also remained consistent with Heath (2010), who connected silence with narrative loss during crisis. M1 explained the relational cost of delay as

“silence never helped. Once time passed, people filled gaps with their own stories. Delay felt like concealment. Even when facts were incomplete, absence of voice made problems look deliberate.” (M1, *Interview, November*)

In contrast, M4 warned against haste prioritised over verification. This account ran counter to simple speed advocacy. Instead, the data indicated that error risk rose when urgency overtook validation. This finding echoed Pearson and Mitroff’s (1993) emphasis on informed decision-making under stress. It also reflected Fink’s (1986) warning that premature response intensified damage. M4 articulated this position explaining that

“speaking too soon carried danger. If facts changed, trust suffered. Correction made things worse than waiting. So speed mattered, but certainty protected reputation.” (M4, *Interview, November*)

An alternative position revealed that timing was shown to affect leadership credibility. M3 stated that leadership hesitation “looked like fear,” which echoed Tourish’s (2013) argument that leadership presence signalled competence during instability. The evidence also remained consistent with Men’s (2014) emphasis on executive communication as trust anchor. M3 depicted timing and authority as

“when leadership delayed, rumours grew. People waited for figures at the top. Delay did not calm anyone. It unsettled the organisation first and the public after.” (M3, *Interview, November*)

In a consistent pattern, M2 explored trade-offs between speed and organisational integrity. This position paralleled Clampitt’s (2016) account of message discipline as legitimacy tool. It also reflected Frandsen and Johansen’s (2011) depiction of timing as discourse control. M2 expressed this tension

“you know...timing became negotiation. Teams pushed for immediacy. Leadership demanded certainty. The message moved only when both were satisfied. That delay created pressure, but it protected coherence.” (M2, *Interview, November*)

When viewed as a whole, the findings revealed that timing was neither technical nor neutral. It shaped credibility, authority, and exposure patterns. SCCT explained the sensitivity of timing through responsibility judgement. Image Restoration Theory clarified why early communication carried identity weight. Stakeholder Theory accounted for pressure across audiences that intensified speed expectations. Timing therefore operated as strategic condition rather than logistic decision.

#### **4.4 Crisis Communication and Customer Perceptions**

This section shifts attention from organisational intent to customer interpretation of crisis communication. It explores how customers evaluate credibility, transparency, speed, and tone when organisations respond to disruption. The analysis highlights the criteria audiences use to judge sincerity and trustworthiness during crisis episodes.

##### **4.4.1 Credibility Through Clear Communication**

Customers described credibility as a practical judgement made in minutes, not a belief formed gradually. As presented in Table 4.6, the patterns associated with credibility illustrate the communicative cues customers relied on when forming judgments about honesty. The

distribution emphasises clarity, tone, and presence as central to audience interpretation. This supports the argument that credibility depends on disciplined, focused communication.

**Table 4.6: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Credibility Through Clear Communication”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Clarity and simplicity	14	33%
2. Non-technical tone	10	24%
3. Leadership presence	9	21%
4. Early explanation	9	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

The data showed that clarity, directness, and human presence determined whether messages were accepted. This position was consistent with the account advanced by Coombs (2007), who argued that credibility formed through immediate cues in crisis messaging rather than through corporate reputation alone. The data also remained consistent with Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003), who treated clarity as the gate through which trust passed under uncertainty. In several accounts, technical language was rejected. Mannered language was also dismissed. As CU3 put it succinctly, “vague words raised more questions than answers.”

his observation was supported by participants distinguished explanation from justification. Messages were judged credible when they explained what happened and what followed, not when they defended the organisation. This echoed Benoit’s (1997) emphasis on explanation as identity protection rather than image decoration. It also reflected Fearn-Banks’s (2017) position that credibility grew out of narrative coherence more than promotional stance. In the present data, clarity therefore did not function as style. It operated as signal. CU7 led with emphasis on simplicity

“when brands spoke clearly, things settled faster. I did not need long statements. I needed honesty. If they explained the issue and what they

were doing in simple terms, it felt believable. Whenever words became technical or confusing, it felt like something was being hidden.” (CU7, Interview, November)

In contrast, credibility collapsed when statements were overloaded with legal terms or slogans. This ran counter to the assumption that formality projected competence. Instead, the data echoed Heath’s (2010) claim that credibility during crisis rested on reasoning rather than polish. It also paralleled the view stated by Cornelissen (2014), who warned that rhetorical excess weakened confidence when audiences expected explanation. In contrast, CU12 described this tension directly:

“the moment communication sounded like marketing, I stopped believing it. When statements felt prepared for newspapers rather than people, trust dropped. Clear words mattered more than beautiful sentences.” (CU12, Interview, November)

From another angle, credibility was shown to depend on the presence of senior figures. Short remarks such as “let the CEO speak” appeared repeatedly across accounts. This finding reflected the account provided by Men (2014), who associated trust building with leader visibility. It also echoed Kim and Reber’s (2011) position that authority merged with believability during crisis contexts. In an alternative account, CU5 associated clarity with leadership presence “I wanted to hear a real person speak. When the message came from the top, it felt serious. When it came as a statement on a page, it felt distant.”

In addition to this, credibility was shown to depend on time-bound explanations. Participants stated that communication had to address *now* rather than *later*. This mirrored the position advanced by Coombs (2015) that speed shaped interpretation as much as content. It also remained consistent with Argenti (2013), who linked clear messaging with perceived organisational readiness. In a comparable view, CU18 framed clarity as immediacy “once they explained early, I relaxed. When they delayed, I worried. Clear words early changed everything.”

Across the accounts, credibility did not operate as an inherited property of the brand but as an outcome produced through communication practices. The findings were supported by SCCT, which explained how responsibility signals shaped interpretation during crisis. Image Restoration Theory further made sense of the way framing influenced how organisational identity was judged, particularly when admission and explanation were involved. Stakeholder Theory also remained relevant by showing why customers treated explanation as an entitlement rather than a favour. Credibility therefore rested in clarity and responsiveness rather than in corporate reputation alone.

#### 4.4.2 Transparency as the Measure of Honesty

Transparency was presented as moral behaviour rather than information quantity. Customers did not equate transparency with long statements. They associated it with admission, explanation, and corrective action. This position reflected the argument offered by Rawlins (2008) that transparency rested in conduct rather than disclosure density. Table 4.7 outlines the cues customers used to assess transparency. The frequencies reflect how admission of fault, avoidance behaviours, and evidence-based action shaped judgments of honesty. This table strengthens the earlier analysis by showing that transparency extends beyond disclosure into demonstrable conduct.

**Table 4.7: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Transparency as the Measure of Honesty”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Admission of fault	11	31%
2. Defensiveness	10	28%
3. Evidence-based action	9	25%
4. Transparency and loyalty	6	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

The data also remained consistent with Christensen and Cornelissen (2011), who situated transparency within organisational integrity instead of messaging volume. An additional issue emerged when customers distinguished between admission and exposure. Fault was respected when acknowledged. Silence was treated as avoidance. This distinction echoed the position advanced by Benoit (1997), who separated explanation from evasion. It also mirrored the view stated by Ulmer (2001), who associated ethical credibility with acceptance of responsibility. Within the data, transparency therefore functioned as ethical posture rather than communication style. CU4 emphasised admission before presenting “I did not expect perfection. I expected honesty. The moment they admitted error, the situation felt human. When they acted like nothing happened, anger replaced trust.”

In contrast, defensive tone was interpreted as dishonesty. Participants associated unwillingness to acknowledge fault with future risk. This stood in tension with the institutional instinct to defend legality. Instead, the data reflected Coombs’s (2015) position that denial intensified reputational vulnerability. It also remained consistent with Hearit (2006), who warned that defensive language created narrative distance. CU15 explained how defence was read:

“When messages sounded defensive, the communication was interpreted as an attempt to avoid responsibility rather than address the problem. This created the impression that blame was being redirected instead of acknowledged. The situation deteriorated because the organisation appeared more concerned with protecting its image than with recognising customer experience and impact.” (CU15, *Interview, November*)

A further interpretation indicated that transparency was associated with evidence rather than reassurance. Customers wanted to *see* action. This echoed the argument provided by Frandsen and Johansen (2011), who associated credibility with demonstrable change. It also

paralleled the position taken by Boin et al. (2013), who linked transparency with visible reform. CU2 made this explicit:

“Words were not sufficient to restore trust after the incident. Conviction emerged only when tangible actions were observed. I paid attention to whether repairs were carried out, recalls were initiated, or internal policies were revised. In those visible changes, honesty became evident and commitment became possible.” (CU2, *Interview, November*)

Reinforcing this position, transparency influenced loyalty calculation. Customers described how honesty shaped future behaviour. This finding echoed the account advanced by Morgan and Hunt (1994), who associated trust with relational continuity. It remained consistent with Einwiller and Johansen (2012), who placed transparency at the centre of reputation repair. In an additional account, CU9 connected honesty with commitment:

“Continued commitment depended on openness. When communication was direct and sincere, I remained supportive of the brand. However, when information was concealed or withheld, trust deteriorated quickly. In that situation, continued association became unjustifiable, and withdrawal followed as a practical consequence rather than an emotional reaction.” (CU9, *Interview, November*)

When viewed as a whole, transparency functioned less as information delivery and more as ethical conduct. SCCT explained why admission altered responsibility evaluation, while Image Restoration Theory clarified how honesty reshaped organisational identity following disruption. Stakeholder Theory further demonstrated why openness was treated as a duty owed to customers rather than a strategic choice. Transparency therefore operated as the basis of relational trust rather than as a communication technique.

#### **4.4.3 Speed as Customer Respect**

Speed was interpreted as social conduct rather than technical efficiency. Customers treated response time as an indicator of respect, care, and seriousness. Delayed acknowledgement was read as disregard, while timely updates were framed as attentiveness. This interpretation

reflected the position advanced by Coombs (2015) that response velocity shaped responsibility judgements in crisis. It also echoed Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003), who associated early communication with uncertainty reduction. The distribution in Table 4.8 demonstrates how timing was read as a relational signal rather than merely a procedural decision. Participants repeatedly treated timeliness as evidence of care. This table supports the argument that customers interpret speed as a reflection of organisational regard.

**Table 4.8: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Speed as Customer Respect”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Speed as respect	12	30%
2. Silence and anxiety	11	27%
3. Early updates accepted	9	23%
4. Memory impact	8	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

Within the present data, speed therefore functioned as relational signal, not operational metric. Added to this, several views described how silence amplified anxiety. Perspectives such as “delay meant hiding” (CU6) and “waiting felt deliberate” (CU14) appeared repeatedly across the enquiry. This pattern remained consistent with Benoit’s (1997) view that absence of response weakened defensive credibility. It also paralleled Heath’s (2010) argument that silence conceded narrative space in crisis contexts. Furthermore, CU11 captured the emotional interpretation of delay before presenting the following findings

“When I did not hear anything for days, my mind went to the worst place. I kept asking myself what they were not telling us. A single message, even a short one, would have changed how I felt. Instead, the silence made it seem like we did not matter. It felt more like we were being avoided than protected.” (CU11, Interview, November)

In contrast, speed was not equated with recklessness. Customers distinguished between early engagement and premature certainty. They tolerated incomplete information if communication remained consistent. This position ran counter to the assumption that

audiences demanded perfection. Instead, it reflected Pearson and Clair's (1998) position that legitimacy during crisis emerged from engagement rather than from precision alone. In contrast, CU4 discussed this distinction directly

“I did not need to know everything at once. What I needed was reassurance that something was being done. Even short updates would have helped me breathe easier. Waiting for a perfect explanation only made me more anxious and uncertain about what was really happening.”  
(CU4, Interview, November)

From another perspective, speed influenced memory. Participants recounted that delayed replies “stayed longer” than any apology that followed. This finding echoed Argenti's (2013) claim that slow response created enduring reputational harm. It also remained consistent with Fearn-Banks's (2017) observation that early acknowledgement softened long-term judgement. Alternatively, CU19 articulated this relationship between timing and recall

“The delay affected me more than the actual problem. Even after everything was corrected, I could not forget how long it took before they spoke. What stayed with me was not only what went wrong, but how long it felt like we were left in the dark about it.” (CU19, Interview, November)

Similarly, rapid response was linked with brand reassurance. Participants described feeling “seen” when communication was swift. This view reflected Men's (2014) work on relational engagement and mirrored Kim and Reber's (2011) position that immediacy fostered emotional trust. In a comparable view, CU2 associated fast response with reassurance “when they replied early, I calmed down. Speed told me they cared.”

Across the data, speed was thus interpreted as respect-in-action. SCCT clarified why timing influenced responsibility judgement. Image Restoration Theory explained why early acknowledgement preserved identity even when resolution took longer. Stakeholder Theory accounted for customers' expectation of responsiveness as obligation rather than courtesy. Speed therefore shaped relational stability more than technical outcome.

#### 4.4.4 Defensiveness as Trust Breakdown

Defensiveness emerged as the clearest trigger of distrust. Customers did not describe it as neutral caution. It was read as evasion, arrogance, or concealment. Statements that appeared protective of the organisation rather than informative to the customer were rejected. This pattern was consistent with Hearit’s (2006) argument that defensive messaging intensified reputational exposure. It also reflected Coombs’s (2015) position that denial strategies aggravated public interpretation. Table 4.9 summarises the interpretive signals that triggered distrust in customer accounts. The spread of Themes highlights how denial, blame, and scripted responses quickly weakened confidence. This numerical summary reinforces the earlier argument that defensiveness obstructs recovery.

**Table 4.9: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Defensiveness as Trust Breakdown”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Denial as evasion	12	33%
2. Blame shifting	9	25%
3. Scripted responses	8	22%
4. Reduced forgiveness	7	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

Moreover, defensive tone was interpreted more harshly than silence. Participants reacted strongly to language that shifted blame or minimised harm. Short embedded findings such as “they blamed others” (CU16) and “they spoke like lawyers” (CU8) captured this reaction. This reading remained consistent with Cornelissen (2014), who warned that risk-heavy language reduced communicative credibility. Additionally, CU10 expressed irritation with defensive posture

“The moment they started explaining why it was not their fault, I stopped believing what they were saying. Everything felt calculated instead of honest. It no longer sounded like a real response to a real problem. It felt

rehearsed, like something written to protect themselves rather than speak to us. Instead of concern, I heard control.” (CU10, Interview, November)

In contrast, customers responded positively to admission over legal protection. They distinguished between accountability and caution. Defensive language was judged as self-centred. This finding reflected Benoit’s (1997) position that acceptance softened identity evaluation more than justification. It also echoed Ulmer’s (2001) association between ethical acknowledgement and trust renewal. In contrast, CU1 described this contrast clearly:

“When a brand admitted that it had made a mistake, my attitude softened immediately. It felt human, and it felt honest. But whenever the message shifted to denial, my frustration grew. Hearing that they were not responsible made me angry, because it sounded like an excuse instead of accountability.” (CU1, Interview, November)

From another perspective, defensiveness was associated with repetition. Scripted statements were dismissed as insincere. Participants treated repetition as avoidance rather than consistency. This echoed Frandsen and Johansen’s (2011) position that narrative stagnation invited suspicion. It also remained consistent with Boin et al.’s (2013) view that evolution in communication signalled learning. This view ran counter to CU13’s perspective which framed repetition as resistance “they kept repeating one line. That felt like refusal, not reassurance.” Building on this, defensiveness reduced willingness to forgive. Participants stated that blame avoidance created emotional distance. This finding paralleled Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) model, which located trust as basis of commitment. It also reflected Einwiller and Johansen’s (2012) emphasis on sincerity as recovery anchor. Extending this argument, CU17 linked defence with retreat

“Once their messages became defensive, I pulled back emotionally. I did not feel connected to the brand anymore. I started paying attention to other options and imagining myself elsewhere. It felt like the relationship was already damaged, and I no longer saw a reason to stay loyal.” (CU17, Interview, November)

The data therefore indicated that defensiveness functioned as trust erosion mechanism rather than protection strategy. SCCT explained why denial increased responsibility judgement.

Image Restoration Theory accounted for identity loss under defensive framing. Stakeholder Theory clarified why customers demanded accountability as moral duty rather than business tactic. Defensiveness thus stood as barrier rather than buffer.

#### **4.5 Post-Crisis Recovery and Brand Loyalty**

This section analyses how crisis experiences shape customer loyalty after the immediate disruption has passed. It focuses on how behaviour, memory, and perceived accountability influence continued commitment or withdrawal. The discussion positions loyalty as conditional and actively negotiated rather than automatic or enduring.

##### **4.5.1 Loyalty as Conditional Commitment**

Loyalty was described across the data as a conditional relationship rather than a permanent state. Customers treated loyalty as a position that could be revised after a crisis, while managers tended to describe loyalty as a relationship that could be repaired but not guaranteed. This pattern reflected the commitment-trust model advanced by Morgan and Hunt (1994), which treated loyalty as a function of trust and perceived fairness. It also remained consistent with the work of Einwiller and Johansen (2012), who argued that loyalty after crisis depended on perceived sincerity and care rather than on pre-crisis familiarity with the brand. Table 4.10 outlines how customers renegotiated loyalty following crisis events. The distribution shows the conditions under which commitment either held or weakened. It clarifies which loyalty considerations influenced post-crisis behaviour most strongly.

**Table 4.10: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Loyalty as Conditional Commitment”**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Code Frequency</b>	<b>Code Percentage</b>
1. Loyalty reassessment	11	29%
2. Accountability expectation	10	26%
3. Safety concerns	9	24%

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
4. Relational history	8	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

From the customer side, loyalty was repeatedly presented as a deliberate choice. Participants described how they reassessed their relationship with a brand after disruption and were willing to remain only when they believed that the organisation had accepted responsibility and taken corrective action. Short phrases such as “I stayed because they were honest” (CU3) and “I left because nothing changed” (CU11) illustrated this evaluative stance. This view reflected Grönroos’s (2007) relational perspective that loyalty after service failure rested on recovery quality and perceived justice. Additionally, CU6 explained that ongoing commitment was re-negotiated rather than assumed:

“I did not feel tied to the brand forever. After the crisis I weighed the relationship again. I asked myself whether the way they handled it showed respect and responsibility. Loyalty became a choice that I made based on what I saw, not on what I used to feel before the problem.”  
(CU6, Interview, November)

Managers also acknowledged that loyalty was fragile, but their views tended to emphasise the responsibility of the organisation to rebuild confidence through structured effort. This position reflected Fombrun and van Riel’s (2004) view that reputation and loyalty were rebuilt through consistent behaviour across time. It also remained consistent with Coombs’s (2015) argument that post-crisis loyalty depended on how responsibility was addressed and communicated. M2 stressed that continued patronage could not be taken for granted:

“we knew that loyalty would not simply return because customers had been with us for years. Once a crisis occurred, we had to earn that trust again. That meant changing what needed to be changed and showing people that we were different from the organisation that allowed the event to happen in the first place.” (M2, Interview, November)

At the same time, several customers described loyalty as contingent on perceived safety. They indicated that they might forgive inconvenience but not risk to life or property. This

position mirrored Aaker's (1996) treatment of brand equity as vulnerable when core expectations such as safety and reliability were violated. It also supported Dowling's (2006) argument that reputational risk changed the cost-benefit calculation that underpinned loyalty.

From another perspective, CU14 linked loyalty directly to confidence in safety:

“once I felt unsafe, loyalty weakened immediately. I could tolerate delays or minor mistakes, but I could not remain with a brand that I believed might endanger my family. At that point, the relationship shifted from support to protection of myself.” (*CU14, Interview, November*)

Managers, however, placed more emphasis on the emotional history between the brand and its customers. They described loyalty as something that could be preserved if the organisation responded with empathy and openness. This reflected the work of Hess (2008), who linked emotional bonds with willingness to stay after failure, and remained consistent with Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger's (2011) argument that respectful communication helped to sustain identification with the organisation. Similarly, M4 highlighted the role of relationship history in continued support

“we believed that if we had built a solid relationship with customers over time, they would be willing to stay with us if we handled the crisis with honesty and care. We did not expect everyone to remain, but we believed our history with them would matter if our response showed that we valued that relationship.” (*M4, Interview, November*)

Across the findings, loyalty therefore appeared as conditional and negotiated. The customers emphasised protection, fairness, and safety, while managers focused on rebuilding and the strength of prior relationships. The findings were supported by SCCT in its focus on responsibility and response as drivers of post-crisis attitudes, by Image Restoration Theory in its emphasis on identity repair, and by Stakeholder Theory in its focus on ongoing obligations between organisations and their publics. Loyalty did not return automatically after crisis; it was reconstituted through behaviour, communication, and the balance between risk and trust.

#### 4.5.2 Behaviour Over Statement

Across both groups, behaviour carried greater weight than verbal reassurance. Customers repeatedly indicated that they listened to messages but judged the brand on what followed, while managers described recovery in terms of corrective action, process change, and long-term improvement. This pattern reflected Benoit's (1997) assertion that image repair depended on concrete responses rather than on rhetorical performance. It also echoed the position advanced by Frandsen and Johansen (2011), who situated credibility in visible organisational change during and after crisis. Table 4.11 highlights customers' preference for demonstrable action over verbal reassurance. The frequencies reflect the premium placed on visible change. This supports the earlier claim that trust repair must be enacted, not merely communicated.

**Table 4.11: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Behaviour Over Statement”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Corrective action	13	33%
2. Structural reforms	10	25%
3. Interpersonal treatment	9	23%
4. Visible internal change	7	19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

For many customers, what the organisation did after the initial message functioned as the primary test of sincerity. Participants referred to recalls, repairs, refunds, policy changes, and revised procedures as “evidence” that the brand had taken the situation seriously. Short statements such as “recall spoke louder than apology” (CU9) and “process change convinced me more than press conferences” (CU18) reflected this orientation. This view mirrored Boin et al.'s (2013) notion of learning as the hallmark of effective recovery. Beyond this, CU9 differentiated between listening to communication and judging outcomes:

“I heard everything that was said, but I believed what they did. The statements were important during the first few days, but after that I watched for real change. Did they call people back to fix the problem, did they change how they handled complaints, did they contact affected customers directly? Those actions showed whether the brand was serious.” (CU9, Interview, November)

Managers also foregrounded behavioural change, but their accounts highlighted internal systems rather than individual gestures. They spoke about reviewing procedures, tightening checks, retraining staff, and adjusting decision flows. This perspective reflected Argenti’s (2013) emphasis on structural response as a basis for reputational stability, and remained consistent with Fearn-Banks (2017), who linked sustained change with credible recovery. In a related account, M3 described recovery as a sequence of internal adjustments:

“the real work of recovery took place inside the organisation. We reviewed our inspection systems, changed how information moved between departments, and strengthened the steps we used to approve critical decisions. Communication to the public was a part of that process, but meaningful recovery meant altering the structures that had allowed the crisis to occur.” (M3, Interview, November)

From the customer side, behaviour also included how staff interacted with them after the crisis. Participants noted whether frontline employees responded with courtesy, patience, and information. This linked with the service recovery literature, particularly Grönroos (2007) and Tax et al. (1998), who argued that interpersonal treatment during recovery shaped future loyalty. The present data mirrored this position, as customers described “how they treated me at the branch” (CU5) as part of their decision to stay or leave. Seen from a different standpoint, CU5 focused on the everyday expression of recovery:

“I looked at how staff behaved when I went back after the issue. Were they defensive, or were they willing to listen and help me? Recovery was not only about technical fixes. It was also about how they treated me when I came with concerns.” (CU5, Interview, November)

Managers recognised that recovery was judged externally but emphasised that some of the most substantial changes were invisible to customers. This position reflected the view advanced by Shrivastava (1993) that crisis prompted deep structural review that might not be

immediately apparent to outsiders. However, several organisational accounts also acknowledged that hidden action had limited impact if it was not communicated. In another instance, M1 summarised this tension between internal adjustment and external perception:

“we knew that many of our changes were inside the organisation and that customers might not see them. That meant we had to find ways to show what we had done without turning recovery into a public relations exercise. If behaviour changed but nobody could see or feel it, trust remained fragile.” (M1, *Interview, November*)

When the twenty customer accounts were compared with the four managerial accounts, a consistent pattern appeared. Both groups placed behaviour above statement, but customers judged action through its visible and interpersonal effects, while managers described broader organisational reforms. SCCT clarified why corrective action softened negative attributions, Image Restoration Theory explained why sustained behavioural change supported identity repair, and Stakeholder Theory accounted for the expectation that organisations would demonstrate improvement across time. Recovery was therefore anchored in practice, with communication required to make that practice legible.

#### **4.5.3 Memory Shapes Future Choice**

Memory emerged as a central mechanism through which customers and managers understood the long-term effects of crisis. Customers described how past experiences remained active when they made later decisions about purchasing, recommending, or avoiding a brand. Managers, in turn, recognised that previous crises continued to shape how current communication was received. This pattern reflected Aaker’s (1996) treatment of brand associations as cumulative and durable, and it remained consistent with Dowling’s (2006) depiction of reputation as a stored evaluation based on prior encounters. As shown in Table 4.12, memory served as the interpretive lens through which customers evaluated present

responses. The thematic distribution reveals how past experiences shaped trust or avoidance. This underscores the long interpretive life of crisis events.

**Table 4.12: Frequency Distribution of Themes in “Memory Shapes Future Choice”**

Themes	Code Frequency	Code Percentage
1. Memory as interpretive lens	11	31%
2. Negative memory	9	25%
3. Positive recovery	8	22%
4. Expectation gaps with managers	7	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Data (2025)

Customer accounts showed that memory operated both as a warning and as a resource. Negative experiences led some customers to avoid the brand in the future, while positive recovery experiences encouraged others to stay. Short expressions such as “I never forgot how they delayed” (CU19) and “I remembered that they handled it well” (CU7) captured this dual function. The present findings mirrored Walsh et al.’s (2014) work on customer memory, which highlighted the way prior episodes shaped ongoing relational decisions. Equally important, CU3 described the role of memory in interpreting later communication:

“every new message that came from the brand passed through what I had seen before. If they had handled the earlier crisis poorly, I listened with suspicion. If they had responded well, I was more willing to trust what they said. Memory worked like a lens that either sharpened or softened my reaction.” (CU3, Interview, November)

Managers also acknowledged that memory constrained their communicative options. They recognised that a current message might be judged in light of an earlier failure. This recognition reflected Fombrun and van Riel’s (2004) understanding of reputation as a historic record rather than a campaign outcome, and it remained consistent with Coombs’s (2015) view that prior crises influenced stakeholder expectations in subsequent events. In an alternative account, M1 treated memory as a continuing boundary for organisational messaging:

“we could not act as if the past had disappeared. Customers and the public remembered previous incidents. That meant we had to speak with that history in mind. If we ignored it, people saw us as dishonest or careless about what had happened before.” (*M1, Interview, November*)

At the same time, both groups recognised that memory could support loyalty when recovery had been strong. Customers who felt respected during a previous crisis described being more inclined to remain with the brand, even when other options existed. This mirrored Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) claim that trust moderated the impact of negative events across time, and echoed Einwiller and Johansen’s (2012) finding that successful recovery episodes strengthened long-term relationships. In an additional account, CU7 emphasised that a positive recovery experience shaped later decisions

“I remembered that they had handled an earlier issue very well. Because of that, I was more patient when another problem occurred. I felt that they had earned that patience from me through their earlier conduct.” (*CU7, Interview, November*)

However, there were also accounts where managerial expectations about memory stood in tension with customer positions. Some managers believed that time would gradually reduce the impact of past crises, whereas several customers insisted that serious failures “did not fade” (*CU10*). This contrast reflected Dowling’s (2006) argument that organisations often underestimated the persistence of negative associations.

In another instance, M4 hoped that time would soften earlier events, while CU10 resisted that assumption:

“we believed that if we continued to perform well and avoided new issues, the impact of the past crisis would reduce. We expected that people would eventually focus more on our present conduct than on the earlier problem.” (*M4, Interview, November*)

“I did not feel that time erased what happened. I still remembered the way they delayed and how they spoke then. New messages could not cancel that memory; they had to work through it.” (*CU10, Interview, November*)

Across the twenty customer accounts and the four organisational accounts, memory therefore appeared as an active and continuing influence on brand choice. It shaped how new information was heard, how trust was recalculated, and how loyalty was either continued or withdrawn. SCCT helped to explain why earlier attributions of responsibility continued to matter, Image Restoration Theory clarified how identity was carried forward from one episode to another, and Stakeholder Theory emphasised the ethical dimension of remembering, in which both harm and repair were kept in view. Memory did not sit passively in the background; it functioned as a decisive reference point in post-crisis loyalty decisions.

#### **4.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented findings organised around the three research objectives. It focused on organisational practice, customer interpretation, and post-crisis loyalty. The chapter relied on participant voice to show shared patterns and points of difference. The next chapter interprets these findings and links them to theory and prior studies.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter closed the study by providing a synthesis of the research, drawing conclusions from the findings, and presenting recommendations for practice and future inquiry. The study examined crisis communication and brand loyalty within the automobile industry, with a focus on how strategic communication practices shaped organisational response, customer interpretation, and post-crisis recovery. The research was conducted in Ghana and involved organisational actors within automobile firms as well as customers with direct experience of brand communication during crisis situations. This final chapter therefore consolidated the outcome of the study and presented the implications arising from the analysis.

#### **5.2 Summary of the Study**

This study investigated how crisis communication was practised within the automobile industry and how such practices influenced customer trust and loyalty. It focused on three interconnected concerns: organisational strategies for managing crisis, customer reactions to crisis communication, and the effect of post-crisis actions on loyalty. A qualitative research design was employed in order to obtain in-depth insight into both managerial decision-making and customer interpretation, allowing the study to capture how crisis was understood, communicated, and evaluated from different positions within the industry.

## **5.3 Summary of Key Findings**

### **5.3.1 RQ1: How are strategic public relations practices employed in managing crises?**

The study found that organisations approached crisis as a condition that had implications beyond technical failure and extended into reputation, regulation, and public confidence. Crisis management was therefore treated as a strategic matter rather than as an operational incident. Leadership played a central role in shaping responses, with authority concentrated at executive level and communication controlled through hierarchical structures. Coordination across organisational units was also shown to be necessary to maintaining consistency and credibility, while timing emerged as a critical judgement factor that required balancing urgency with accuracy. Together, these practices indicated that crisis communication within the automobile industry was managed as a high-level organisational function rather than as a peripheral task.

### **5.3.2 RQ2: 2. In what ways does crisis management communication influence customers' perceptions of brand trust and loyalty?**

Customers evaluated crisis communication through clarity, openness, speed, and moral bearing. Communication was interpreted not only in terms of content but also in terms of tone, presence, and responsiveness. Messages that appeared evasive or defensive were read negatively, while transparent explanation and prompt acknowledgement were associated with credibility. Delays were interpreted as a lack of care or accountability, whereas visible engagement was perceived as respect. Customers therefore drew conclusions about credibility and trust less from the existence of communication and more from how communication unfolded during crisis situations.

### **5.3.3 RQ3: 3. How do post-crisis recovery strategies contribute to rebuilding and sustaining brand loyalty?**

The findings also indicated that loyalty following crisis was not guaranteed and did not automatically return once issues were resolved. Instead, loyalty was re-evaluated by customers based on perceptions of organisational responsibility, behavioural change, and sincerity in recovery efforts. Actions taken after crisis were found to be more influential than statements issued during crisis, while memory of prior experiences continued to shape future decision-making. Recovery was therefore revealed as a process rather than a moment, with loyalty emerging as a relational outcome based on behaviour, consistency, and historical interaction rather than on brand attachment alone.

### **5.4 Conclusions**

This study established that crisis communication within the automobile industry functioned as a strategic organisational activity rather than as a reactive communication exercise. Crisis was treated as an institutional condition that affected legitimacy, authority, and long-term positioning, not merely as an operational disruption. Communication was therefore embedded in leadership structures, decision hierarchies, and cross-unit coordination processes. The study also clarified that effective crisis management depended less on the technical correction of error and more on how authority was exercised, how timing was managed, and how organisational coherence was maintained during disruption. Crisis communication was, in this sense, a form of organisational governance rather than a publicity response.

The study further clarified that customers were not passive recipients of crisis messages but active interpreters of organisational conduct. Communication was assessed not only for informational content but also for moral weight, credibility, and intent. What became clearer was that customers treated clarity, openness, and responsiveness as signals of organisational

integrity. Communication that appeared defensive or evasive weakened trust, while acknowledgement and explanation strengthened confidence. Crisis communication therefore operated simultaneously as information exchange and ethical performance, shaping how organisations were judged beyond the immediate event.

Finally, this study took the position that loyalty following crisis was not a continuation of habit but a reconstituted relationship. Customers recalculated commitment based on how responsibly organisations acted, how visibly change was enacted, and how consistently recovery unfolded. Loyalty was not restored by time alone and did not depend on reassurance alone. Instead, it was built through behaviour, memory, and perceived responsibility. Crisis communication thus did not merely protect reputation; it structured the future of the brand-customer relationship.

## **5.5 Recommendations**

### **5.5.1 Recommendations for Practice**

Automobile firms should treat crisis communication as an institutional responsibility anchored in leadership rather than as a task delegated solely to communication units. Communication protocols should be formally integrated into executive decision structures, with clear authority lines and defined response responsibilities. Firms should prioritise early acknowledgement, transparent explanation, and sustained engagement rather than defensive positioning or message delay. Emphasis should be placed on behavioural correction, including procedural reform and visible improvement, rather than on statement issuance alone. In addition, organisations should invest in cross-unit coordination systems that enable consistent messaging and rapid internal verification during crisis situations. Recovery

strategies should therefore focus on restoring confidence through action, coherence, and ethical conduct rather than through promotion.

### **5.5.2 Recommendations for Policy and Industry**

Industry bodies and regulators should strengthen crisis communication standards within the automobile sector by developing formal guidelines that emphasise transparency, accountability, and timeliness. Regulatory frameworks should require organisations to disclose safety-related failures promptly and to communicate corrective measures clearly to the public. Associations within the industry should also establish shared response protocols and capacity-building programmes that support organisational preparedness and ethical communication. In addition, oversight mechanisms should be improved to ensure that post-crisis reforms are not limited to compliance statements but are reflected in observable operational change. Regulatory practice should therefore move beyond documentation review toward continuous monitoring of institutional conduct.

### **5.5.3 Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should examine crisis communication across multiple industries in order to assess whether the patterns identified in this study extend beyond the automobile sector. Longitudinal designs would provide deeper insight into how loyalty develops or declines over time following crisis events. Scholars should also consider comparative studies across geographic regions to explore how cultural, regulatory, and market differences influence customer interpretation. In addition, mixed-method approaches would allow further examination of the relationship between communication processes and behavioural outcomes.

Greater attention should be given to digital platforms as sites of crisis interaction, particularly in relation to speed, public pressure, and message interpretation.

### **5.6 Limitations of the Study**

This study was confined to the automobile industry, which allowed for sector-specific insight but limited direct application to other contexts. The research was also geographically situated in Ghana, which provided contextual depth while restricting broader generalisation. The sample size was intentionally bounded in order to permit in-depth engagement with participants rather than broad coverage, and this prioritisation supported analytical depth over statistical representation. The exclusive use of qualitative interviews meant that the analysis focused on interpretation and experience rather than numerical measurement; however, this limitation was addressed through careful sampling across organisational and customer groups, systematic thematic analysis, and triangulation across accounts. These decisions strengthened validity through depth, coherence, and methodological consistency rather than through scale.

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## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW GUIDES

#### INTERVIEW GUIDE A - ORGANIZATIONAL PARTICIPANTS

*(For PR, communication, or marketing executives in the automobile industry)*

##### **Informed Consent**

The purpose of this interview is to gain insight into how your organization manages crises and how such efforts influence brand loyalty. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw or skip any question at any time. All information will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

##### **Section 1: Strategic Public Relations and Crisis Management**

*(Objective 1)*

1. How does your organization identify and define a crisis?
2. What principles or communication frameworks guide your crisis response?
3. How are crisis-related communication responsibilities distributed across departments?
4. How does leadership involvement shape your crisis response and message delivery?
5. What challenges do you face in coordinating effective crisis communication?

##### **Section 2: Post-Crisis Recovery and Brand Loyalty**

*(Objective 3)*

6. What deliberate communication efforts are made to rebuild brand credibility after a crisis?
7. How do you maintain long-term trust and loyalty among stakeholders following a crisis?
8. In what ways do you incorporate stakeholder feedback into post-crisis brand rebuilding?
9. How do past crises inform your current communication and brand relationship strategies?

##### **Closing**

10. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding how crisis communication supports lasting brand loyalty?

*(Thank participant and restate confidentiality.)*

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE B - CLIENTS / CUSTOMERS**

*(For car owners, buyers, or users familiar with an automobile brand)*

### **Informed Consent**

This interview seeks to understand how customers perceive brand communication during crises and how such experiences influence their trust and loyalty. Your participation is voluntary, and your identity will remain confidential. You may stop or skip any question at any time.

### **Section 1: Crisis Communication and Customer Perceptions**

*(Objective 2)*

1. How do you usually receive information about automobile brands during difficult situations?
2. What makes a brand's message during such times appear believable or sincere to you?
3. How do you judge whether a brand is being transparent or defensive in its communication?
4. How do such communications affect your willingness to continue supporting the brand?
5. What factors influence your level of trust in a brand after a crisis?

### **Section 2: Post-Crisis Recovery and Brand Loyalty**

*(Objective 3)*

6. How do you react when a brand tries to restore its image after a crisis?
7. What actions make you feel valued or reassured as a customer?
8. How does your memory of a brand's past crisis communication affect your present loyalty?
9. What could automobile brands do better to maintain customer loyalty after crises?

### **Closing**

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about how brands should communicate during and after crises?

*(Thank participant and restate confidentiality.)*