



Phenomenological Exploration of Crisis Management Experiences in Public Relations Professionals in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) has evolved significantly in the digital age, with crisis management becoming an increasingly complex field that involves rapid adaptation to new media platforms. While much has been studied regarding strategic crisis communication, the subjective experiences of PR professionals in managing reputational crises have been less explored. Specifically, the emotional and personal aspects of how PR practitioners cope with digital crisis management remain underexamined. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of PR professionals using a phenomenological approach to better understand the emotional labor and strategic responses involved in managing reputation crises. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten PR professionals revealed key themes: the emotional toll of crisis management, the strategic use of digital tools, and the need for rapid adaptation to digital media. The findings demonstrate that PR professionals face significant emotional challenges while balancing strategic decisions, and that digital tools are crucial for real-time crisis resolution. These results suggest that emotional resilience and digital competency are critical components of effective crisis management, which should be integrated into training and support for PR professionals. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of crisis management in the digital era, offering new insights into the emotional and strategic dynamics at play and highlighting the need for future research into the personal and professional development of PR practitioners.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the field of public relations (PR) has undergone a significant transformation due to the rapid development of digital technologies and the increasing reliance on social media platforms. Public relations, traditionally focused on managing communication between organizations and their publics, has had to adapt to the evolving digital landscape, where information spreads rapidly and can have immediate consequences. Crisis management in public relations, once primarily concerned with traditional media channels, now involves real-time responses on social media, making it an increasingly complex and dynamic field of study (Valverde-Berrococo dkk., 2022). This shift has raised important questions regarding how PR professionals handle reputation crises in a digital age, where public perception is heavily influenced by online discourse.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies not only in the evolving practices of public relations but also in the impact these practices have on individuals and organizations. The crisis management process in the digital era has profound implications for both the emotional and professional experiences of PR practitioners. Their ability to navigate these crises influences not only organizational outcomes but also their own emotional resilience and job satisfaction. As information is disseminated at unprecedented speeds, the need for a rapid, empathetic, and strategic response has placed increasing pressure on PR professionals to perform under high-stress conditions, raising questions about their personal experiences and perceptions during such times.

This study calls for an exploration of the lived experiences of PR professionals, particularly their subjective feelings and interpretations when managing reputational crises in the digital environment. Understanding how these individuals experience and make sense of these crises is essential to developing more effective communication strategies (Blanco-Castilla dkk., 2022). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on uncovering the essence of human experience, provides a suitable framework to gain a deeper insight into the personal, emotional, and professional aspects of crisis management. By focusing on the individual experiences of PR practitioners, this research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the emotional labor and the strategic decisions involved in managing crises in the digital age.

The study of subjective experience in the context of crisis management within public relations has increasingly become an important area of research. In particular, understanding how public relations professionals experience and navigate crises—especially in the digital era—has garnered attention as these professionals are at the frontline of reputation management. Crisis situations, such as public backlash, scandals, or organizational mishaps, are intensely personal for PR practitioners who must balance emotional responses, strategic decisions, and public-facing actions. Their ability to manage these crises can shape both their professional trajectory and the overall success of the organization's reputation recovery.

However, exploring the deep, personal experiences of PR professionals in crisis management presents significant methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative approaches often fall short in capturing the nuanced, emotional, and subjective elements of these experiences. These methods focus primarily on measurable data, such as response times or the success of specific strategies, but they cannot effectively convey the emotional labor, stress, or decision-making processes involved in managing a crisis (Allen dkk., 2022). The limitations of such quantitative approaches highlight the need for more qualitative, phenomenological methods that can delve into the lived experiences of individuals and uncover the meaning they attach to their roles during times of crisis.

Phenomenological research, with its emphasis on exploring human experience from the perspective of the individuals involved, offers a deeper understanding of the crisis management process. Previous studies on crisis management have often overlooked or underexplored the emotional and personal dimensions of PR professionals' experiences, especially when navigating the complexities of digital communication channels. This gap underscores the need for research that can more effectively capture the essence of these subjective experiences, providing richer insights into how PR professionals perceive and respond to crises in real-time.

While existing research on crisis management in public relations often relies on practical, strategic approaches—such as quantitative assessments of communication efficiency or the effectiveness of specific PR tactics—these solutions fail to capture the deeper, subjective experiences of professionals dealing with reputational crises. Such approaches, though valuable for understanding the operational aspects of crisis management, overlook the emotional and personal dimensions of how public relations practitioners experience and interpret their roles during crises (Foà dkk., 2024). These limitations result in a less comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, particularly in terms of how individuals internalize and navigate the stress, pressure, and decision-making involved in managing a corporate crisis in the digital age.

Current methods largely focus on measurable outcomes, such as response times or public sentiment shifts, but they cannot provide the rich, nuanced insights into the human experience of crisis management. These approaches miss the essence of the lived experiences of PR professionals—the emotional labor, the sense of responsibility, and the psychological toll these crises impose on those managing them. Therefore, there is a critical gap in our understanding of how professionals subjectively experience and make sense of crises, particularly when these events are mediated through digital platforms where public discourse can evolve in real-time.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is needed. Phenomenology allows for a deeper, more holistic exploration of the lived experiences of PR practitioners, focusing on the meanings they attribute to their experiences in managing crises. By examining these experiences from the perspective of the professionals themselves, this research can provide a more comprehensive

understanding of the personal and emotional challenges they face, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate these complex situations (Valasek dkk., 2022). This shift from a traditional, outcome-oriented perspective to one that values individual experience is essential for advancing both theoretical and practical knowledge in crisis communication.

Existing literature has explored various aspects of crisis management in public relations, often focusing on strategies, communication effectiveness, and organizational responses. However, few studies have delved into the subjective experiences of PR professionals during crises, particularly in the digital age. Previous research has primarily used quantitative or case study methods to assess crisis outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding the personal, emotional, and cognitive experiences that shape how PR practitioners respond to such situations. Theories like crisis communication models and media theories have provided useful frameworks, but they tend to overlook the human element, particularly the lived experiences of those managing the crisis. This gap underscores the need for research that focuses on exploring the meanings and experiences of PR professionals, a gap that this study seeks to address.

The proposed phenomenological approach offers a unique way to explore these experiences. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for this type of research because it seeks to uncover the deeper meaning of individuals' lived experiences. By focusing on how PR professionals perceive and make sense of their emotional and professional roles during a crisis, this approach will provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon. It will allow for a deeper exploration of the emotional labor involved in crisis management and the strategies professionals use to cope with stress, manage public perception, and navigate digital media (Carr dkk., 2020). Through this, the study will address the knowledge gap identified previously, offering a more nuanced and holistic understanding of crisis communication in the digital era.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. It begins with an introduction to the context of crisis management in public relations, highlighting the challenges faced by professionals in the digital landscape. The methodology section follows, detailing the phenomenological approach used to gather and analyze data, followed by the findings from in-depth interviews with PR practitioners (Pereira dkk., 2024). The results are discussed in relation to the themes that emerged from the data, offering insights into the lived experiences of PR professionals. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and suggests implications for practice and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of public relations professionals in managing corporate reputation crises in the digital age. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited to this research as it focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences (Cooper, 2019). By using a phenomenological design, the study aims to delve into the deep, personal experiences of public relations practitioners, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the emotional, strategic, and technological challenges they encounter during crises.

In particular, an interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen, as it seeks to uncover not only the essence of individual experiences but also how these experiences are shaped by broader cultural and social contexts. This approach enables the exploration of both personal narratives and the interpretation of those narratives within the framework of crisis communication and digital media influence.

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with direct experience in managing corporate reputation crises, especially in the context of digital platforms and

social media. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least five years of professional experience in public relations or crisis communication, with specific exposure to crisis management involving digital media (Ventsel dkk., 2024). Exclusion criteria included individuals without crisis management experience or those whose professional roles did not involve direct engagement with reputation management.

A total of ten participants were involved in the study. The participants were diverse in terms of gender and age, with an average age of 38 years. The sample comprised seven females and three males, all of whom worked in various sectors such as corporate communication, healthcare, and tech industries. The participants' professional backgrounds provided rich insights into the varying strategies and challenges faced by PR professionals across different fields when managing reputational crises.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability and preferences. The interviews were designed to allow participants to reflect on their personal experiences and offer detailed accounts of how they managed crisis communication in the digital era. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, focusing on key themes such as the role of digital media in crisis management, emotional responses to crises, and the strategies employed to restore reputation. The interview guide was based on existing literature and refined based on feedback from a small pilot study (Frau-Meigs, 2024). To ensure a comfortable and open environment for participants, interviews were held in private settings, either in a quiet office or in virtual spaces that allowed for confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common technique in phenomenological research. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. This process was conducted through several systematic steps. First, the interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was then read multiple times to immerse in the data and familiarize with the content.

Subsequent steps involved coding the data, categorizing significant statements or "meaning units" related to the research questions, and organizing these codes into broader themes. The analysis sought to uncover the core themes related to the participants' experiences with crisis management and the digital adaptation required in the modern PR landscape (Dunleavy dkk., 2024). NVivo software was utilized to assist with organizing and managing the large amount of qualitative data, although the focus remained on the interpretative process of analyzing these themes within the phenomenological framework.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for qualitative research, and ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

All participants provided written consent to participate in the study, and they were assured that their personal data and responses would remain confidential (Philip, 2021). The identities of participants were anonymized, and any identifying details were removed from the transcripts to ensure privacy. Furthermore, the data collected were stored securely and only accessible to the research team.

RESULTS

Crisis Management and Digital Adaptation

The participants shared their experiences of managing corporate reputation crises, especially in the context of the digital age. One recurring theme that emerged was the need for rapid adaptation to digital platforms during crises. As one participant noted:

"During a crisis, the speed of information spreading on social media is overwhelming. We had to react fast, sometimes within minutes, to prevent further damage. It was not just about releasing a statement anymore, but monitoring social media trends, responding to customer feedback, and crafting messages that resonated with the public in real-time."

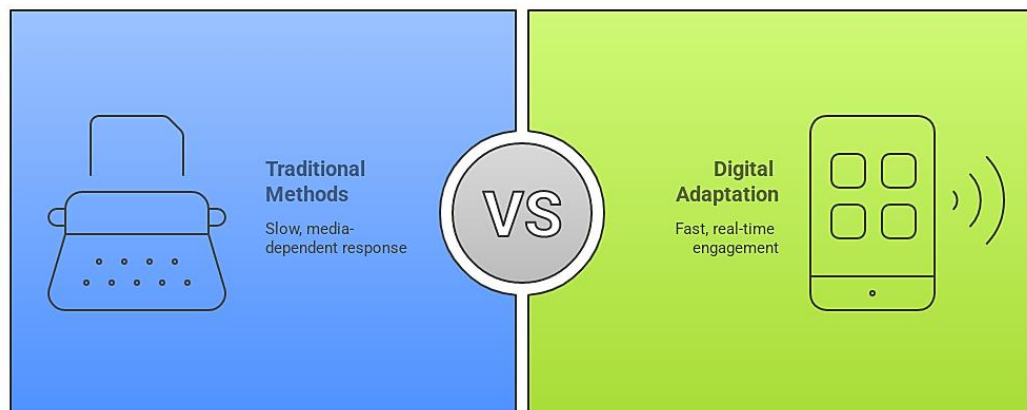
This highlights the significant shift from traditional methods of crisis management to a more dynamic, real-time approach facilitated by digital platforms. The integration of social media monitoring, real-time response strategies, and the use of digital tools were seen as pivotal in rebuilding a company's reputation during a crisis.

Another participant reflected on the challenges they faced during such crises:

"In the past, our crisis communications were much slower. We could draft a statement, distribute it via press releases, and wait for the media to pick it up. But now, everything happens on social media, and we need to engage directly with people who have immediate questions or concerns."

This underscores the importance of digital literacy and adaptability in modern public relations practices, particularly when managing reputational crises.

How to effectively manage corporate reputation crises?



Emotional Labor and Personal Involvement

A second major theme that emerged was the emotional labor involved in managing a crisis. Participants spoke about the personal toll that dealing with crises took on them, both professionally and emotionally. As one participant elaborated:

"There is a lot of pressure. You are not just managing the company's image; you're constantly assessing how your team is handling the situation. There's a lot of personal responsibility, and you can't just ignore the emotional strain."

This statement reflects the intense emotional engagement required of public relations professionals when their company is in crisis. It is clear that workers in this field experience a form of emotional labor, where they are required to manage their own emotional responses while also guiding others through the crisis.

One participant described how they would often feel a personal sense of failure when the crisis worsened, despite their best efforts:

"When things go wrong, you question yourself. I would replay every decision I made, thinking it was my fault if we didn't contain the issue fast enough."

This illustrates how PR professionals internalize the outcomes of crises, reinforcing the need for emotional resilience and support systems within corporate communication teams.

Strategic Use of Technology and Media in Crisis Communication

The third theme involved the strategic use of technology and media to address and mitigate the impact of a crisis. Participants emphasized how the evolution of digital tools and media platforms shaped their crisis management strategies. One participant highlighted:

"We've learned to use social media not just for announcements but for creating conversations. It's not about pushing a message anymore; it's about engaging directly with stakeholders. We now monitor online sentiment and adjust our approach based on what we see in real time."

The shift from a one-way communication model to a two-way interaction, facilitated by social media and digital communication tools, was seen as an essential component in managing crises effectively. This approach allows for more proactive engagement and quick response, directly addressing public concerns and mitigating potential reputational damage.

Another participant echoed the significance of digital tools, mentioning:

"Before, we had to wait for traditional media to report on the crisis. Now, with online platforms, we can track how people are reacting and tailor our responses accordingly. It's more dynamic, but also more unpredictable."

These insights reveal how technology has revolutionized crisis communication strategies, moving from reactive measures to more proactive and adaptive strategies in real-time.

The results highlight the profound transformation in public relations practices when managing corporate crises in the digital age. Key findings include the critical role of rapid digital adaptation, the emotional labor involved in crisis management, and the strategic use of technology and media to mitigate reputational damage. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of crisis communication in the context of digital media and provide insight into the personal and professional challenges faced by public relations professionals.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The study reveals that public relations professionals experience significant emotional and strategic challenges when managing corporate reputation crises, particularly in the context of digital media. The key findings underscore the rapid adaptation required in response to digital platforms, the emotional labor involved, and the strategic use of technology to mitigate reputational damage in real-time.

Contribution to the Research Question

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how PR professionals manage reputation crises, specifically by highlighting the emotional and personal dimensions of crisis management. By using a phenomenological approach, the study reveals the complex interplay between emotional stress, strategic decision-making, and technological adaptation. The findings offer valuable insights into the subjective experiences of PR practitioners, showing how these professionals internalize crises and manage the high emotional stakes involved. The research also emphasizes the increasing importance of digital tools, not just for communication efficiency, but as a strategic component of reputation management. Ultimately, the study answers the research question by illustrating that crisis management is not only a technical and strategic task but also an emotionally taxing experience that requires resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

These findings align with and expand upon existing crisis communication theories that emphasize the strategic elements of crisis management, yet they also challenge the more operational approaches by focusing on the emotional labor of PR professionals, an aspect that has been less explored in prior research. While studies such as those by Rani dkk (2024) have highlighted the role of strategic communication during crises, this research adds depth by revealing how professionals

experience and emotionally process these challenges, which has been underexplored. Furthermore, the findings resonate with phenomenological studies on emotional labor (Dubyna dkk., 2023), where individuals are required to manage their emotions to perform professionally. In contrast to traditional crisis communication models, the emphasis here is on the individual's internal experience and the emotional and personal dimensions of crisis management. This study thus contributes to bridging the gap between strategic crisis management and the lived experiences of those handling these crises, suggesting that future crisis communication models should incorporate the emotional resilience of PR professionals as a critical component.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have both scientific and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, they highlight the importance of incorporating emotional and personal dimensions into crisis communication models, which have traditionally focused more on strategies and outcomes. The emotional labor and strategic use of digital media revealed in this study emphasize the need for public relations professionals to be equipped with not only technical skills but also emotional resilience and adaptive strategies. The study suggests that future crisis management models should consider the subjective experiences of PR practitioners, as these experiences significantly shape their responses to crises and the effectiveness of their strategies.

From a practical standpoint, these findings are highly relevant for organizations looking to improve their crisis communication strategies. By acknowledging the emotional and personal toll that crises place on PR professionals, organizations can provide better support and training to equip their teams with the emotional tools and digital skills necessary for effective crisis management. The integration of emotional resilience into professional development programs could lead to more effective crisis communication in both corporate and public sectors. Furthermore, organizations could benefit from enhancing their use of digital platforms in real-time crisis management, as this study shows that digital engagement plays a pivotal role in crisis resolution.

Study Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. One limitation is the relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on a specific group of professionals with significant experience in crisis management, which may not fully represent the experiences of less experienced practitioners or those working in different sectors. Additionally, the research was limited to a specific cultural and organizational context, which may differ from other regions or industries (Mula-Falcón dkk., 2023). While the phenomenological approach provides deep insights into individual experiences, it may not capture the broader organizational dynamics that influence crisis communication. These limitations suggest that further research with larger and more diverse samples could provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open avenues for further research into the intersection of emotional labor and digital crisis management in public relations. Future studies could expand the sample size and include PR professionals from different cultural backgrounds or industries to explore how these experiences may vary across different contexts. Additionally, exploring how emotional resilience is developed and sustained in PR practitioners could offer valuable insights into improving crisis management training. Future research could also examine the long-term effects of crisis management on PR professionals' career trajectories and emotional well-being, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the profession's demands. This study's insights into the digital adaptation of crisis management strategies could also be extended by investigating the role of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence in enhancing real-time crisis communication.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of public relations professionals in managing corporate reputation crises in the digital age, focusing on the emotional and strategic dimensions of crisis communication. The findings highlight the critical role of digital tools in real-time crisis management, the emotional labor involved, and the adaptability required by PR professionals in response to rapidly changing situations. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of crisis management by emphasizing the subjective experiences of practitioners, addressing gaps in prior research that focused primarily on strategic and outcome-oriented approaches. By incorporating the emotional and personal aspects of crisis management, this research enriches existing crisis communication models, offering practical insights for better professional development and organizational support. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the emotional resilience of PR professionals and the impact of emerging technologies on crisis management. This continued exploration could further enhance the effectiveness and well-being of PR professionals in crisis situations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research. This study was conducted with the highest level of ethical standards and transparency, and no financial or personal interests influenced the research findings or interpretation.

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