

Beyond Clarification: Empathic Communication In Corporate Crisis Communication

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary corporate crisis communication requires organizations to address both stakeholders' need for accurate information and their expectations for empathy, recognition, and relational sensitivity. This conceptual paper aims to develop an integrated framework positioning empathic communication alongside organizational clarification in corporate crisis communication. The study employs a narrative literature review to synthesize scholarship on crisis communication, empathic communication, stakeholder trust, and organization-public relationships. The literature was thematically analyzed to identify organizational clarification as an informational function and empathic communication as a relational function. The synthesis resulted in the Beyond Clarification Framework, which conceptualizes effective crisis communication as the integration of these two complementary functions. Organizational clarification provides factual certainty through timely, accurate, and transparent information, while empathic communication recognizes stakeholder experiences and demonstrates organizational concern. An illustrative application to Green SM Indonesia's crisis statements following the Bekasi railway crossing accident demonstrates

how factual clarification can be complemented by explicit expressions of empathy and recognition of affected stakeholders. The framework contributes to crisis communication scholarship by repositioning empathy from a supporting rhetorical element to a core relational communication function. The study concludes that effective corporate crisis communication should move beyond factual clarification toward an integrated approach addressing both informational and relational stakeholder expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate crises have become increasingly complex in an era characterized by digital connectivity, real-time information exchange, and active stakeholder participation. Unlike conventional crisis environments, contemporary crises unfold within communication ecosystems where organizational responses are rapidly disseminated, interpreted, and reshaped by multiple stakeholder groups across digital platforms. Social media has transformed stakeholders from passive recipients of organizational messages into active participants who contribute to crisis narratives and influence public perceptions. Consequently, corporate crisis communication is no longer limited to disseminating factual information or protecting organizational reputation. It has evolved into a strategic communication function that simultaneously seeks to reduce uncertainty, maintain organizational legitimacy, preserve stakeholder trust, and sustain organization-public relationships (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Seeger, 2006; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011).

Within Public Relations, crisis communication has traditionally emphasized timely, accurate, and transparent organizational responses. This perspective is particularly reflected in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which proposes that organizations should align crisis response strategies with stakeholders' attributions of responsibility in order to minimize reputational threats and facilitate recovery (Coombs, 2007). SCCT remains an influential framework because it provides practical guidance for selecting appropriate response strategies

under different crisis conditions. However, contemporary crisis communication extends beyond strategic message selection. Stakeholders increasingly evaluate organizational authenticity, responsiveness, and emotional sensitivity, particularly when crises involve victims, affected communities, employees, customers, or other groups directly experiencing the consequences of a crisis (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016).

The transformation of the digital communication environment has further expanded stakeholder expectations. Information can circulate across multiple platforms within minutes, enabling journalists, influencers, online communities, and affected publics to collectively shape interpretations of organizational crises. Organizations are therefore expected not only to provide timely factual clarification but also to communicate openness, responsiveness, and genuine concern. Public evaluations consequently depend upon both informational credibility and perceptions of organizational humanity (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Fraustino & Liu, 2017; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).

Recent crisis communication scholarship has consequently paid increasing attention to empathic communication. Rather than functioning merely as emotional expression, empathic communication represents organizational efforts to recognize stakeholders' experiences while conveying understanding, concern, and respect. Empirical studies indicate that empathic organizational responses can enhance trust, strengthen perceptions of sincerity, facilitate forgiveness, and contribute to reputation recovery following crises (Schoofs et al., 2019; Fannes & Claeys, 2022). Practitioners have likewise identified empathy as an important component of effective crisis responses because it reflects organizational humanity and supports stakeholder relationships (Schoofs, Fannes, & Claeys, 2022).

Despite these contributions, the conceptual role of empathic communication in corporate crisis communication remains insufficiently developed. Existing literature has predominantly examined empathy as a message characteristic, an ethical recommendation, or an antecedent of favorable stakeholder evaluations (Schoofs et al., 2019; Fannes & Claeys, 2022). Comparatively limited attention has been given to how empathic communication operates alongside organizational clarification as two complementary communication functions within an integrated crisis response. This gap is important because contemporary stakeholders simultaneously seek informational certainty and relational reassurance. As Schoofs, Fannes, and Claeys (2022) noted, further theorization is needed to advance understanding of empathy in organizational crisis communication.

This article therefore develops a conceptual framework integrating organizational clarification and empathic communication within a unified perspective of corporate crisis communication. Organizational clarification primarily fulfills an informational function by providing accurate explanations and reducing uncertainty, whereas empathic communication fulfills a relational function by acknowledging stakeholder experiences and demonstrating organizational concern. The article proposes the Beyond Clarification Framework, which conceptualizes effective corporate crisis communication as the integration of these two functions.

The practical relevance of this integration can be illustrated through contemporary corporate crises in which organizations issue public statements following accidents, service failures, or operational disruptions. Initial responses commonly prioritize factual clarification regarding the incident, investigation, and corrective actions. At the same time, stakeholders may expect explicit acknowledgment of victims, affected communities, and the emotional consequences of the crisis. This article refers to Green SM Indonesia's crisis communication following a railway crossing accident in Bekasi as an illustrative example. The case demonstrates a shift in communication emphasis from factual clarification toward more explicit expressions of

empathy. It is not treated as empirical evidence for theory testing but as an illustration of how the proposed framework may be applied to contemporary organizational crisis communication.

Accordingly, this conceptual paper aims to advance crisis communication scholarship by repositioning empathic communication as a core relational communication function operating alongside organizational clarification. Drawing upon a narrative literature review, the article integrates two bodies of scholarship that have largely developed independently and proposes a broader conceptualization of corporate crisis communication capable of addressing both informational and relational stakeholder expectations.

METHOD

This study employs a narrative literature review to develop a conceptual understanding of empathic communication within corporate crisis communication. Unlike systematic reviews, which primarily seek to aggregate empirical findings, narrative literature reviews enable researchers to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives and generate conceptual insights through critical synthesis of existing scholarship (Snyder, 2019). This approach is appropriate because the objective of the study is not to empirically measure the effectiveness of empathic communication, but to reposition empathic communication within the conceptual architecture of corporate crisis communication.

The literature search was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, Sage Journals, and Google Scholar. The search employed combinations of the following keywords: *corporate crisis communication*, *crisis communication*, *empathic communication*, *empathy*, *organizational empathy*, *crisis response*, *stakeholder trust*, *organization–public relationship*, *relationship management*, and *public relations*. Backward and forward citation tracking was also undertaken to identify influential publications relevant to crisis communication scholarship.

The review primarily included peer-reviewed journal articles that were conceptually relevant to the objectives of the study. Priority was given to recent scholarship reflecting contemporary developments in corporate crisis communication and empathic communication, while seminal publications were retained when they represented foundational theoretical contributions, particularly those related to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Organization–Public Relationship (OPR), and relationship management.

The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. Repeated reading and comparison across studies resulted in four analytical themes: (1) the evolution of corporate crisis communication; (2) organizational clarification as an informational communication function; (3) empathic communication as a relational communication function; and (4) organization–public relationship as the desired relational outcome of corporate crisis communication. Rather than evaluating individual studies independently, the synthesis focused on relationships among concepts and served as the basis for developing the Beyond Clarification Framework, which conceptualizes effective corporate crisis communication as the integration of informational and relational communication functions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Informational to Relational Crisis Communication

Corporate crisis communication has undergone substantial transformation over the past three decades. Earlier perspectives primarily viewed crisis communication as a mechanism for managing information during unexpected events, with emphasis on minimizing uncertainty, correcting misinformation, and protecting organizational reputation. Consequently, speed,

accuracy, and consistency became central characteristics of effective crisis responses, particularly during the initial stages of a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

The development of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered this environment. Contemporary crises unfold through instantaneous information dissemination, user-generated content, and continuous stakeholder interaction. Organizations are no longer the sole producers of crisis narratives; stakeholders actively interpret, evaluate, and amplify organizational responses across digital platforms. Crisis communication has therefore expanded from information management toward stakeholder engagement, requiring organizations to demonstrate not only factual accuracy but also transparency, accountability, and relational sensitivity.

Within this context, organizational clarification remains a fundamental function of crisis communication. Stakeholders require reliable information about what occurred, the extent of the impact, organizational responsibility, and the actions being taken. The primary function of clarification is to reduce uncertainty through factual, accurate, and timely information (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

SCCT provides a central theoretical explanation for this informational orientation. The theory proposes that organizational responses should correspond with stakeholders' attributions of crisis responsibility. Depending on the nature of a crisis, organizations may employ different response strategies, including denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. Although these strategies differ in their communicative objectives, clarification remains important because it provides explanations, reduces ambiguity, demonstrates accountability, and supports organizational legitimacy.

The importance of clarification is particularly evident in digital environments, where misinformation and speculation can spread rapidly. Timely and verified information can prevent information vacuums from being filled by rumors or misleading interpretations. Nevertheless, factual clarification does not necessarily satisfy all stakeholder expectations. Stakeholders increasingly evaluate whether organizations acknowledge the human consequences of a crisis and demonstrate responsiveness, responsibility, and concern.

From a Public Relations perspective, this limitation is significant because crisis communication serves not only to disseminate information but also to preserve relationships. Information may reduce uncertainty, but relationship preservation requires communication that demonstrates recognition, respect, and organizational concern. Organizational clarification should therefore be understood as a necessary but not sufficient component of effective corporate crisis communication.

This limitation provides the basis for considering empathic communication as a distinct relational function. Empathic communication reflects an organization's capacity to recognize stakeholder experiences, demonstrate concern, and communicate respect toward those affected by a crisis (Schoofs, Fannes, & Claeys, 2022). Whereas clarification primarily addresses what happened, empathic communication addresses who has been affected and how the organization recognizes their experiences.

Empirical research supports the strategic relevance of empathy in crisis communication. Empathic organizational responses can positively influence stakeholder evaluations, increase organizational trust, facilitate forgiveness, and contribute to reputation recovery (Schoofs et al., 2019). Fannes and Claeys (2022) further demonstrate that different verbal expressions of empathy can generate different stakeholder responses, indicating that the way empathy is communicated influences perceptions of organizational sincerity and credibility.

Despite these contributions, empathic communication has largely been conceptualized as a message characteristic, ethical recommendation, or determinant of stakeholder evaluation. Comparatively less attention has been given to its structural role within corporate crisis communication. Schoofs, Fannes, and Claeys (2022) emphasize the need for further theorization of empathy in organizational crisis communication, particularly regarding how it is defined and implemented in practice.

The literature therefore indicates two complementary communication needs. Organizational clarification fulfills an informational function by reducing uncertainty, while empathic communication fulfills a relational function by acknowledging stakeholder experiences and demonstrating organizational concern. The central conceptual issue is consequently not whether organizations should choose clarification or empathy, but how both functions can operate simultaneously within an integrated crisis response.

3.2 Integrating Informational and Relational Communication Functions

The literature reviewed in this study reveals two major streams of crisis communication scholarship. The first, represented predominantly by SCCT, emphasizes organizational clarification, crisis responsibility, appropriate response strategies, and reputation recovery (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The second focuses on empathic communication and demonstrates its influence on stakeholder trust, perceived sincerity, forgiveness, and post-crisis reputation (Schoofs et al., 2019; Schoofs, Fannes, & Claeys, 2022; Fannes & Claeys, 2022).

Although both streams have substantially enriched crisis communication scholarship, they have largely developed independently. SCCT explains how organizations should respond according to crisis responsibility, whereas empathy research primarily examines how stakeholders evaluate organizational expressions of concern. Consequently, limited theoretical attention has been given to how clarification and empathy operate together within a unified organizational response.

This separation is increasingly inadequate in contemporary Public Relations practice. Organizational crisis statements rarely perform only one communication function. A single statement may communicate available facts, explain organizational actions, acknowledge uncertainty, express concern for affected parties, and demonstrate responsibility. Stakeholders therefore receive informational and relational cues within the same communication event.

From a relationship management perspective, credible information alone cannot fully explain the preservation of stakeholder trust. Relationship quality is also strengthened through communication that demonstrates respect, responsiveness, openness, and concern. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes corporate crisis communication as the integration of two complementary functions.

The informational function is fulfilled through organizational clarification, which provides timely, accurate, and transparent information concerning the crisis. The relational function is fulfilled through empathic communication, which acknowledges stakeholder experiences, demonstrates organizational concern, and reinforces organization–public relationships. These functions are neither sequential nor mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist within effective crisis responses and address different dimensions of stakeholder expectations.

This conceptual integration contributes to crisis communication scholarship in two ways. First, it shifts analytical attention from individual response strategies toward the communication functions performed by organizational messages. Second, it repositions empathic communication from a complementary rhetorical element to a core relational mechanism operating alongside organizational clarification. This perspective provides a broader understanding of how corporate

crisis communication contributes not only to uncertainty reduction but also to relationship preservation, stakeholder trust, and organizational legitimacy.

Beyond Clarification Framework

Building on the preceding synthesis, the Beyond Clarification Framework conceptualizes effective corporate crisis communication as the integration of informational and relational communication functions operating simultaneously within a single organizational response. These functions address different stakeholder expectations while contributing to the shared strategic objective of preserving organization–public relationships under conditions of uncertainty.

The informational communication function is fulfilled through organizational clarification. It seeks to reduce uncertainty by communicating verified facts, explaining organizational actions, correcting misinformation, and providing transparent updates. Clarification enables stakeholders to understand what occurred, how the organization is responding, and what actions are being taken. It therefore establishes informational credibility and organizational accountability.

The relational communication function is fulfilled through empathic communication. Rather than primarily explaining events, empathy recognizes their human consequences. Through acknowledgment, compassion, concern, and respect, organizations demonstrate that stakeholder experiences are recognized as an important consideration in the crisis response. Empathic communication therefore contributes to relationship preservation while strengthening perceptions of organizational sincerity and responsibility.

The framework proposes that these functions should be integrated rather than implemented independently. Clarification without empathy may successfully reduce informational uncertainty but leave relational expectations insufficiently addressed. Conversely, empathy without sufficient clarification may demonstrate concern while failing to provide stakeholders with the factual certainty necessary to understand the crisis. Effective crisis communication therefore requires both functions within an integrated organizational response.

The framework does not replace established crisis communication theories, particularly SCCT. Instead, it complements existing scholarship by shifting analytical attention from which crisis response strategy should be selected toward which communication functions should be simultaneously fulfilled. Whereas SCCT primarily explains response selection according to crisis responsibility, the Beyond Clarification Framework explains how organizational messages can simultaneously address stakeholders' informational and relational expectations.

Accordingly, the central proposition of the framework is that effective corporate crisis communication extends beyond clarification when organizations integrate factual certainty with relational recognition. Clarification provides the informational foundation of the response, while empathy provides the relational dimension necessary to recognize stakeholder experiences and sustain organization–public relationships.

Illustrative Application: Green SM Indonesia

To illustrate the practical relevance of the framework, the initial public statement issued by Green SM following the Bekasi railway crossing accident is interpreted through the two communication functions proposed in the Beyond Clarification Framework. The statement primarily performs an informational function by communicating available facts, organizational actions, and cooperation with the ongoing investigation. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to examine the extent to which relational elements, including acknowledgment of those affected, expressions of concern, and empathic communication, are incorporated into the organizational response. Accordingly, the Green SM case is not presented as empirical evidence

for evaluating the organization, but as an illustrative example demonstrating how the Beyond Clarification Framework may be applied to interpret corporate crisis communication.

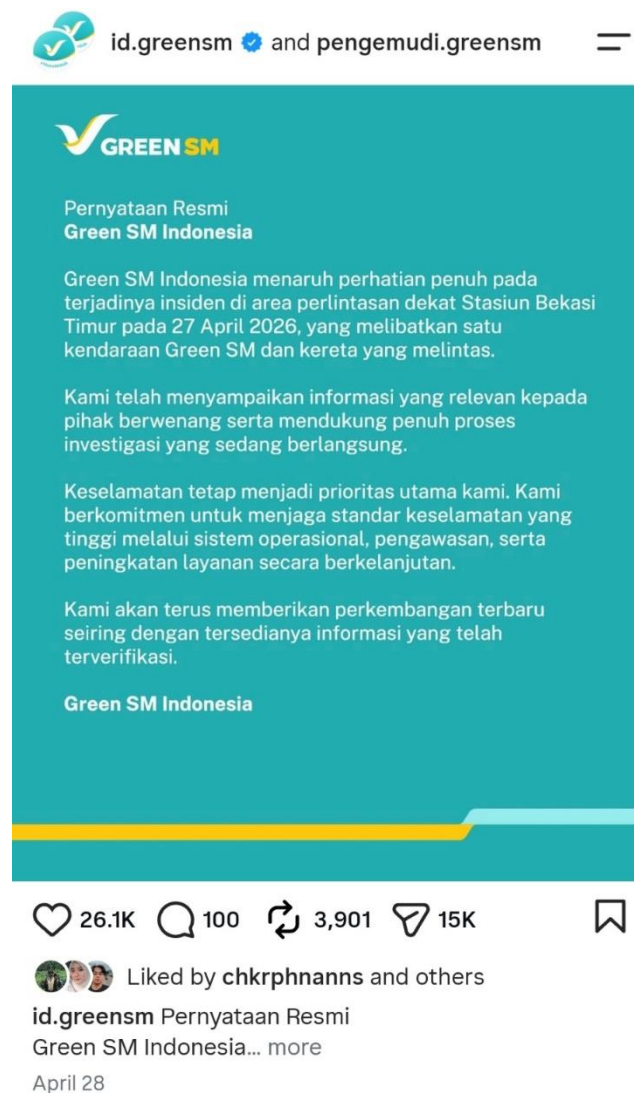


Figure 1. Green SM's initial official statement following the Bekasi railway crossing accident.

Source: Green SM Official Instagram (@id.greensm). Original text in Bahasa Indonesia; translated by the authors.

Green SM's initial official statement

Green SM Indonesia is paying close attention to the incident that occurred near the Bekasi Timur railway crossing on 27 April 2026, involving a Green SM vehicle and a passing train.

We have provided the relevant information to the appropriate authorities and are fully supporting the ongoing investigation.

Safety remains our highest priority. We are committed to maintaining high safety standards through our operational systems, supervision, and continuous service improvements. We will continue to provide updates as verified information becomes available.

Green SM Indonesia

The initial statement demonstrates a strong informational orientation through factual clarification, organizational commitment, and procedural transparency. However, explicit relational elements, such as acknowledgment of victims, expressions of sympathy, and recognition of stakeholders' emotional experiences, receive comparatively limited attention. This

does not imply that the response was ineffective; rather, it illustrates how organizational crisis communication may prioritize informational objectives while leaving opportunities to strengthen its relational dimension.

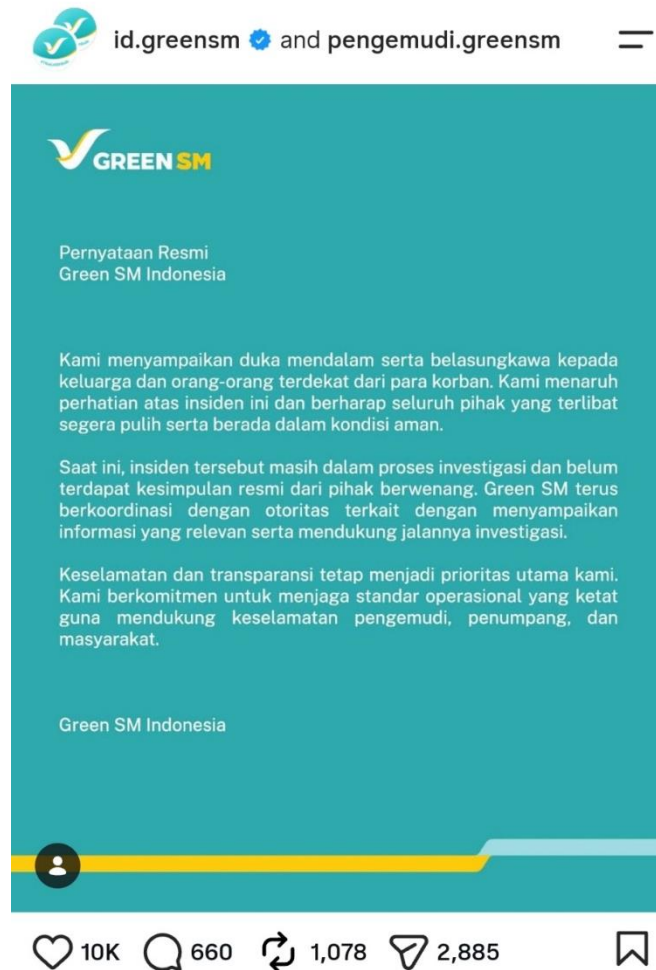


Figure 2. Green SM's subsequent official statement incorporating explicit empathic communication.

Source: Green SM Official Instagram (@id.greensm). Original text in Bahasa Indonesia; translated by the authors.

Green SM's subsequent official statement

We extend our deepest condolences to the victims, their families, and those closest to them. We are deeply concerned about this incident and sincerely hope that everyone affected recovers soon and remains safe.

At present, the incident remains under official investigation, and no final conclusions have been issued by the relevant authorities. Green SM continues to coordinate with the appropriate authorities by providing relevant information and supporting the ongoing investigation.

Safety and transparency remain our highest priorities. We are committed to maintaining rigorous operational standards to ensure the safety of our drivers, passengers, and the wider community.

Green SM Indonesia

The comparison between Green SM's two official statements illustrates a shift in the emphasis of its crisis communication during the early stages of the incident. While the initial statement primarily fulfilled an informational function through factual clarification, explanation

of organizational actions, and emphasis on operational commitment, the subsequent statement incorporated stronger relational elements through explicit condolences, recognition of victims and their families, and expressions of hope for recovery. Importantly, empathic communication did not replace clarification; rather, it complemented the existing informational response. This progression illustrates the central proposition of the Beyond Clarification Framework that effective corporate crisis communication integrates informational and relational communication functions within a unified organizational response.

Table 1. Comparison of Informational and Relational Communication Elements in Green SM's Official Crisis Statements

Communication Function	Indicator	Initial Statement	Subsequent Statement
Informational Function	Clarification of incident	✓	✓
	Transparency regarding investigation	✓	✓
	Organizational commitment	✓	✓
	Future information update	✓	△
Relational Function	Recognition of victims	Limited	✓
	Expression of condolences	—	✓
	Concern for affected families	—	✓
	Hope for recovery	—	✓
	Organizational compassion	Limited	✓

Source: Developed by the authors based on Green SM's official crisis statements (2026).

The comparison shows that both statements consistently perform informational functions through clarification, transparency, investigation updates, and safety commitment. The subsequent statement, however, demonstrates a substantially stronger relational orientation by incorporating explicit recognition of victims, condolences, concern, and hope for recovery. The two statements therefore illustrate how empathic communication can complement rather than replace organizational clarification.

The Green SM illustration should not be interpreted as evidence that the subsequent statement was empirically more effective than the initial statement. Rather, the comparison demonstrates how the proposed framework can be applied to identify different communication functions within organizational crisis responses. The case thus provides a practical illustration of the conceptual proposition that informational certainty and relational recognition can coexist within a unified crisis communication response.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that contemporary corporate crisis communication should no longer be understood solely as an organizational effort to provide factual clarification. Although clarification remains essential for reducing uncertainty, maintaining transparency, and supporting organizational accountability, stakeholder expectations increasingly extend to recognition of the human consequences of crises. Effective crisis communication therefore requires the integration of informational and relational communication functions.

Drawing upon a narrative synthesis of crisis communication and Public Relations literature, this paper develops the Beyond Clarification Framework, which conceptualizes organizational clarification and empathic communication as two complementary functions

operating simultaneously within corporate crisis responses. The framework repositions empathic communication from a supporting response strategy to a core relational communication function that contributes to stakeholder trust and organization–public relationships. Rather than replacing established theories such as SCCT, the framework complements existing perspectives by explaining how organizational messages can simultaneously satisfy informational and relational stakeholder expectations.

The illustrative application using Green SM's official crisis statements demonstrates how organizational communication may move from an emphasis on factual clarification toward a more integrated response incorporating explicit empathy and recognition of affected stakeholders. The comparison reinforces the proposition that crisis communication depends not only on what organizations communicate but also on how they acknowledge stakeholder experiences throughout the crisis response process.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Public Relations scholarship by integrating two bodies of literature that have largely developed independently: organizational clarification within crisis communication research and empathic communication within relationship-oriented Public Relations scholarship. Practically, the framework encourages communication practitioners to integrate factual information with explicit recognition of stakeholder experiences within a single crisis response. Such integration may strengthen organizational credibility while supporting stakeholder trust and long-term organization–public relationships.

This study has several limitations. As a conceptual paper, the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated. Furthermore, the Green SM case is presented solely as an illustrative application rather than as empirical evidence for theory testing. Future research should examine the Beyond Clarification Framework across different organizational contexts, crisis types, cultural settings, and communication platforms using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches. Empirical validation may further refine the framework and strengthen its contribution to corporate crisis communication scholarship.

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