Exploring consumers' views expressed in X comments on Eskom's crisis communication responses during the load shedding crisis in 2022-2023.

Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree **Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership** at The Independent Institute of Education, Vega School**.**

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18 / 02 / 2025

DECLARATION

I, Rachel Rousseau, with student number ST10226218, affirm that this dissertation was compiled and written by me and that the work presented in the dissertation is my own unless specifically declared otherwise in the contents of this document, and that this dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as stipulated. Finally, I'd like to declare that this work has been proofread

Rachel Raine Rousseau.

18 February 2025.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my Supervisor, Dr. Rose-Marié Bezuidenhout for helping through this journey and pushing me to reach my potential. Second, I would like to thank my mom, Leanne Corniere, and my granddad, Fernand Corniere, for helping finance my post-graduate studies and for being my biggest supporters. Thirdly, to my Stepmom, Jing Yu, my Fiancé, Brad Zietsman and my siblings Hannah and Nathan Rousseau, thank you for being by my side through the toughest parts of this research paper. Finally, my closest friends, Jenna Melander and Kiara Efthymiades, you both provided the emotional support needed, whether it was an ear to listen or a hug that offered comfort, I cherished it all.

To my mentor Dan Gladulich, I appreciate the unwavering support you have given me over the last 2 years, particularly the empathy and compassion shown to me throughout this whole process. Kayla de Chalain and Lukhona Nkosi, I have so much appreciation and gratitude towards you both for covering me whilst I needed time away from work to progress in my dissertation and for taking on more of the workload so that my stresses could somewhat be reduced. Another member of my team, Jonathan Cole, who offered to read my dissertation and offer guidance based on his experience as a researcher, I appreciate the time you took out of your personal capacity to help me grow as a researcher and colleague. My closest friends, Jenna Melander and Kiara Efthymiades, you both provided the emotional support needed, whether it was an ear to listen or a hug that offered comfort, I cherished it all.

I'd like to thank Janey for always helping me navigate the admin side of Masters, which often goes underappreciated, and for being a phone call away when the anxiety was at its worst, I will forever be grateful to you. Thank you to the institution, my academic peers and other supervisors who sat in on my presentations and offered guidance and support in how to improve this dissertation.

Gratitude is also extended to my editor, Gilbert Nchabeleng.

With gratitude,

Rachel Rousseau.

ABSTRACT

Social media has become essential tools for engaging with customers during a crisis. However, many organisations fail to utilise these platforms strategically, often reducing their role to mere information dissemination. This study investigated Eskom's possible social media strategy during the national electricity crisis in South Africa, particularly after Stage 6 load shedding was announced to take place on 28 June 2022. The research explored the feelings and opinions shared by consumers on X in reaction to Eskom's posts declaring Stage 6 load shedding, and examined Eskom's responses to determine the strategic intent behind their social media use in managing their brand reputation.

Using interpretivist directive qualitative content analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis, 886 X comments were analysed deductively. The findings reveal that Eskom primarily employed communication strategies aimed at shifting blame and providing excuses for the load shedding. In contrast, consumers expected Eskom to be accountable and clearly communicate their plans to resolve the crisis. Notably, Eskom did not respond to any consumer comments, indicating a lack of dialogic intent in their social media strategy. Additionally, consumers felt overlooked as key stakeholders, attributing Eskom's lack of engagement to this perceived disregard.

This research contributes to an understanding of the application of the Dialogic Theory, Image Restoration Theory, and the Brand Identity Matrix within the context of a South African state-owned entity (SOE). Although the study was constrained by time, the researcher used immersivity and reflexivity in analysing X content, ensuring the credibility of the data and findings. It is recommended that a quantitative sentiment analysis could further reveal consumer perceptions regarding Day Zero and a potential grid failure by the state owned and national power provider Eskom.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a management function that involves a set of strategic actions that align with the overall organisational strategy of a company which helps maintain its position in the marketplace and its reputation amongst stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2004; Dimitrova, 2016; Ibn-Mohammed, Herath, Swallow, Gower, Montes, Brooks, Garcia & Morrison-Saunders, 2024). In unforeseen and compelling instances wherein, the organisational reputation is vulnerable and in jeopardy, crisis communication is deployed as a tactical method to counteract such vulnerability (Cornelissen, 2004; Marsen, 2020). Crisis communication is part of an organisation's crisis management activities to assess and influence stakeholders' views to retain their reputation amid a crisis (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Since the perceptions of crisis vary among the different observers, communication has evolved from being a tool to inform about the issue to rather being a way for an organisation to influence the crisis and brand reputation (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021).

Social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), is one of the popular platforms used for information consumption, and it plays a focal role in connecting brands with their customers swiftly and effectively (Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Gan, Alexeev, Bird & Yeung, 2020; Srivastava, 2018). With the rise of social media, managing reputation has become a complex process, prompting organisations to formulate a social media-specific communication strategy to manage their brand reputation (Dimitrova, 2016; Elmada, Elmaresa, Wardhani & Putri, 2022; Srivastsava, 2018). A brand's good social media interactions maintain a positive public perception, conversely, negative or non-existent interactions result in discontented stakeholders (Elmada *et al*., 2022; Srivastava, 2018). Consequently, businesses must formulate and implement preventative and proactive measures to safeguard their brands and reputations (Becker & Lee, 2018; Elaihar, Elhadj & Djemouh, 2024).

Becker and Lee (2018: 231) note that social media's pervasiveness and 'always-on' nature have profoundly added to its communicative power, which has decimated industries, harmed organisations' reputations, and drastically altered the power dynamics between customers and organisations. Organisations may be active on X and use it to disseminate information, however, this does not imply that they have a plan in place for using the platform to communicate in a time of emergency (Vanadia, 2020). Although some businesses with X accounts disseminate information in times of crisis, the information is vague if they are doing so strategically to control their image (Vanadia, 2020). Due to the ever evolving and expanding characteristic of social media and technology, scant research has been done on how businesses may manage their reputation in times of crisis through communication strategies (Vanadia, 2020).

The 2018 *H&M* debacle, in which the retailer shared an image of an African youngster wearing a hoodie and the slogan "coolest monkey in the jungle," serves as an illustration of how social media may harm a brand's reputation (Gill, 2018; Langaro, Neves & Loureiro; 2020). Over the next weekend, the company received many social media complaints (Langaro *et al*., 2020). On Monday, January 8, 2018, *H&M* took to social media to express sympathy for their irate customers and assumed responsibility for their actions (Vanadia, 2020). *H&M* took preventative steps, such as hiring a new Global Leader for Diversity and Inclusivity expressing regret for their campaign and accepting responsibility for their conduct (Kjærsgaard, 2018; Lieber, 2020). Owing to their prior errors regarding child labour, cultural insensitivity, and discrimination, they received mixed reactions — negative and positive — to their main messages on social media, despite having a strong strategic communication plan in place (Makanjuola, 2020; Mensah & Osman, 2018). More so, Mensah and Osman (2018) posit that their reputation repair communication plan was thorough and laid out the path to success, however, their history of errors prevented their communication strategy to mitigate their reputation among audiences from being fully successful. This complexity arises against the backdrop of the electricity crisis experienced in South Africa, where Eskom's decision to begin Stage 6 load-shedding on June 28, 2022, garnered much public attention (BusinessTech, 2022).

This study will explore the consumers' feelings towards Eskom's social media crisis communication approach, using existing brand reputation strategies and brand identity as a reference to identify commentary related to Eskom's communication and brand identity.

1.2. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

1.2.1 Background of the study

Eskom, now represented by and under custodianship of the Ministry of Electricity led by Minister Kgosientsho David Ramokgopa after Eskom was shifted from the scope of the Ministry of Public Enterprises, is the only shareholder of the South African government, which also owns and operates most the country's power plants (African Energy Chamber, 2023). In 2022, coal contributed to 80% of power generation in these power plants, which produce around 95% of South Africa's total electricity (African Energy Chamber, 2023).

Eskom began implementing load shedding, or intentional power outages, regularly in 2007. According to the African Energy Chamber (2023) and Ayuk (2023), load shedding is a regulated and deliberate disruption of the electrical supply. The country's several regions alternately experience these power outages during designated times (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). Load shedding was initially introduced as a mitigation mechanism for a situation when the demand for electricity surpassed the capacity of the power grid due to insufficient electricity generation (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). Nevertheless, the situation has gotten worse over time as a result of issues with the power infrastructure and a lackluster maintenance plan for the current electrical generation equipment (African Energy Chamber, 2023). Consequently, African Energy Chamber (2023) and Ayuk (2023) assent that chronic electricity troubles in South Africa are primarily the fault of Eskom, the state-owned power provider, which operates an outdated and intensively used fleet of coal-fired power plants that routinely fail and require repair (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). Thus, for the past 14 to 15 years, these power disruptions have had a significant economic impact on the country.

To compensate for the electricity supply catastrophes with the older power stations, efforts were undertaken to improve and maintain the power supply infrastructure, as well as boosting electricity production capacity. As a result, Limpopo and Mpumalanga have erected two of the world's largest coal-fired power plants, Medupi and Kusile (African Energy Chamber, 2023). Despite 15 years of construction, these plants only produce around half of their intended aggregate capacity of 9,600 MW due to a variety of concerns, including breakdowns, technical issues, construction delays, and accidents (African Energy Chamber, 2023). These two projects have prompted Eskom to incur debts of approximately US$23 billion (418 million ZAR), putting the company's finances in jeopardy. Furthermore, electricity theft and municipal customer nonpayment have exacerbated the problem (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). Even with increased consumer prices, Eskom is unable to pay its debts, affecting both citizens and companies (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). In 2022, South Africa endured 205 days of rolling blackouts due to Eskom's infrastructural and financial problems (Ayuk, 2023).

Customers' dissatisfaction prompted them to use social media to express their grievances and thoughts about Eskom (Govender, 2020). Social media has grown in popularity among consumers due to its ability and potential to allow and facilitate equal and open communication between the public and government entities. Govender (2020) stresses the efficacy of social media by allowing individuals to actively participate in democratic discourse, policymaking, and governance through interactive, two-way communication. Furthermore, social media has emerged as and proven to be an effective tool for managing brand equity and reputation through communications (Govender, 2020; Shahi, Clausen & Stieglitz, 2022). Even though social media has become an essential component of customer engagement during times of crisis, there is limited research on how consumers feel towards crisis communications and their expectations (Spoljaric, 2021).

Eskom has a profile on X, but the question remains if they use their X profile efficiently to communicate with stakeholders (Govender, 2020). This study aims to explore consumers perceptions and feelings towards Eskom's crisis communication efforts and their state corporate brand during the power crisis in 2022 - 2023. It is against this backdrop that, this researcher will consumers' perspective on crisis communication. Eskom's online crisis communication and its consumers' perceptions of Eskom's online crisis communication approach, will be examined using

X, as it has been identified that X is a contemporary and influential crisis communication instrument (Shahi *et al*., 2021).

1.2.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceived success of Eskom's use of X to manage its brand reputation by developing a comprehensive understanding of consumers' feelings towards Eskom's social media crisis communications approach through what they have expressed in the comment section in three Eskom's posts on X, announcing the Stage 6 load shedding during the electricity crisis in South Africa between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023.

The consumers' comments on Eskom's X posts will be explored to establish how consumers received Eskom's crisis communication approach through what consumers have expressed in the comment section of Eskom's posts on X referencing existing brand strategies and elements of brand identity.

1.2.3 Relevance of the topic

Load shedding was an almost daily occurrence in South Africa, where South Africans are plunged into darkness for hours at a time due to the failing infrastructure of parastatal organisation, Eskom (Govender, 2020). This has caused frustration amongst South African consumers due to their daily tasks being disrupted as well as increased tariffs with no relief from load shedding. Eskom's inability to maintain power supply to its consumers has had a negative impact on its reputation locally and internationally (Ateba, 2018). Consumers have voiced their frustrations on X, but it is yet to be identified what Eskom is doing with the feedback.

Researchers widely acknowledge that effective crisis management often depends on carefully planned communication strategies (Babatunde, 2022). This highlights the crucial role that communication plays in navigating crises, with its impact having the potential to either support or undermine crisis response efforts and an organisation's reputation (Guo, Liu, Wu & Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, the complex link between communication and media is a critical aspect in crisis situations (Babatunde, 2022). As a result, academic research has increasingly focused on the use of media, particularly social media, during different stages of crisis communication (Reuter, Hughs, & Kaufhold, 2018). Despite it being recognised that crisis situations can have a huge impact on an organisation's wellbeing, consumers' perspective on crisis communication still has not been researched thoroughly (Spoljaric, 2021; Stieglitz *et al*., 2018). Therefore, this study will provide a deeper understanding of consumers perspectives of Eskom's crisis communication on X, during the stage 6 load shedding period between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023.

1.2.4 Relationship of the topic to the discipline of creative brand leadership

Researchers have become increasingly interested in the concept of public sector branding and its ability to shape how citizens perceive government and their actions (Ferlie & Ongaro, 2022; Marland, Lewis & Flanagan, 2017; Sataøen & Wæraas 2015). Currently, brands are no longer only created through symbols, logos and language, and include the emotions and perceptions that consumers have towards the brand (Adewole, 2024; Da Camara, 2007; Maurya & Mishra, 2012).

With feelings and perceptions playing a role in brand creation, reputation plays an important role in creating the brand (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2020). Reputation is how internal and external stakeholders of an organisation, along with regulators and the communities where the organisation operates, view the business (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2020). Therefore, brand reputation is defined as the overall thoughts and feelings of stakeholders and conversations about, and events that affect the financial performance of an organisation and its brands (Rust, Rand, Huang, Stephen, Brooks & Chabuk, 2021).

The public perceptions that create the brand reputation, also influence brand equity and vice versa (Beneke, Chamberlain, Chohan & Neethling, 2015; Tasci, 2020). Brand equity is the worth that consumers associate with the brand, and is affected by service and/or product quality (Jain, 2017; Tasci, 2020).

To manage reputation, and therefore brand equity, a company needs to have an effective brand communication strategy (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020; Shrestha, 2021). What makes communication more vital, is the growth of social media and its nature to spread information quickly to large audiences and provide unlimited access to information (Cheng, 2016; du Plessis, 2018; Malecki, Keating & Safdar, 2021). As a result, the practice of social media crisis communication emerged to manage an organisation's online communication strategy and protect its brand reputation (du Plessis, 2018; Elmada *et al*., 2022).

Eskom is a parastatal organisation which currently has a poor brand reputation and equity due to its poor service delivery of electricity to South African consumers (Ateba, 2018; Tsireledzo, 2022). Poor service delivery is seen in times of load shedding, and between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023 load shedding reached stage 6 which pushed South Africa into an electricity crisis (O'Regan, 2022). Therefore, the researcher has chosen to analyse consumer's perception towards Eskom's online crisis communication during the electricity crisis between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023. Existing brand reputation strategies and elements of brand identity will be used to identify the perceptions of consumers towards Eskom's crisis communication and their state corporate brand. A study on Eskom consumers' perceptions of Eskom's online communication during a crisis is highly relevant to the discipline of creative brand leadership, as it explores how digital communication influence public perceptions and brand reputation in the public sector.

1.3 CONCEPTUALISATION OF KEY TERMS

The key terms for this study include crisis communication, corporate brand, brand management, load shedding, social media, crisis, and social media comments. The meanings of these main concepts will be based on definitions found in a variety of existing scholarship.

1.3.1 Crisis Communication

A crisis is an unforeseen and challenging circumstance that poses a profound danger (Canyon, 2020). A crisis has alternatively been described as an event that was not anticipated or predicted but poses a threat to very significant values, requiring a swift response within a restricted time frame (Canyon, 2020; Kara, 2019). Crisis communication denotes a range of communicative measures and techniques intended to foster organisational stability and safety if regular operations of the company are interrupted by crisis (Coleman, 2020; Mikušová & Horváthová, 2019). Organisational crisis communication falls under the umbrella of disaster response and emergency management, which encompasses, inter alia, organisational communication, issues management, strategic communication, and crisis management (Tyler & Kapucu, 2021).

Thus, by intertwining the definitions of crisis and communication, crisis communication is defined as a series of actions used to disseminate information to manage an incident that threatens an organisation's reputation (Coleman, 2020).

1.3.2 Corporate Brand

A brand is a distinctive name, logo, design, or mix of these aspects used by a company to distinguish its products and services from those of competitors (Da Camara, 2007; Kenton, 2023). However, it is becoming clear that branding is evolving from an organisation-centric approach to a more collaborative process involving the organisation, consumers, and other stakeholders (Iglesias, Ind & Schultz, 2022; Ind & Schmidt, 2019). As a result of this shift, Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic and Koporcic (2019) and Iglesias *et al*., (2022) recognise the corporate brand as co-created by its stakeholders and composed of interrelated elements that are part of an ongoing dynamic process. A brand is made up of interconnected elements such as value proposition, relationships, position, expression, brand core, personality, mission and vision, culture, and competencies, all of which are influenced by an organisation's stakeholders and their interactions with one another (Urde, 2022; Urde & Greyser, 2016).

In this study, the concept of a corporate brand refers to the company's collectively established identity and overall reputation, which is influenced by stakeholders and their relationship with the company itself (Iglesias *et al*., 2022; Urde, 2022).

1.3.3 Brand Management

Brand management is a continuous and comprehensive process that begins with the creation of a brand, notwithstanding its intrinsic intricacy (Kononenko, 2021). Brand management techniques consist of a variety of marketing tools used to boost consumers' perceptions of the value of branded products (Kononenko, 2021). Brand management promotes product price increases and fosters consumer loyalty through the establishment of positive associations and heightened brand awareness in line with the objectives outlined in the marketing strategy (Kononenko, 2021). Companies are gradually shifting their focus on brand management from just controlling product or brand profitability to prioritising customer management, emphasising customer profitability and equity (Kotler & Armstrong, 1997; Kononenko, 2021).

In this study, brand management is defined as the maintenance and enhancement of customers' positive relationships with brands.

1.3.4 Load Shedding

Power outages, sometimes referred to as load shedding, are imposed when the electricity demand exceeds the supply. According to the Department of Economic Development and Tourism (2019) and Eskom Holdings SOC Ltd (2024), this is a controlled way of allocating the available electricity among all Eskom customers using a rotating system. This study adopts this same definition, conceptualising load shedding as scheduled power outages that are implemented rotationally across several geographical areas, controlling the distribution of electricity.

1.3.5 Social Media

Kent (2010), Manning (2014) and Kaye (2021) describe social media as any interactive communication tool that promotes two-way conversation. Present-day social networks, such as Facebook and X, are distinguished by their ability to provide real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, a sense of immediacy, convenient response times, and the flexibility to participate with the network at any moment (Kent, 2010; Carr & Hayes, 2015; Vanadia, 2020).

In this study, social media will refer to digital platforms that allow for instant, two-way communication between users, identifying X as a social media platform and focusing on the use of X in crisis communication.

1.3.6 Crisis

Doorley and Garcia (2018) and Canyon (2020) describe a crisis as an incident that, while not necessarily catastrophic, has the potential to inflict considerable reputational, operational, or financial loss if left to normal business processes and procedures. Many crises are little disruptions in ordinary operations that can quickly escalate if ignored or mishandled (Canyon, 2020; Doorley & Garcia, 2018).

This study adopts the conceptualisation of crisis that aligns with Doorley and Garcia's (2018) and Canyon's (2020) descriptions which combines the notions discussed above and explains a crisis as a non-routine event that risks undesired visibility, potentially leading to significant reputational damage. The severity of a crisis is not only determined by the non-routine event itself but also by the potential visibility and subsequent threat to the organisation's reputation (Canyon, 2020; Doorley & Garcia, 2018; Fink, 1986).

1.3.7 Social media comments

A post is a content unit that can contain a written text, audio-visual elements, and/or a link (Teneboim, 2022). The success of a social media post is often measured through reach, impressions, and engagement (Barklamb, Molenaar, Brennan, Evans, Choong, Herron, Reid & McCafferey, 2020). Social media engagement is understood as the total interactions on a social media (Barklamb *et al*., 2020). Interactions include social media users' reactions or comments on the post and sharing the post with their followers (Barklamb *et al*., 2020). Therefore, a post is a single piece of owned content posted to social media (Teneboim, 2022), whilst a comment is a type of engagement that takes place on the original post (Barklamb *et al*., 2020). Thus, in this study comments are considered as a reaction to a post indicating engagement with the comments.

1.4 TYPE OF STUDY

In this section, the interpretivist paradigm is discussed including its epistemological, ontological, and axiological orientations in terms of the study. Also discussed are basic research, exploratory research, and the case study design.

1.4.1 Interpretivist paradigm

Interpretivism is a paradigm utilised in qualitative studies (Pulla & Carter, 2018; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). It emphasises an in-depth exploration of contextual features and elements

(Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). Interpretivists argue that studying human experiences and meanings is not the same as studying physical objects or events. According to interpretivism, human activities are purposeful, and people assign meanings to their own and others' behaviour (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). Interpretivists seek to comprehend human actions by describing them through the eyes of the people being researched (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). When studying these human interactions, interpretivists understand that cultural, contextual, and historical distinctions all contribute to the formation of distinct social realities (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a).

Despite positivists' criticism of interpretivists for using subjective understanding in their practice, interpretivists maintain that knowledge and meaning are formed through interpretation. This means that there is no absolute, impartial knowledge that exists independently of human thinking and reasoning (Klenke, 2016; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This view enables interpretivist scholars to obtain a more in-depth understanding of distinct individual realities and experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pulla & Carter, 2018). This study adopts interpretivism to focus on consumers' experiences of Eskom's online crisis communication strategy on X during the energy crisis. Therefore, this study will provide a deeper understanding of consumers' reactions towards Eskom's online crisis communication on X, identifying refereme to brand reputation and identity.

1.4.1.1 Ontology

Ontology refers to people's viewpoints on reality, namely their ideas about the essence of existence (Gichuru, 2017). Ontology is largely concerned with understanding the underlying essence of a phenomenon, and precisely how it exists (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The researcher seeks to discover the reality of a study question by pointing to existing relevant knowledge (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Interpretivists reject the idea of a single, objective reality that everyone experiences in the same manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). Instead, they posit that society shapes reality and is affected by the interpretations individuals assign to their own experiences and interactions with others. (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). In interpretive research, ontology views reality as a personal creation influenced by the significance people attach to their life experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Therefore, an interpretive researcher aims to comprehend a specific viewpoint of reality by actively involving themselves in the social phenomenon being studied, giving special attention to the participants' distinctive perspectives and perceptions of reality.

This researcher will delve into the numerous comments left on X, with a particular focus on the unique perceptions and opinions expressed by consumers regarding Eskom's online crisis communication.

1.4.1.2 Epistemology

The study of epistemology focuses on how knowledge is produced, how a researcher seeks knowledge to comprehend reality or truth, and how to reveal these truths (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Additionally, epistemology denotes how researchers view and comprehend the world and determine what is accurate or inaccurate in their research (Blackwell, 2018; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022).

The way in which researchers engage with the subjects of their studies have raised concerns (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). On one hand, some agree that the act of studying people might have an impact on the researcher which can result in challenges in maintaining objectivity (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). On the other hand, interpretivists disagree with the idea that truth and knowledge are entirely objective, and instead, cannot be entirely objective since what is deemed a reality is dependent upon how individuals understand information within a particular context (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). Additionally, the generalisability of interpretivist research findings is another epistemological element of concern (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). Interpretivists believe that the truth is determined by how people understand information, which is why interpretivists do not seek to generalise their findings universally which is why they use methodologies specific to the scenario that is being studies and cannot be applied to other situations (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The epistemological perspective of this research study focuses on the interactions between Eskom and its customers to understand Eskom's strategic aim to use X to communicate with its stakeholders, if any, and how consumers react to it. The researcher will not attempt to make broad generalisations, nor will the researcher precondition, predict, or manipulate findings, as is common in epistemological interpretative studies (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019a).

1.4.1.3 Axiology

The axiological perspective is concerned with the study of values and judgments, and it investigates how values influence research and helps us understand what a particular community or tradition finds valuable. Axiology also poses the question of whether scholars can set aside their values to obtain insight, or whether their values influence what they comprehend (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). Interpretivists value having a thorough understanding of complex and unique individual realities (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). They do not want to do research without regard to values (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). Instead, they acknowledge the values that guide their research, which include both their interpretations and those of the people being studied (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). Consequently, thematic analysis is utilised in this interpretative research to better comprehend and derive themes from consumers' interactions with Eskom to identify their perception and judgement regarding Eskom's crisis communication efforts and their brand. The researcher also maintains reflexivity throughout the study keeping a voice recording journal of their thoughts throughout the data anlysis process to track their own interpretations.

1.4.2 Basic Research

Basic or pure research seeks to gain a greater understanding and comprehension of a certain issue. This study aims to explore consumers feelings towards Eskom's online crisis communication as indicated in their under Eskom's posts during stage 6 load shedding. Basic research seeks to advance existing knowledge in a given field or specific topic. Perspectives must be adjusted as things constantly evolve (Davis, 2021). Enhancing existing knowledge entails establishing new research methods, which may include studying the methodologies employed in the research itself

(Davis, 2021). The findings from this study will contribute to the existing literature on consumers feelings of and expectations from organisations' social media crisis communication.

1.4.3 Exploratory research

Exploratory research seeks to learn more about emerging problems or issues. An exploratory case study involves providing a thorough account of a specific instance while considering its larger context to grasp its characteristics (Bezuidenhout & Strydom, 2021). This study adopts exploratory research to investigate how successfully Eskom's crisis communication strategy on X was received by a better understanding of consumers' experiences as reflected in the comment section of Eskom's posts on X.

1.4.4 Case Study Design

Researchers may use the term 'case' to refer to a single setting, place, or institution, or to both the institution (or place, or setting) and each individual within it (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). A case study is a detailed account of a real-world social event (Bezuidenhout & Strydom, 2021). It allows researchers to better grasp a problem by viewing it in its original context, immersing themselves in the natural setting, and gaining a comprehensive picture of what someone goes through (Bezuidenhout & Strydom, 2021; Neuman, 2007). Interpretivist case studies attempt to understand participants' sense-making of events or phenomena (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). They are based on a social constructivist understanding of reality and focus on symbolic components of experience, examining how and why people act in specific ways and investigating the meanings they generate (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). According to Bezuidenhout and Strydom (2021), the case study technique is useful for qualitative research since it allows researchers to concentrate on the distinct and individual experiences of the participants.

In particular for this study, the researcher will implement a single case study design, which involves single fields observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A single case study further allows the researcher to focus on an issue by selecting one case to represent the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Takahashi and Araujo (2019) note that multiple case study designs are more valuable to reach generalisability. However, the interpretivist paradigm prioritises understanding specific instances over generalisability (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Thus, using a single case study technique the researcher delves deeply into issues surrounding a lack of crisis communication on social media by analysing the single case of Eskom's crisis communication during the stage 6 load shedding crisis in 2023. By examining the experiences that South African consumers shared in the comments section on Eskom's X post during the stage 6 load-shedding energy crisis, the researcher will be able to identify the unique experiences from Eskom's stakeholders and how they feel towards Eskom's crisis communication or lack thereof. Through this immersion, the researcher will be able to comprehend their expectations regarding Eskom's social media communication strategies.

Case study research has been critiqued on a few of its characteristics and limitations (Sena, 2024). First, it is difficult to generalise the findings due to the fact that case studies typically focus on a particular circumstance or a small number of cases (Sena, 2024).

Objectivity is another concern because case studies are often qualitative and influenced by the researcher's opinions (Sena, 2024). This concern around objectivity brings up questions around the findings being impartial or scientifically credible (Sena, 2024). This particular study is qualitative and therefore generalisability and credibility are not the aim of this study but is rather concerned with gaining an in-depth understanding of the data and the findings' trustworthiness (Sena, 2024).

1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

The nature and scope of the study require the adoption and application of qualitative and cross-sectional research approaches which are defined and explained below.

1.5.1 Qualitative Approach

Baldwin (2018: 49) asserts that "qualitative research studies focus on gaining insights and understandings rather than drawing conclusions about cause and effect." Tracy (2024) and Carter (2018) posit that qualitative research attempts to comprehend how people individually interpret their experiences pertaining to the topic. To better grasp the perceived strategic goal of Eskom's social media crisis communication in managing its brand reputation and comprehend how consumers have responded, this research takes a qualitative approach in its quest to learn more about consumers' experiences with Eskom's online crisis communication.

Although qualitative research has its strengths, it also has its limitations (Lim, 2025). One of the limitations of qualitative research requires a significant amount of time to collect and analyse data (Lim, 2025). Researchers can manage their time by using specialised software tools that can improve efficiency (Lim, 2025). In this particular study, the researcher has used QDA miner to help manage the coding process (Lim, 2025).

The interpretative nature of qualitative research also facilitates the possibility of researcher bias (Lim, 2025). To mitigate this, researchers must engage in reflexivity, which entails continually thinking on their own perspectives and how they may influence the research (Lim, 2025). The researcher has maintained reflexivity thought the research process using a voice memo to document all decisions and feelings (Lim, 2025).

Despite its limitations, qualitative research facilitates the analysis of subjects by allowing the researcher to examine the significance of individuals' distinct experiences in authentic and natural settings (Baldwin, 2018; Bezuidenhout & Strydom, 2021). For this study, the researcher will examine consumers' comments on Eskom's post about stage 6 load shedding. These comments were given in natural situations rather than contrived circumstances, allowing the researcher to obtain insight into the consumers' authentic experiences (Bezuidenhout & Strydom, 2021).

1.5.2 Cross-Sectional Approach

Cross-sectional studies collect meaningful data at a specific point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020). In this study, a cross-sectional approach was utilised to collect data from consumers' comments on Eskom's post on X to better understand their reactions to Eskom's apparent strategic goal when using social media as a crisis communication tool to manage its brand reputation.

Cross-sectional studies frequently include selecting a sample from a large population, rather than beginning with a predetermined population group (Wang & Cheng, 2020). As a result, there is a danger that the sample chosen will not accurately represent the entire population, which can lead to biassed results (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

However, despite the possibility of biased in selecting the sample size, the cross-sectional design aids the researcher in understanding consumers' experiences during stage 6 load-shedding. The focus of this study is not to examine the evolution of feelings or communication techniques over time, but rather to determine how participants perceive Eskom's online communication efforts at a single point in time and whether Eskom had any strategic aim in using X as a crisis communication tool.

1.6 FORMULATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.6.1 The research problem

Despite the importance of social media in engaging with customers in times of crisis, many organisations only use it to share information rather than strategically using it for crisis communication management and engagement (Badham & Mykkänen, 2022; Stieglitz *et al*., 2018). This is evident is Calzati's (2023) examination of the internet connectivity of Huawei in the Pan-African region amidst the crisis caused by the US banning Huawei's products and services in May 2019. Accordingly, Huawei's communication strategy did not include Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). SSA and Kenya were both overlooked in terms of the quantity and quality of Huawei's crisis-related materials (Calzati, 2023). In terms of communication strategies, this shows that Pan-African regions have hitherto been disregarded by companies, leaving a gap in understanding what South Africans expect from companies during times of crisis. Further to this, there has also been a lack of research around stakeholders' perspectives on crisis communication (Spoljaric, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that the aim of this research is to gain a thorough understanding of customer feedback in comments on X about the South African energy crisis during Eskom's Stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023. The study will then explore Eskom's intended strategic goal while utilising X as a tool for online crisis communication during the Stage 6 load shedding crisis. This research will also explore the constraints in crisis communication research, along with the possible absence of strategic purpose in utilising social media within a South African setting.

1.6.2 Research questions

- How did Eskom respond (if at all) to residential consumers' comments on X during the Stage 6 load shedding?
- What were the discernible crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X?
- How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?

1.6.3 Research objectives

To explore:

- The opinions of Gauteng residential consumers expressed in X posts during Stage 6 published by Eskom on 28 June 2022.
- The nature of the responses Eskom generated in response to residential consumers' sentiments and comments on X during the Stage 6 load shedding period, on 28 June 2022 in an attempt to maintain their reputation.
- How a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in posts and comments on X to Eskom's communication during the stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study will use an exploratory approach, utilising qualitative approaches to collect data through guided qualitative content analysis. The comments will next be studied using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis, which involves establishing and arranging these codes into themes before analysing and interpreting the data.

A case study design will be used for data collection and analysis. This will assist the researcher in gaining insight and understanding of South African Eskom consumers' experiences and how they perceive Eskom's communication strategies on X during stage 6 load-shedding.

1.7.1 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is social artifacts, which are comments made by South Africans on Eskom's posts on X at a specific period, between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023.

1.7.2 Population and Sampling

This study's population consists of social artifacts in the form of comments on X, from which the researcher aims to extract findings (Babbie, 2020). The common characteristics of this study's population are comments made on X when Eskom announced stage 6 load-shedding. All comments being studied must include text rather than images with no words.

A sample is drawn from the population to whom the researcher has access, and these individuals become the subjects of the research study (Babbie, 2020; Pascoe, 2021). The sample for this study will include public comments posted on the social media platform X by persons who use Eskom as an electricity service provider, expressing their experiences and expectations. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, will be employed in this study. This strategy involves researchers selecting a sample based on preset features (Andrade, 2021; Pascoe, 2021).

The sample size for this study will be determined during the research process, once the data collection method has reached saturation point. In practice, saturation occurs when a researcher collects data from participants until no new information is collected (Mwita, 2022). Reaching the saturation threshold enhances the validity and credibility of the study's findings while also saving researchers time and effort in data collection (Mwita, 2022).

Purposive sampling is quite susceptible to the researcher's prejudice (Thomas, 2022). Researchers establish a sample by interpreting and evaluating data (Thomas, 2022). However, for this study, the researcher stipulates that purposive sampling was carried out using Brandwatch to determine the largest peaks in conversation to select the posts by Eskom, about stage 6 load shedding, that received the most comments from consumers, ensuring data saturation (Thomas, 2022). As a result, the researcher established that their sample selection was appropriate for the study (Thomas, 2022).

1.7.3 Data Collection

Data collection is the process of acquiring information to better comprehend a research issue (Taherdoost, 2021). This researcher has adopted directed qualitative content analysis (DQCA) to collect data. This process involves filtering out particular aspects of the material, to give a cross-section through the material according to pre-determined ordering criteria, or to assess the material according to certain criteria (Mayring, 2020). In the data collection process of this study, Brandwatch is used to refine the data collection time frame to a specific moment where the electricity crisis was at its peak between 2022 and 2023, thereby filtering out data that is outside of this time period to focus on consumer comments under 3 Eskom posts. Although QCA has been criticised for its subjective judgements and lack of transparency in analysis techniques (Prasad, 2019), the researcher adopted reflexivity throughout the research process and provided a detailed encounter of how the data was collected and analysed to maintain transparency and trustworthiness.

1.7.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis entails arranging data, recognising patterns, emphasising key points, and presenting the findings (Azungah, 2018). Thematic analysis involves organising and simplifying the complexity of the data into meaningful and manageable codes, categories and themes (Peel, 2020). Although thematic analysis is valuable, it has limitations (Lochmiller, 2021). Thematic analysis relies heavily on well-formulated research questions (Lochmiller, 2021). When doing a thematic analysis, researchers should ask questions that highlight specific patterns in the data (Lochmiller, 2021). This entails formulating "what" or "how" research questions (Lochmiller, 2021). These questions encourage thematic analysis by elaborating on underlying patterns and using its strengths (Lochmiller, 2021). Making explicit linkages to theoretical or conceptual frameworks can be challenging in thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021).

This researcher will conduct a thematic analysis in six steps: familiarising themselves with the data, producing codes, establishing themes, defining themes, and finally compiling the report. This data analysis aims to uncover patterns in the data to better comprehend the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Finlay, 2021).

1.8 FEASIBILITY OF THE STUDY

The feasibility of the study relates to its ability to be completed with the resources available (Koonin, 2021). The study's feasibility will be guaranteed by considering numerous components of trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter 3 delves more into these components.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher obtained ethical authorisation from Vega's ethics committee before the commencement of data collection. The data collection method is directed qualitative content analysis, which entails gathering using brandwatch to filter out data that does not fit a certain category by identifying peaks in engagements over time related to mentions of stage 6 load shedding, thereby the researcher identified that conversations peaked between 2022 and 2023, and collected data in the form of consumer comments from the peaks identified.

Due to the analysed comments being collected from X already being made public by the author, there is no need for consent or explanatory forms (Information Regulator, 2019). The researcher considered the POPI Act and X's privacy policy, which stipulate that researchers are permitted to gather and publish information for social media platforms provided it has been made public by an X user (Information Regulator, 2019; X, 2023). The identities of the authors of the comments will be kept anonymous so that no harm is done in terms of jeopardising any future job prospects. Since the researcher will have no contact with the subjects, no further harm will be done to them in terms of making them feel uncomfortable or pressured. The researcher will report the findings honestly and keep an audio journal to ensure all thought processes are recorded to reduce bias. Information from the comments will be stored in password-protected Word documents to ensure no one else besides the researcher and their supervisor can access the data and misuse the information.

1.10 LIMITATIONS

The lack of research on how South African state-owned entities use social media for crisis communication presented some limitations for this study, as well as the changes that were happening to X (previously Twitter) at the time of this study as the platform was being bought by Elon Musk, which could affect the relevancy of the findings. Although purposive sampling may create bias, the researcher employed reflective methodologies to ensuring the credibility of the analysis.

1.11 CONCLUSION

In Chapter One an outline of the proposed research study was provided, discussing the various research elements such as the context of the study, conceptualisation, the type of study, research approach and methodology, the research problem, and associated questions. The ethical considerations will be implemented throughout the study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore consumers feelings about Eskom’s social media crisis communications through what they have expressed in the comment section in Eskom’s posts on X, announcing the Stage 6 load shedding during the electricity crisis in South Africa. This exploratory research study will use directive content analysis to collect data and thematic analysis to interpret the data, in alignment with a case study design. The researcher will make sure this research is conducted honestly and with integrity.

1.12 EXPOSITION OF THE STUDY

In Chapter Two, the researcher explores the existing body of literature concerning the domains of brand management, reputation management, the function of crisis communication in reputation, and the utilisation of social media to implement crisis communication to manage brand reputation.

The theoretical frameworks providing the fundamental ideas of this research study, is explored in Chapter Three. Here, the three theories that will be discussed in this section is Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory, Taylor and Kent's (2017) Dialogic Theory and Urde and Greyser's (2016) Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix.

The researcher explains the research design and methodology of this research study in Chapter Four. The population, sampling methods, data collection and data analysis methods, will be included in Chapter Four. The methods and approaches will be discussed and critiqued, and motivation for using these approaches, designs and methods, will be provided. Finally, ethical considerations of the study will be discussed.

In Chapter Five, the researcher provides the findings and recommendations. are explained. Finally, Chapter Six is a concluding chapter which provides the study's findings, limitations, and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher aims to examine the current body of literature to comprehend the ongoing research and discussions pertinent to brand reputation strategies. Commonalities and gaps within the existing literature will be identified. So far, it has been observed that brand identity and reputation are closely linked and equally important (Mirzai, Fard & Slambolchi, 2016; Revilla-Camacho, Rodriquez-Rad, Garzon, Rio-Vazquez, Prado-Roman & Palacios-Florencio, 2022). In this contemporary era where information is constantly shared at any time, crises develop faster, causing more significant pressure on an organisation's efforts to maintain its reputation (Becker & Lee, 2018; Snoussi, 2020). Social networks allow for interactivity and two-way conversations, allowing customers and clients to judge a company's reputation online rather than absorbing information passively (Govender, 2020). This new digital era's platforms and their effect on brands have prompted this researcher to investigate strategies for managing their reputation on X and their success.

To explore approaches that brands have employed in the past for handling their image on X and the outcomes they achieved, this researcher will analyse existing literature and include a theoretical framework to understand the current landscape of online communications in terms of the best tool for online communication and include a theoretical framework to inform the discussion of the findings.

2.2. DEFINING A BRAND

A brand is created through a name, a visual logo, a design, or a strategic combination of these elements to ensure the public identifies and differentiates a company's products and services from its competitors (Da Camara, 2007; Kenton, 2023). Furthermore, the concept of a brand is linked to a range of characteristics and psychological connections, providing it with a heightened level of emotional significance (Da Camara, 2007; Romani & Grappi, 2021). A brand has become more complex as audiences like brands they feel they can trust or a brand that elicits an emotion from them (Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021). Seeing as feelings are complicated, the definition of a brand is complicated and unique to everyone (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016; Romani & Grappi, 2021).

There are two types of branding: corporate branding and product branding (LaMarco, 2019). Product branding refers to promoting a specific product without focusing on the company (LaMarco, 2019). On the other hand, corporate branding speaks to the entire company and that company's reputation (LaMarco, 2019). In this study, the researcher will look at Eskom from a corporate branding perspective to identify its social media strategy and perceived influence on consumers.

2.2.1. Defining a Corporate Brand

As mentioned earlier, the main difference between product brands and corporate brands is their target audiences (LaMarco, 2019). Product brands focus on customers and their needs, whereas corporate brands focus on multiple stakeholders like customers, employees, suppliers, media, investors, and society (Balmer & Podnar, 2021; Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic & Koporcic, 2020).

Urde and Greyser (2016) developed and explained a matrix that includes nine interrelated elements that make up a corporate brand and divided these elements into three categories. The first category houses the internal brand elements including mission, vision, culture, and competencies, which form the foundation for corporate brand identity (Balmer & Podnar, 2021; Urde & Greyser, 2016).

At the matrix's pinnacle are external elements, housing aspects associated with how the company aims to be perceived by customers and other external stakeholders. These external elements encompass the organisation's value proposition, external relationships, and positioning (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Within the middle section, some components serve as a bridge between the external and internal elements (Balmer & Podnar, 2021; Urde & Greyser, 2016: 6). These components encompass the organisation's personality, unique communication approaches, and its brand core, representing what it stands for and the enduring values that form the foundation of its commitment to customers. (Balmer & Podnar, 2021; Urde & Greyser, 2016: 6). Urde and Greyser's (2016) Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

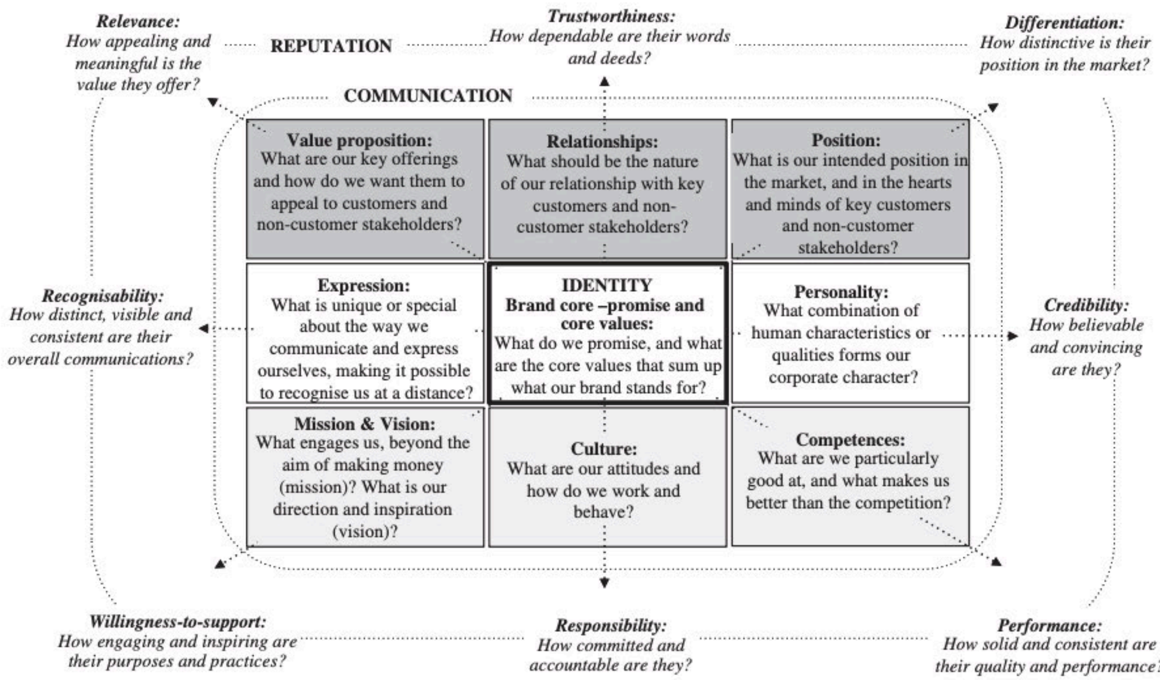


Figure 2.1: The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM). (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 103)

Iglesias *et al*. (2020) provide more information about stakeholders' roles in constructing the corporate brand. According to Iglesias *et al*. (2020) and Ramaswamy (2022), the corporate brand is established on an interconnected set of elements that lead stakeholders to participate in co-creating the corporate brand identity. Stakeholders engage in four activities during the co-creation process, including communicating, internalising, contesting, and elucidating (Iglesias *et al*., 2020).

2.2.1.1 Communication

Communication refers to a process of transmitting the corporate brand identity to all stakeholders, both internal and external, with an emphasis on employees (Iglesias *et al*., 2020). When the corporate brand identity aligns with external stakeholders, they are inclined to advocate and support it within their circles, emphasising the importance of fostering strong relationships with stakeholders for sustaining a resilient corporate brand (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

2.2.1.2 Internalisation

Internalisation denotes a process of bringing the corporate brand identity to life by translating it into natural behaviours aligned with the identity and integrating it into the organisation's daily routines and actions (Iglesias *et al*., 2020; Urde & Greyser, 2016). Employees are more likely to behave consistently when personal values match the corporate brand identity (Iglesias *et al*., 2019). Iglesias *et al*. (2020) corroborates Urde and Greyser's (2016) claim that the employees of a brand must be convinced of the brand identity and behave accordingly if the corporate brand is to be authentic.

2.2.1.3 Contestation

Contestation is a comparative process in which stakeholders evaluate the company brand identity against their own perceptions and those of competitors (Iglesias *et al*., 2020). Different stakeholder perceptions of a corporate brand's identity influence its market positioning and perception among various stakeholders (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

2.2.1.4 Elucidation

Elucidation is a conversational process in which managers and stakeholders discuss and negotiate their interpretations of the corporate brand identity, fostering a shared understanding that clarifies and strengthens the brand's core values (Iglesias *et al*., 2020; Urde & Greyser, 2016). At the center of this negotiation process are the brand's core values (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

A corporate brand is a dynamic and co-created concept, constructed with elements such as value proposition, relationships, position, expression, brand core, personality, mission and vision, culture, and competencies (Iglesias *et al*., 2020; Urde & Greyser, 2016). These elements are all influenced by the various stakeholders of an organisation and their interrelationships (Iglesias *et al*., 2020; Urde & Greyser, 2016).

2.2.2. Elements of Brand Trustworthiness

Trust is critical in developing and maintaining brand loyalty in both business-to-consumer and business-to-business purchasing scenarios (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021). Trust influences consumer behaviour and loyalty, which affects market share and price resilience (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021). A brand must have a positive reputation and demonstrate competency, predictability, and accountability in order to develop trust with its stakeholders (Barfi, Yuan, Afryie, Fonjong, & Sarpong, 2019).

2.2.2.1 The Role of Brand Reputation in Building Brand Trust

Brand trust and brand loyalty must be understood in order to understand the concept of brand reputation (Lau & Lee, 1999; Shin, Amenuvor, Basilisco, & Owusu-Antwi, 2019). Consumer comments and ideas influence reputation, which includes trustworthiness, integrity, and honesty. It indicates the consumer’s impression of the brand's dependability (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; Rust *et al*., 2021). Effective marketing, customer interactions, and a strong market position all have an impact on brand reputation. Positive market standing fosters trust and purchasing decisions, but unmet expectations or poor brand value cause consumer scepticism (Baruah & Panda, 2020).

2.2.2.2 Brand Competency as an Element of Trustworthiness

A competent brand can solve customer problems and meet their needs (Butler, 1991; Portal, Abratta & Bendixenb, 2019). A good brand satisfies customer needs, and its attributes must be compatible with them (Khan, Rehman, Ali & Wajahat, 2010; Portal *et al*., 2019; Singh, Sharma, Jayapriya, Kumar, Chander & Kumar, 2023). In the context of brand trust, consumers develop a sense of trust when they believe a brand can meet their needs, therefore demonstrating a solid link between competency and trust (Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015; Singh *et al*., 2023).

2.2.2.3 Brand Predictability as an Element of Trustworthiness

Brand predictability refers to a brand's capacity to consistently meet the needs of its customers (Efendi, Setiawan, Saksono, Ekasari & Munizu, 2023; Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015). Consumers want to be able to predict how the brand will perform over time and under different conditions (Efendi *et al*., 2023; Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015). Several factors influence how predictable a brand is (Efendi *et al*., 2023; Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015). One of the most significant aspects is maintaining the same level of quality that a service or product provides (Efendi *et al*., 2023; Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015).

Brand trust increases when brands show predictability to stakeholders, (Efendi *et al*., 2023; Kasperson, Golding, & Tuler, 1992; Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015). This trust benefits the brand since it increases the likelihood that customers would choose it when making purchasing decisions (Efendi *et al*., 2023; Kasperson, *et al*., 1992; Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015).

2.2.2.4 The Influence of Accountability on Trust

People are more likely to trust transparent and responsible government entities (Indama & Salain, 2023). Accountability refers to the extent to which an organisation responds to those who have placed their trust, confidence, and resources in it (Indama & Salain, 2023). Government organisations in charge of providing important public services must be efficient and effective in the way they execute their mandates (Indama & Salain, 2023). Being trustworthy, which involves being open and accountable, is essential for ensuring that public services are effecient and effective in serving the public (Indama & Salain, 2023). Indama and Salain (2023) investigated how openness and accountability affect public trust in government institutions, to better understand the impact of public trust.

Indama and Salain (2023) surveyed 200 students, that they selected at random, from Basilan State College to gather their views on this topic, in which they found that most participants felt that accountability and transparency greatly affect their trust in government bodies (Indama & Salain, 2023). In general, their research emphasised the need for transparency and accountability to build public trust Indama & Salain, 2023). Building and maintaining brand loyalty requires trust, and that trust stems from a brand's perceived reliability, competence, and predictability (Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021). When consumers put their trust in a brand, they do so by placing expectations upon it, which involves risk (Barfi *et al*., 2019; Sun & Moon, 2024). If a brand fails to deliver, the brand's trustworthiness is called into question (Barfi *et al*., 2019; Efendi *et al.,* 2023). Predictability, or the perceived reliability of a brand based on its consistent performance, deepens trust by assuring customers that they will not face any unforeseen issues and that their needs will be met (Baruah & Panda, 2020; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Kasperson *et al*., 1992).

2.2.3. Authenticity as an Element of Brand Identity

Brand authenticity is the perceived originality of an object that cannot be copies (Tran, Vo & Dinh, 2020). Riefler (2020), describes brand authenticity a type of communication between consumers and brands that promotes the understanding of the authenticity and history of certain brands. Authenticity is important for creating and maintaining a successful brand since it is more likely to be trusted than inauthentic brands (Leonaviciute, Seinauskiene, Mascinskiene and Jeseviciute-Ufartiene, 2024; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014).

Tran and Keng (2018) identified four aspects of authenticity after studying a variety of literature. Terms related to genuine, the real thing, sincere, and accurate are associated with branding realism, communicating the level of authenticity a brand has as opposed to imitating the characteristics of another (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schafer & Heinrich, 2012; Södergren, 2021). According to Napoli *et al*. (2016) and Sarfaz and Bano (2022), terms related to sincerity, legacy, and quality commitment that are used to describe a brand demonstrate the control an organisation has within its operating environment. Customers' perceptions of a brand's authenticity are impacted by this control (Napoli *et al*., 2016; Sarfaz & Bano, 2022).

Connection is achieved through relating to others, which essentially demonstrates authenticity which can be maintained through various strategies emphasising genuineness (Rodrigues, Borges & Sousa, 2022). Leonaviciute *et al*. (2024) explain virtue as upholding moral principles, which cultivates a brand's legitimacy in the eyes of people who form opinions based on sincere intentions. Therefore, brands that are perceived as unethical or acting against moral standards are viewed as inauthentic, whereas companies with good intents or genuine motives are seen as authentic (Leonaviciute *et al*., 2024; Napoli *et al*., 2016).

2.3. CORPORATE BRAND REPUTATION

According to Rust *et al*. (2021), brand reputation is the sum of stakeholders' thoughts and sentiments as well as discussions and occurrences that impact an organisation and its brands' financial performance. As previously stated, companies must safeguard their corporate reputation since they have a brand as well. Corporate reputation is a dynamic notion that is viewed variably across disciplines (Baruah & Panda, 2020; Pires & Trez, 2018). Corporate reputation is described as stakeholders' overall perceptions of a company based on ongoing financial, social, and environmental assessments (Baruah & Panda, 2020; Pires & Trez, 2018).

More so, Baruah and Panda (2020) explored key components which make up the concept of corporate reputation which include innovation, management quality, financial robustness, global competitiveness, and the quality of products or services. Innovation empowers companies to create unique products, processes, and services with minimised production costs, facilitating market exploration (Baruah & Panda, 2020). This innovative approach fortifies the company's competency within its industry, contributing to the satisfaction of customer needs and wants, consequently fostering a positive reputation among stakeholders (Baruah & Panda, 2020; Narteh & Braimah, 2019).

Management quality pertains to the accountability of the company's leadership for the overall success or failure of the organisation (Baruah & Panda, 2020). When a company performs successfully in the market and generates substantial revenue, it signals a content customer base resulting from the company's delivery of high-quality products and services (Baruah & Panda, 2020). This ability to provide excellent products is ultimately attributed to well-managed employees who are content with fair compensation and motivation, as determined by the management's decisions (Baruah & Panda, 2020). Thus, Baruah and Panda (2020: 147), describe financial soundness as an important indication of the position of the company that:

> *" reveals to the investors, customers, government and even the greater society the way a company adheres to resource efficiency by aligning judiciously its assets to operating performance."*

Eckert (2017) implies that, rather, reputation influences the financial performance of an organisation, and that financial loss is an element of reputational risk. On the other hand, researchers Narteh and Braimah (2019) found evidence supporting the notion that financial performance affects a company's reputation. These different views suggest a two-way relationship between reputation and financial performance.

A company adopts global competitiveness when its products or services reach international markets (Baruah & Panda, 2020). A company's export performance benefits itself, its shareholders, consumers, and the country by bringing foreign exchange to boost the economy (Baruah & Panda, 2020). Exporting globally fosters relationships outside of the home country, hence impacting how international entities see the firm brand (Baruah & Panda, 2020). The long-term investment value explores the relationship between company size, return potential, and risk (Baruah & Panda, 2020). This indicator represents the company's long-term performance and is an important factor in establishing reputation (Baruah & Panda, 2020).

Customers value the quality of products and services (Baruah & Panda, 2020). This quality is measured by how well products and services adhere to certifying bodies' criteria and meet consumer expectations (Baruah & Panda, 2020).

When a company's products satisfy these requirements and exceed consumer expectations, it demonstrates the company's empathy for its customers, which improves its reputation (Baruah & Panda, 2020). Fundamentally, corporate brand reputation relies heavily on the relationship the company has with various stakeholders at all levels; it is the nature of these relationships that creates a certain perception of the corporate brand in the minds of the stakeholders, which is what influences the company brand’s reputation (Balmer & Podnar, 2021)

2.3.1 Brand Reputation Management Through the Lens of Crisis Communication

Communication is an important element in a successful crisis management strategy (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020). Crisis management is a practice that involves various tactics to manage a brand’s reputation, and communication has become an important tactic to manage crises and brand reputation (Marsen, 2020; Sellnow & Seegar, 2021). Srivastava (2018) confirms the importance of communicating the right message at the right time in their study on Maggi, an instant noodle brand that suffered reputational damage after it became apparent that their food had a higher MSG and lead content than what was allowed by Food Safety and Standards regulations. The noodles underwent testing and came back as safe for consumption (Srivastava, 2018). Despite the story spreading through the media quickly, Maggie chose not to respond immediately, thinking not many would believe the story (Srivastava, 2018). Marsen (2020) further identifies the importance of rapid response in conclusion to their literature review and suggests the importance of organisations responding quickly is growing due to social media.

Another case study that demonstrates the need for strong and timely crisis communication during a crisis, is that of Pepsi (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020). In 2017, Pepsi published a video ad picturing a protest scene and Kendal Jenner in the middle of a photoshoot which she leaves to go hand a police officer a Pepsi which resulted in an end to the protest (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020). There was a lot of criticism around the use of Kendal Jenner, throwing her wig at her black female assistant to join the protest and another critique on how using Jenner in the ad took away from the prominent role black people had in previous protests in America (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020). Pepsi responded quickly and defended the ad saying they were trying to promote the message of unity, but then quickly took down the ad the next day and published an apology (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020).

Srivastava's (2018) and Saqina and Ambarini's (2020) studies indicate that protecting and preserving necessitates appropriate communication at the appropriate time for the right target audience. Specifically, social media communication aided the company in re-establishing its reputation among the younger generation more swiftly. More so, Saqina and Ambarini (2020) emphasise the need for rapid response during a crisis, as well as an apology. Therefore, demonstrating a timely and genuine communication approach is vital in crisis management (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020; Srivastava, 2018).

2.3.1.1 Ambiguity in Crisis Communication

Sohn and Edwards (2018) conducted a study in which they aimed to contribute to strategic communication literature by using an interdisciplinary approach, providing a broader perspective for organisations to view their communication practices. The interdisciplinary approach helps resolve complex real-world problems and reduces one-dimensional evaluations of Sohn and Edwards (2018). Sohn and Edwards (2018) further examined the efficacy of equivocal, conflicted messages in communication strategies during a crisis and the ramifications of stakeholders' judgments by way of empirical tests to assess and extend existing communication theories.

Strategic ambiguity is described as the deliberate implementation of mixed messages in communication by individuals inside companies to achieve specific goals (Winter-Froemel & Zirker, 2015). In practice, strategic ambiguity enables organisational actors to create alternate interpretations for goals based on the diverse interests of their stakeholders (Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2012). It uses semantic instability to generate new meanings and promote mutual understanding (Eisenberg, 1984; Sillince *et al*., 2012). Organisations create practical ambiguity by crafting mixed messages, allowing them to effectively negotiate the difficulties of varied stakeholder expectations and opposing aims (Sohn & Edwards, 2018).

Using mixed messages or presenting two seemingly opposed ideas at the same time is one method for redefining and reinterpreting a crisis (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides guidelines for aligning crisis response techniques with the level of crisis accountability and responsibility that an organisation takes on (Coombs, Holladay & White, 2021). SCCT supports accommodative and cooperative strategies in which organisations take full responsibility if stakeholders place a high value on them (Coombs *et al*., 2020). Furthermore, when an entity has little crisis responsibility, it is incentivised to deploy defensive strategies that deny responsibility (Coombs *et al*., 2021). According to SCCT, acknowledging responsibility and adopting a rebuilding mindset would effectively offset reputational harm (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, Holladay, & Claeys, 2016; Coombs *et al*., 2021). Organisations can, however, reframe critical difficulties with ambiguous messages by utilising strategic ambiguity (Coombs *et al*. 2010; Hoffjann, 2021). Instead of presenting a clear single message, they may refute claims while selectively apologising for minor errors, creating and giving the impression of an apology (Sohn & Edwards, 2018).

According to relativist perspectives, such as those from constructionism, individuals are seen as interpreters and creators of their social reality, which is shaped by their meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Consequently, ambiguity is not unusual, as meanings are constructed rather than intrinsic to discourse (Eisenberg, 1984; Fairclough, 2023; Piantadosi, Tily & Gibson, 2012). This perspective implies that multiple interpretations of a single event are possible (Fairclough, 2023; Piantadosi *et al*., 2012).

Additionally, messages intentionally designed to be ambiguous can result in several different interpretations simultaneously (Weick, 1995; Sohn & Edwards, 2018; Turner, Allen, Hawamdeh & Mastanamma, 2023). When people encounter ambiguous messages, they engage in a sensemaking process to resolve the uncertainty (Weick, 1995; Piantadosi *et al*., 2012; Turner *et al*., 2023). Weick (1993; 2015) and Turner *et al*. (2023) suggest that reality is an ongoing process that is a result of efforts to create order and make sense of what has occurred. Recognising the existence of various interpretative frameworks for the same event is crucial, as interpretations shape human behaviour (Sohn & Edwards, 2018; Turner *et al*., 2023).

To test the existing literature on crisis communication strategies, Sohn and Edwards (2018) considered two case studies. First, to be analysed was the crisis Chrysler faced in the 1980s when they were accused of test-driving vehicles for up to five weeks with disconnected odometers and then selling them as new (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). During a press conference, then-chairman Lee Iacocca acknowledged that the firm's integrity had been compromised (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). However, they dismissed concerns about the quality of their products, asserting that the company policy was to ensure high-quality automobiles (Sohn & Edwards, 2018; Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). Iacocca described their customer compensation plan as a recall that came from a place of moral principle rather than a product recall (Sohn & Edwards, 2018; Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). This statement seemed to admit wrongdoing and offer a sincere apology, but it focused on the company's ethical errors while maintaining confidence in the quality of Chrysler vehicles (Sohn & Edwards, 2018).

The second case study analysed was a crisis that the restaurant Jack in the Box found itself in when they were blamed for an outbreak of E. coli infections that involved the death of three children in the early 1990s (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). The grill temperatures in its restaurants were found to be below the state-mandated minimum, which was identified as the primary cause of the outbreak (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). The company took responsibility for the infections, stating that the temperature regulations had not been adequately communicated within the organisation (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). Rather than admitting to human error in meat preparation, Jack in the Box attributed the issue to a failure in its communication system (Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004; Sohn & Edwards, 2018).

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), a leading framework in crisis communication research, often assumes that audiences will straightforwardly accept organisations' messaging as intended (Coombs et al., 2020; Sohn & Edwards, 2018). This assumption excessively focuses on clear and transparent communication practices Coombs et al., 2020; Sohn & Edwards, 2018). However, the current study reveals that individuals interpret messages in diverse ways rather than accepting them at face value, which in turn influences their attitudes and behavioural intentions

(Sohn & Edwards, 2018). The study also highlights that both the nature of the crisis communication strategies and the type of crisis play significant roles in shaping these outcomes (Sohn & Edwards, 2018).

Sohn and Edwards' (2018) research expands on Coombs' (2007) SCCT by including practical concerns, implying that businesses must carefully construct crisis communication strategies that consider both organisational and stakeholder variables. Organisations must recognise that people's interpretations are shaped by their prior attitudes, expertise, and cultural backgrounds (Sohn & Edwards, 2018). Finally, while clarity remains a cherished ideal in crisis communication, intentional ambiguity provides companies with a versatile tool for managing complex situations (Meehan & Pinnington, 2021; Sohn & Edwards, 2018). Organisations can protect their reputation and stakeholder trust by understanding and strategically deploying ambiguous messages (Coombs, 2007a; Meehan & Pinnington, 2021; Sohn & Edwards, 2018; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

2.4. THE VALUE IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CRISIS COMMUNICATION TOOL

This section will review existing literature that identifies and discusses how social media has previously been utilised to manage brand reputation. Topics to be explored include communication strategy, response time, tone of voice, influencers, brand reputation management on X, and ESG strategies on X.

2.4.1. The Role of Social Media in a Crisis Communication Strategy

In the realm of corporate communication, a crisis has the potential to spark extensive discussions on social media, necessitating organisations to proactively engage as active participants. Employing dialogic strategies becomes crucial in reinforcing organisational images during such instances (Eriksson, 2018; Lee, Britt & Kanthawala, 2023). Given the rapid nature of communication facilitated by social media, a crisis can either originate on these platforms or be heightened and subsequently alleviated through social media channels (Cheng, 2016; du Plessis, 2018; Lee et al., 2023). Consequently, social media crisis communication has emerged as a specialised form of communication aimed at managing online communication strategies and safeguarding an organisation's brand reputation (du Plessis, 2018; Malecki, keating & Safdar, 2021).

Şirzad (2018) concurs with the importance of social media in allowing organisations to manage their reputation. Not only can organisations manage their reputation through sharing information and key messages, but they can also scan through online conversations and proactively get involved in the conversation to manage stakeholder perceptions through dialogic communication strategies (Cheng, 2016; du Plessis, 2018). Participating in a clear and interactive dialogue on social media during a crisis enables the organisation to deliver authentic content regarding the crisis, eliminating space for speculation or misinformation (Cheng, 2016; du Plessis, 2018). Encouraging social media audiences to engage with the corporate brand online contributes to upholding the credibility and legitimacy of the content, showcasing vigilance as a resilience strategy for renewal (du Plessis, 2018).

There are a number of issues when it comes to state owned entities using social media to carry out crisis communications. One concern is the ethical and practical complexity of social media platforms, which are based on algorithms that can polarise public opinion and keep them focused on content that they want to see and not content that is outside of their interests which restricts access to varied perspectives (Lovari & Valentini, 2020).Furthermore, true participation among social media users remains minimal, with the majority of users not adding significantly to public discourse, despite the fact that social media is viewed as a means for two-way communication and interaction.

Not everyone has access to internet or is educated on using digital platforms meaning that state owned entities run the risk of excluding particular demographics if they were to sue social media as a tool for crisis communication (Lovari & Valentini, 2020). State owned entities must aim to reach and involve all demographic groups in order to prevent reinforcing existing sociopolitical imbalances, as they are responsible for serving all citizens, PSOs, as organisations responsible for serving all citizens (Lovari & Valentini, 2020).

Despite the issues that come with using social media as a crisis communication tool, social media still proves to be a valuable in sharing information quickly and to a wider audience and facilitates two-way communication (Gan *et al*., 2020). Du Plessis (2018) and Cheng (2016), bring to light the role social media has in corporate communication when managing reputation through dialogic communication with stakeholders through social media.

2.4.2. Prompt Response

Vanadia's (2020) study found that organisations must respond swiftly to a crisis on social media. Ideally, the organisation should respond quickly, precisely, and consistently, and communicate within an hour of the crisis occurring (Vanadia, 2020). A prompt response demonstrates that the organisation is responsible for its actions (Vandia, 2020). While it is important for a company to provide feedback within the first hour of a crisis occurring, doing so can increase the risk of spreading incorrect information (Vanadia, 2020). Le, Teo, Pang, Li, and Goh (2018) investigated the efficiency of strategic silence during a crisis and identified three intention-based typologies: delaying, avoiding, and hiding silences (Le *et al*. 2020). The study discovered that avoiding/hiding silence exacerbated the severity of crises, harming the organisation's image (Le *et al*., 2018). Whilst using silence as a method to delay the response, assisted in preserving/restoring the organisation's reputation with primary stakeholders if successfully sustained and broken as planned (Le, *et al*., 2018).

Vanadadia (2020) stresses the need to respond swiftly on social media during a crisis; yet cautions against responding in haste and propagating false information. According to Le *et al*. (2018), using silence to postpone the response process can help rebuild a brand's reputation. This is an interesting argument that will be addressed to determine whether South Africans anticipate Eskom to delay or accelerate the response process.

2.4.3 The Importance of Voice's Tone: Conversational Human Voice versus Corporate Voice

Gommans (2020) established two distinct tones of voice in their research, namely the conversational human voice (CHV) and corporate voice (CV). CHV, according to Kelleher (2009), is an organisational communication style that has organic, engaging, and humanised discussions with the public. Through the use of emotive language, abbreviations, second-person pronouns, and public dialogue, organisations might embrace a CHV (Liebrecht *et al*., 2021). However, CV suggests a more systematic approach, with organisations using third-person pronouns when speaking to the public (Liebrecht *et al*., 2021).

According to Gommans (2020) communications that used a CHV did not lead to a greater perceived organisational reputation than those that used a CV. This was true for both Spanish and Dutch consumer groups, indicating that sensitivity to various speech tones was not significantly impacted by cultural orientation (Gommans, 2020).

On the contrary, Spoljaric (2021), explored consumers' opinions on social media crisis communication whereby they conducted an online survey amongst 125 participants. Their study aimed to gain insight from the participants into their expectations of the types and tone of social media messages that organisations should communicate during a crisis (Spoljaric, 2021). Participants were asked to watch a video of a delivery man throwing a parcel containing a computer monitor over a fence (Spoljaric, 2021). They then were shown a video from the senior vice president of the delivery company in which he gave a minute-and-a-half long speech to acknowledge the situation and apologise for the employee throwing the customers package over the fence (Spoljaric, 2021). The participants answered questions regarding their perception of this particular crisis communication response from the company's vice-president (Spoljaric, 2021). The results of the study showed that the participants perceived the crisis response video as using a corporate voice and would have preferred a more personal tone of voice to be present (Spoljaric, 2021). Indicating that tone of voice does have an effect on consumer's perceptions of the video, unlike Gomman's (2020) findings. This researcher intends to establish if Eskom's consumers express anything towards Eskom's current tone of voice in their online crisis communication.

2.4.4. X and Brand Reputation Management During a Crisis

Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, and Potthoff (2018) conducted a study on Volkswagen's communication strategies on X during a brand crisis triggered by the discovery of specific software in most VW diesel engines. This software could detect emissions tests and adjust performance to enhance diesel emissions results (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018). Subsequently, the organisation acknowledged engaging in deceptive practices during emissions tests in the United States (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018). The study by Stieglitz *et al*. (2018) highlights that Volkswagen did not directly respond to stakeholders and customers in crisis-related posts on X. Instead, they chose to overlook crisis-related posts (X posts) while responding to more general ones, particularly those related to customer service inquiries. However, VW did publish two posts on X that could be considered an apology, which were expected to have a positive effect on stakeholders' sentiments, but the responses to the apologies were negative (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018: 519). The reasons for this criticism were the poor timing and manner of the apology, as it was not directed and timeous (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018).

Volkswagen seemingly ignored the importance of customer relationship management in brand management and customer loyalty when they did not respond to crisis-related inquiries, which could result in losing trust among customers and other stakeholders (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018: 520; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017). Sundstrom and Levenshus (2017) highlight the importance of organisations actively getting involved in a discourse with customers and the public and thus establishing a two-way exchange, which should be included in a brand reputation management strategy on X.

Sundstrom and Levenshus (2017) investigate how the dialogic theory of public relations might foster relationships between individuals and organisations on X. Their study discovered that X provides more opportunities for dialogic exchanges, and strategic communication strategies should include consistent responses to mentions and enquiries to boost engagement. These actions demonstrate that the ability for interactivity and synergy in the X environment benefits organisation-public relationships and can improve stakeholder impressions of the organisation.

2.4.5. Environmental, Social and Governance Strategies on X and Brand Reputation

According to Piyasinchai, Grimes, and Loch's (2021) study premised on environmental, social and governance strategies, during crises, public environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criticism harms an organisation's reputation. A respectable ESG reputation during a crisis leads to a healthy cycle years later by creating positive public impressions that lead to stronger interactions with stakeholders (Piyasinchai *et al*., 2021). The positive ESG attitudes enable organisations to create better sustainability practices, resulting in an organisation's reputation becoming progressively favourable (Piyasinchai *et al*., 2021). However, companies that are frequently critiqued on their ESG protocols during times of crisis are more inclined to find themselves in a perverse cycle as the negative perception of the company's reputation hinders their capabilities to better implement sustainability formalities after a crisis (Piyasinchai *et al*., 2021). This can cause the organisation's reputation to tarnish further (Piyasinchai *et al*., 2021).

Furthermore, Piyasinchai *et al*. (2021) found that when an organisation enters a perverse cycle caused by a damaged reputation during a crisis, it can be remedied. This requires the company to spend time investing in ESG initiatives and efforts to move into a positive cycle where its image reinforces its sustainability efforts and goals (Piyasinchai *et al*., 2021). This implies that ESG is critical to building and maintaining a positive organisational reputation and should be an element of discussion throughout its online communications (Piyasinchai *et al*., 2021).

2.5. GOVERNMENT ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Reputation spillover happens when an organisation becomes associated with a crisis that is affecting another entity, such as a competitor, causing reputational harm due to the perceived affiliation (Laufer & Wang, 2018). When the affected organisation and and the organisation that was initially in question, are believed to belong to the same industry or category, reputation spillover is more likely to occur (Laufer & Wang, 2018). When stakeholders see the crisis as a result of bigger issues within a category, they may generalise the blame to that category (Laufer and Wang, 2018). Reputation spillover between organisations and their home countries will be discussed in this section. The discussion extends to cover the government's use of social media.

2.5.1. Reputation Spillover Between Organisation and Home Country

Laufer and Wang (2018) identified four key risk factors that increase the likelihood of a crisis spillover, namely: country of origin (COO), industry, organisational style, and positioning strategy

(Laufer and Wang, 2018). These factors influence how stakeholders perceive similarities between entities, hence impacting the degree to which common category qualities may be connected with a crisis (Laufer and Wang, 2018). In cases where an organisation aligns with more than one of these factors, the cumulative effect intensifies, increasing both the ease with which connections to the crisis are made (accessibility) and the perceived relevance of those connections (diagnosticity), ultimately raising the risk of reputational spillover (Laufer & Wang, 2018).

Gaining insight into the dynamics that drive spillover phenomena is crucial for both academic inquiry and practical crisis management (Laufer and Wang, 2018). It allows for more accurate evaluation of spillover likelihood and enables organisations to devise suitable strategies for risk mitigation (Laufer and Wang, 2018). This understanding is equally significant for enhancing crisis readiness—particularly in assessing whether, and how, to respond to crises unfolding in external entities (Laufer and Wang, 2018). Laufer and Wang (2018) emphasise that the necessity and nature of a response will depend on the perceived probability of spillover.

If a crisis affecting a competitor involves any of the spillover risk factors and becomes publicly visible, whether through media coverage or general discourse, it becomes critical for the organisation to monitor perceptions (Laufer and Wang, 2018). If there are signs of growing associations, the organisation may need to move quickly—perhaps by publishing a rebuttal that clearly distances itself from the affected party. Such proactive communication helps to eliminate ambiguity and limit reputational damage (Laufer and Wang, 2018).

On a broader level, crisis preparation can be viewed as a reflection of the various threats that an organisation may face (Laufer and Wang, 2018). Crisis spillover is a type of external risk in which reputational harm results not from the organization's own actions, but from its perceived involvement with another's crisis (Laufer and Wang, 2018). Laufer and Wang (2018) identified four risk factors: COO, industry, organisational type, and positioning strategy. These factors indicate areas where perceived similarity can lead to the transfer of negative perceptions, affecting an organisation's overall preparedness and resilience in the face of external reputational threats (Laufer and Wang, 2018).

Firstly, the country of origin (COO) refers to the country that a corporation is associated with, this is usually the location of its headquarters (Laufer and Wang, 2018). For example, Starbucks is related to the United States (Laufer and Wang, 2018). When other companies have the same COO as the organisation that is the focus point of a crisis, stakeholders may perceive them as belonging to the same national category (Laufer and Wang, 2018). This perceived similarity increases accessibility, making it more likely that stakeholders will draw connections between them (Laufer and Wang, 2018). The concept of diagnosticity, by contrast, is concerned with whether particular attributes of the COO, such as national culture or the country's general reputation for certain products (i.e., product–country image), are seen as relevant to the crisis, thereby reinforcing the perceived link (Laufer & Wang, 2018).

Secondly, crises within an industry often affect more than just the directly involved firm (Laufer and Wang, 2018). When a company within a specific sector experiences a crisis, other organisations in the same industry may also suffer reputational damage due to the tendency of consumers to generalise from one firm to the entire category (Laufer and Wang, 2018). This generalisation is more likely to happen if the event involves industry-wide standards or practices, as it would increase diagnosticity, which is the extent to which the crisis is perceived as ordinary for the entire sector (Laufer & Wang, 2018).

Third, the organisational type is characterised by its mission, ownership structure, and operational model, which can also contribute to crisis contagion (Laufer and Wang, 2018). For example, a for-profit institution, such as a private university, is mainly focused on generating revenue, whereas a non-profit organisation, such as a public university, is often focused on contributing to social or humanitarian goals (Laufer and Wang, 2018). When an organisation who is focused on growing profits experiences a crisis, stakeholders may see it as a result of the larger organisational type, especially if the issue originates from the efforts made to grow profit (Laufer and Wang, 2018). In these circumstances, the crisis becomes more diagnostic of the category, increasing the chance of spillover to other similar organisations (Laufer & Wang, 2018).

Lastly, a comparable positioning strategy involves branding, marketing, and advertising approaches and can also increase the potential of crisis spillover (Laufer and Wang, 2018). A company that is not yet a focal point in the crisis but has a similar positioning strategy to the company experiencing the crisis, will be more likely to be connected to the crisis in the eyes of stakeholders because it will be perceived to be similar to the company in question (Laufer and Wang, 2018). In contrast, if stakeholders see a clear ddiffernece in positioning strategy, the mental link between unaffected and impacted organisations is weakened, lowering the risk of reputational contagion (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Janakiraman et al., 2009; Laufer & Wang, 2018).

An example of how reputation spillover pushes organisations to redefine their communication strategy to reshape their reputation is the case in which McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm, invested $700,000 into Eskom, which was on the verge of insolvency at the time (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2018). It was later discovered the contract was illegal, with some of the payments made to an associate of an Indian-born family, the Guptas, who were already in the middle of a corruption scandal (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2018). At the time, McKinsey was in the process of adjusting its business model to take on more work with governments; however, this controversy with Eskom and the Gupta presented a reputational risk for the consulting firm (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2018). McKinsey's communication strategy included an apology in which they took full responsibility for missing the hints of the Gupta's involvement (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2018).

Bai, Gazze, and Wang (2022) conducted a study on the food poisoning scandal in China's dairy sector in 2008. The study discovered that organisations whose products were not contaminated still suffered from the negative reputation of those whose products were contaminated, resulting in a decrease in export demand for the entire Chinese dairy sector, demonstrating reputation spillover effects (Bai *et al*., 2022). This emphasises the importance of collective reputation in international trade, as well as the obstacles that governments may confront in restoring quality and confidence (Bai *et al*., 2022).

2.5.2. Government's Use of Social Media Communication

There has been a tendency of democratic skepticism in recent decades, resulting in strained and fragile ties between citizens and governments (Karlsson, Aström & Adenskog, 2021; Silva, Tavares, Silva, & Lameiras, 2019). A strategy to bridge this gap involves exploring new avenues of interaction with citizens, especially at the local level, where increased proximity between citizens and local politicians is often linked to heightened responsiveness; this is where social media becomes instrumental (Silva *et al*., 2019; Gu, Harrison & Zhu, 2020).

The fast developments of social media technologies have caused governments to re-evaluate the way in which they communicate resulting in a shift to online communication platforms to increase transparency, encourage participation, and foster community interaction (Wukich, 2020). However, governments tend to still prioritise sharing information rather than participating in two-way communication with online audiences (Wukich, 2020).

Much of the research on governments' use of social media during a crisis has been on natural disasters, such as Wukich's (2020) study of the United States government's social media strategy during Hurricane Florence.

Wukich (2020) identified an increasing expectation from governments to interact with their communities in a variety of ways, including relationship management and broader governmental expectations among community members. Wukich (2020) found that, while information often flowed unidirectionally from government to citizens, numerous communities did solicit input from inhabitants about their needs during reaction and recovery efforts. Furthermore, some cities started conversations with the public about storm preparedness (Wukich, 2020).

However, social media can provide the environment for communities to grieve and complain about the government, which poses a risk to the government's reputation (Wukich, 2020). This risk prompts governments to withdraw and overlook the public, potentially depriving them of a voice and disrupting valuable feedback loops, thereby posing a threat to their reputation (Wukich, 2020).

Government’s use of social media can positively impact public perception by spreading information and facilitating discussion between citizens and the government (Garud-Patkar, 2021; Sanmartín, 2015). Garud-Patkar (2021) examined the relationship between government reputation and social media usage in South Asia. India has recently revised its social media diplomacy policies to correspond with those of the United States, which further shows alignment of its interests with those of South Asians (Garud-Patkar, 2021). This realignment has improved India's standing in South Asia and resulted in favourable support for its foreign policies (Garud-Patkar, 2021).

The Indian government has encouraged engagement from citizens on their social media pages to gather more information from them and create discussions (Garud-Patkar, 2021). This approach has proven to help create a positive reputation for the Indian government in the eyes of the citizens (Garud-Patkar, 2021). Also contributing to the Indian government's reputation is the type of information they share (Garud-Patkar, 2021). India often participates in infrastructure projects and provides financial aid to the South Asia region, positively influencing how the local communities view the Indian government (Garud-Patkar, 2021).

Therefore, the literature in this section has provided insight into the importance of social media for government communication. Although not all governments are using social media in their communication strategy due to reputational risks, other governments are experiencing positive reputation growth from using social media. This prompts thoughts into whether the South African government has used social media to communicate during the Stage 6 load-shedding crisis and how consumers felt about their online crisis communication approach.

2.6. SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES FOR CORPORATE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

The section below will explore current social media strategies used to manage organisational brand reputation online. Communication strategies and transparency will also be discussed.

2.6.1. State-Owned Enterprises Reputational Dependency on Citizen Perceptions

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) must carefully balance economic, social, and other objectives (Greiling & Schaefer, 2020; PWC, 2015). Unlike the private sector, they need to remain financially sustainable while also creating value for citizens and society (Wollmann, 2020; PWC, 2015). Therefore, SOEs ought to be measured not only on financial performance but also on their contribution to society, adopting comprehensive approach (Bird, 2020; PWC, 2015). Focusing solely on short-term profit and loss can jeopardise broader goals and even harm social value (Bird, 2020; PWC, 2015).

SOEs must be actively owned and controlled in order to generate public value, with a clear purpose and mission linked to desired objectives and outcomes (PWC, 2015; Sorrentino, 2020). As public institutions, SOEs must promote transparency and accountability by providing excellent, timely, and trustworthy reporting on their performance and operations, thereby gaining the trust of citizens and other stakeholders (Kowalski, 2020; PWC, 2015). Effective accountability needs more than just information sharing; it also necessitates stakeholder orientation or responsiveness (Cohen, Mamakou, & Karatzimas, 2017; Lampropoulou, 2020).

Bonsón and Flores-Muñoz (2014) suggest that organisations are more likely to disclose information when required by regulation, motivated by a financial need to reduce the cost of capital, or influenced by social pressure from stakeholders. The degree to which an organisation transparently provides comprehensive information about its attributes and maintains timely communication with its various publics, known as interactivity, is seen as a measure of government accountability (Indama & Salain, 2023).

Royo, Yetano, and Lacalle (2019) conducted a study to identify various accountability patterns among State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) by assessing the e-disclosure levels of Spanish SOEs. Royo *et al.* (2019) found that Spanish State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) do not view citizens as key stakeholders or feel an urgency to disclose information to them. In Southern European countries, citizens are often seen as service recipients rather than active participants (Royo *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, many SOEs maintain a narrow accountability style, considering shareholders as the primary stakeholders. Although this case study is based in a European context, it proves that there are SOEs that neglect to communicate with citizens, as they are not seen as important stakeholders but are rather service recipients (Royo *et al.*, 2019). This is important to note for this researcher's study when analysing Eskom's approach to communicating with consumers who proactively engage with Eskom in the comment sections of their posts on X.

2.6.2. Social Media Communication Strategies for Reputation Management

The landscape of communication has evolved significantly with the emergence of social media, introducing novel dynamics and interactions between businesses and the public (Ettern, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019; Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016; Gan, Alexeev, Bird & Yeung, 2020). Recognising the growth of social media, the internet, and their crucial role in reputation-building, it becomes imperative to monitor social media platforms for effective corporate brand reputation management (Elmada *et al*., 2022; Ettern *et al*., 2019; van den Heever & Rensburg, 2018).

Floreddu and Cabiddu (2016) identified six complementary strategies of social media communications to manage corporate reputation, namely: egocentric, conversational, selective, openness, secretive, and supportive. Egocentric communication strategies refer to companies that share information on their social media pages but refrain from engaging in conversations with customers and fans (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). Companies employing egocentric communication strategies aim to enhance the firm's visibility through social media without establishing personalised relationships with stakeholders (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). Organisations with reputations ranging from low to medium frequently utilise non-conversational strategies in their social media interactions, choosing either secretive or egocentric approaches (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016).

Conversational companies, as opposed to egocentric organisations, seek to foster meaningful interactions and communication with stakeholders (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). Companies that use a conversational strategy reply to every comment made by stakeholders to initiate a dialogue and resolve any problems (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). Engaging with stakeholders' online fosters loyalty and trust in the corporate brand (Liebrecht, Tsaousi & van Hooijdonk, 2021). Organisations with a higher reputation are more likely to use a conversational strategy to initiate talks and establish relationships (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016).

Organisations employing selective communication strategies aim to filter exclusively positive comments while disregarding any negative feedback (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). These organisations also exercise selectivity in the relationships they cultivate, typically engaging with stakeholders who endorse the firm rather than addressing conflicting opinions (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). Following this strategy, companies respond to every positive comment shared by customers, simplifying community management (Lui, Piccoli & Sadhyac, 2018). Organisations with higher reputations tend to use selective communication strategies in conjunction with the other communication strategies (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016).

Openness as a communication strategy aims to improve transparency of firm-customer conversations (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). This strategy's approach includes not deleting any comments, and companies respond publicly to every remark shared with customers (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). High-reputation companies often take an open approach together with supportive strategies, discussed below, to mitigate any problems their stakeholders face (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). The increased transparency influences the organisations' capability to maintain their high reputation (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016).

Supportive communication strategies focus on providing information about offers and quotations, helping stakeholders throughout the purchase process (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). The supportive strategy allows companies to develop corporate reputation through the active support structure to solve stakeholder issues (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016).

The secretive communication strategy, which aims to manage conflict on social media pages, responds to queries and remarks via another private channel, such as mail or private message, or deletes contradictory comments (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016). Similar to the egocentric approach, the corporation does not engage in dialogue with stakeholders on its social media page (Floreddu

& Cabiddu, 2016). Using a secretive approach can be risky for a company owing to the lack of openness and unfavourable impressions associated with secrecy (Sawalha, 2020).

2.6.3. Transparency

Sisson and Bowen (2017) identified the importance of transparency on an organisation’s reputation during a crisis. From an ethics, reputation management, and authenticity perspective, being responsive and transparent helps organisations build and maintain their reputation (Sisson & Bowen, 2017; Esa, Mohamad, Zakaria & Illias, 2020).

Sisson and Bowen (2017) conducted a study on the positive effects transparency has in sustaining an organisation's brand during a crisis, focusing on Starbucks' alleged tax cheating and the #spreadthecheer campaign. The crisis erupted in response to a Public Accounts Committee report criticising Starbucks, Google, and Amazon for failing to pay or paying low taxes in the UK despite large earnings over three years (Sisson & Bowen, 2017).

In 2012, Reuters found that Starbucks reported no profit and no income tax payments from 1.2 billion pounds in UK sales. Following this disclosure, Starbucks vowed to devote additional funds, agreeing to pay an additional 10 million pounds in taxes per year for two years in order to repair customer trust (Bergin, 2012).

Amidst the tax crisis in December 2012, Starbucks ran a holiday social media campaign, sponsoring an ice-skating rink outside the London Museum with a large screen displaying live posts on X under the hashtag #spreadthecheer (Sisson & Bowen, 2017). However, upset UK taxpayers used the opportunity to post about Starbucks’ tax practices with explicit language visible to families at the ice rink. Starbucks apologised for the oversight in their filtration system (Sisson & Bowen, 2017). The #spreadthecheer crisis was viewed as a potential turning point for Starbucks' reputation in the UK due to the considerable public outrage over its tax practices (Sisson & Bowen, 2017).

Some individuals perceived Starbucks UK's tax crisis as an event further eroding trust in business and, consequently, in Starbucks (Sisson & Bowen, 2017). While transparency was evident in Starbucks' communications after the tax allegations, it could have been more effective if implemented earlier (Sisson & Bowen, 2017). Starbucks could have reduced the appearance of opacity if it had proactively provided its special tax arrangements in the full context of its reporting (Harvard Business Review, 2020; Sisson & Bowen, 2017). Starbucks' case study demonstrates the necessity of maintaining transparency in managing corporate reputation and highlights that limited transparency elevates reputation risk (Harvard Business Review, 2020).

2.7. CONCLUSION

The previously presented literature review has offered rich insights into the current measures and potential alternatives that could be employed to manage the reputations of organisation brands on social media, particularly the platform known as X. The review has also allowed the researcher to identify a gap in research that focus on how stakeholders feel about crisis communication.

The review highlighted the changing dynamics of brand and reputation management in the digital age, where social networks like X allow for two-way conversations and the judgment of a brand's reputation by customers and clients. Gommans (2020) and Vanadia (2020) have highlighted the need for organisations to actively engage with their audiences on X and to employ dialogic interactions to improve stakeholder perceptions and build stronger relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework encapsulates the fundamental ideas that underpin a research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage & Young, 2020). It serves as the foundation for describing why the study is necessary, what problem it tries to solve, its purpose, significance, and the questions it seeks to answer (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Varpio *et al*., 2020). A theoretical framework is essential for developing a clear and planned research plan (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Varpio *et al*., 2020). This study's theoretical lenses comprise of three theories: Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory, Taylor and Kent's (2017) Dialogic Theory, and Urde and Greyser's (2016) Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix.

3.2. IMAGE RESTORATION THEORY

Benoit (1995) proposed a hypothesis arguing that communication is intrinsically a goal-orientated activity, implying that human interaction is motivated by certain agendas. Benoit (1995) used his earlier work on the construct of 'apologia' to condense multiple-image strategies and tactics into a compact five-strategy classification approach.

3.2.1. Tenets of the Theory

Image Restoration Theory posits that maintaining a positive face, image, or reputation is crucial for individuals and organisations (Benoit, 1995, 2020). When this vital asset is at risk, image repair strategies can help restore it (Benoit, 2015, 2020). Attacks, criticisms, or complaints consist of the reprehensible act and the perceived liability for that act (Benoit, 2015). If no reprehensible act has occurred, or if the public does not believe that an offensive act has occurred, then there is no threat to the reputation (Benoit, 2015, 2020). Additionally, an organisation's reputation is not at risk if the relevant audience does not believe it is responsible (Benoit, 2015, 2020). Responsibility or blame can take various forms, such as being accountable for performing, encouraging, or allowing an act (Benoit, 2015; 2020). A threat to reputation exists only if both elements of offensiveness and blame are present.

Benoit (1995) developed a list of fourteen (14) image restoration strategies, which he then grouped into three distinct approaches for handling an organisation's reputation during a crisis, which include reducing offensiveness, denial, and evasion of responsibility. These strategies will be discussed in further detail below.

3.3.2.1 Strategies for Reducing Offensiveness

Reducing the offensiveness of an act is a general approach to image repair (Benoit, 2013; 2020). This strategy can take six forms: mortification, attacking the accuser, transcendence, differentiation, minimisation, and bolstering (Benoit, 2020).

a. Mortification

Apology is a key rhetorical technique in crisis management and conflict resolution (Benoit, 2020; Lerbinger, 2012). Mortification, which involves admitting blame and seeking forgiveness, can be implemented in various forms (Benoit, 2020; Lerbinger, 2012).

The arraigned can definitively apologise, acknowledge misconduct, or communicate repentance (Benoit, 2015; 2020; Lerbinger, 2012). In the English language, *I'm sorry*, can be particularly ambiguous; it might serve as an apology admitting guilt or simply as an expression of sympathy without admitting fault (Benoit, 2015; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Corporations need to be especially cautious, as admitting guilt can complicate efforts to defend against lawsuits seeking damages (Benoit, 2015; Pollach, Ravazzani & Maier, 2021).

Stein and Barton (2018) outline four strategies for enacting mortification: taking responsibility, emphasising the harm caused, asking for forgiveness, admitting a lack of justification, and expressing feelings of shame. Stein and Barton (2018) conducted a study utilising content analysis and grounded theory approaches to examine 409 cases of public apology from 351 different incidents. They aimed to develop a typology of mortification-specific strategies and critique the existing scholarship for its lack of attention to the specific nuances of mortification (Stein & Barton, 2018). Below are the four categories of mortification identified by Stein and Barton (2018).

The first and common mortification strategy involves emphasising the harm or damage caused (Stein & Barton, 2018). Stein and Barton (2018) found that 24% of the cases analysed employed this approach. This strategy signals to the audience that the accused not only recognises the wrongdoing but also genuinely acknowledges the damage caused, rather than apologising merely out of obligation.

The second strategy is to ask the audience for forgiveness or make statements intended to elicit forgiveness (Stein & Barton, 2018). This approach was utilised in 5% of the cases examined (Stein & Barton, 2018). According to Coombs (1995), this strategy is also known as repentance.

The third strategy involves claiming that there is no excuse or justification for the harmful act (Stein & Barton, 2018). This approach represented 4% of the mortification utterances in Stein and Barton's (2018) study (Stein & Barton, 2018). This strategy ensures that the apology is not diminished by any qualifying language (Stein & Barton, 2018).

The fourth and final strategy is that of apology in which some apologists choose to highlight the humiliation caused by the harmful behaviour (Stein & Barton, 2018). This strategy was used in 7% of the total mortification utterances (Stein & Barton, 2018). It not only admits guilt but also underscores the embarrassment resulting from the incident (Stein & Barton, 2018).

Stein and Barton (2018) support the suggestion of Benoit (1995) of using mortification as a crisis communications strategy. Stein and Barton (2018) provide further details on the kind of mortification strategies that can be adopted, providing more strategy approaches within the mortification message intent category.

Further to Benoit’s (1995) mortification strategies, Coombs (1995) identifies three types of mortification strategies, namely redemption, repentance, and rectification. Redemption has already been identified by Benoit (2013) as a mortification strategy that asks for forgiveness from the audience. Coombs’ (1995) strategy of rectification overlaps with Benoit's corrective action message intent strategy discussed in the next subsection.

Under the mortification strategies, Coombs (1995) categorised Benoit’s (1995) corrective action strategy as a mortification strategy, which they called rectification. Corrective action be approached in two ways: firstly, the accused may try to rectify the damage caused by the offensive act (Benoit, 2013; 2020). Secondly, the accused may implement measures to prevent the act from recurring (Benoit, 2013; 2020). Typically, corrective action is carried out by those responsible for the offensive act (Benoit, 2013; 2020).

Another mortification strategy identified by Coombs (1995) is remediation, which describes Benoit's (1995) compensation strategy. Compensation seeks to offset the offensive act by providing money, goods, or services to the victim (Benoit, 2013; Bowen & Coombs, 2020). Unlike the first two general strategies that address blame, this approach aims to counteract the damages caused by the perceived offensiveness of the act (Benoit, 2013, 2024).

b. Attack User

An attack-the-accuser strategy is directed against the individual accusing to undermine their credibility by implying that they, the accuser, are involved in the wrongdoing (Benoit, 2024). Reducing the credibility of the source of charges might have a negative influence on one's image (Benoit, 2024). Attack is regarded as the most aggressive technique for confronting persons who falsely declare that a non-existent crisis exists (Benoit, 1995, 2013, 2024, Metts & Cupach, 1989). Furthermore, if the accuser is also the victim of the claimed crime, this tactic may suggest that the victim deserved what happened, lowering the act's perceived offensiveness (Benoit, 2024).

c. Transcendence

Transcendence indicates that the act was warranted by a higher principle (Benoit, 2013). This approach recontextualises the act into a more positive light, emphasising a different and more significant value (Benoit, 2024; Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Transcendence helps foster identification with the public when organisations and the public share values associated with a broader context. These shared values strengthen the connection between them (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 2024).

d. Differentiation

Differentiation suggests that, while offensive behaviour is undesirable, it is less severe than other comparable acts (Benoit, 2013, 2024; Coombs, 1995). Differentiation entails requesting that judgement be deferred until all evidence is revealed to provide a more favourable interpretation (Benoit, 2015, 2024). This approach, also known as justification, is employed as a distance strategy to lessen the connection between the problem and the organisation (Benoit, 2024; Coombs, 1995).

e. Minimisation

Minimisation, like distinction, communicates that a crisis is not serious without comparing it to another catastrophe (Benoit, 2013, 2024). One could claim that the conduct was less in scope, shorter in duration, less damaging, or impacted fewer individuals (Benoit, 2015, 2024). Coombs (1995; 2013) classified the minimisation technique as a justification strategy within the distance strategies category. It is utilised to increase public acceptance of the crisis while diminishing the link between it and the organisation (Benoit, 2024; Coombs, 1995).

f. Bolstering

Bolstering emphasises the accused's positive traits or deeds in the belief that they will overshadow the offense (Ahmad & Shaari, 2017; Benoit, 2013, 2024). Ingratiation strategies are used to generate public support for an organisation by identifying it with items that the audience values positively (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 2024; Coombs, 1995). An endorsement from an outside expert can also increase an organisation's legitimacy (Benoit, 2024; Coombs, 199).

3.2.2.2. Strategies for the Evasion of Responsibility

The subsequent general strategy is evasion of responsibility which can be approached in four ways, including communicating good intent, claiming the act was an accident, invoking defeasibility, and citing provocation (Benoit, 2013, 2024).

a. Good Intensions

Good intentions are used as a strategy when a company acknowledges offense while arguing that its motive was positive (Benoit 2013, 2024). This method can also be defined as employing reasoning to distance the organisation from the problem (Benoit, 2013; Coombs, 1995). An excuse attempts to reduce the organisation's involvement in the issue and may take the form of denying harmful intentions, which is compatible with Coombs' definition of an excuse tactic (Benoit, 2013; Coombs, 1995).

b. Accident

An accident is a mishap or misfortune (Benoit, 2013, 2024). Blaming an incident on such events serves as a form of an excuse as it minimises the organisation's responsibility for the crisis, thus classifying the strategy of blaming the crisis on an accident as an excuse (Benoit, 2024).

c. Defeasibility

Defeasibility infers that the accused lacked knowledge of or did not have control over the offensive act (Benoit, 2013). Defeasibility is viewed as a distancing strategy since it functions as an excuse (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 2013, 2024).

d. Provocation

According to Benoit (2013, 2024), provocation occurs when another person or entity induces the accused to commit offence. The conduct is presented as an appropriate response to provocation

(Benoit, 2024). This strategy aims to lessen the organisation's responsibility for the problem by serving as both an excuse and a distancing mechanism (Benoit, 2013, 2024; Coombs, 1995). One of the new crisis communication responses identified by Coombs (1995) was silence, a passive tactic that conveys the organisation's uncertainty, of which its relevance is still seen in recent years (Le *et al*., 2020). Stonewalling is defined as being evasive during a discussion or withdrawing from the conversation (Horan & Bryant, 2019).

3.3.2.3 Strategies for Denial

Denial is the final general strategy of Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory. There are two types of denial strategies: first, a simple denial, and second, a shift of blame (Benoit 2013). This strategy attempts to eliminate blame for the offensive act (Benoit, 2013).

a. Simple Denial

Denial is the simple statement that nothing happened and that there is no crisis (Benoit, 1992). Here, the organisation denies its wrongdoing or that the act performed was not offensive (Benoit, 2013).

b. Shift the Blame

In this case, the accused shifted the blame to the claimed true perpetrator (Benoit, 2013, 2020). This can be more successful than mere blame in some cases since it provides another target to blame (Benoit, 2013, 2020). However, for the technique to be effective, the new target for blame must be reasonable.

3.2.2. Application of Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory

Vanadia (2020) conducted a study, using the lens of Benoit's (1995) message intent framework in their Image Restoration Theory, to establish best practices for reputation repair during crises that involved racial bias. Vanadia (2020) analysed the posts of three retail companies to establish intent as part of the companies' online communication strategies.

As already mentioned, an apology involves acknowledgment or remission of fault, which can also include asking for forgiveness (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020). Corrective action is seen when the organisation promises to rectify the issue (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020). Corrective action can involve restoring the conditions that existed before the offensive action occurred or providing reassurance that the accused will prevent the offensive act from recurring (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020). When a company denies that the act occurred, that they executed the act, or that the act was negative in any wa, this is known as the denial strategy (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020). Shifting the blame is another act of denial (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020). Evasion of responsibility has four variants, which include stating the act was a reaction to another's offensive act, invalid, an accident, or that it was carried out with good intentions (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020). Reduction of offensiveness occurs when a company bolsters itself, reduces negative feelings, differentiates itself from others, transforms, attacks accusers, or compensates for the damage it causes (Steiner & Byrne, 2019; Vanadia, 2020).

Vanadia (2020) found that all the companies analysed and communicated messages that attempted to reduce offensiveness. It was also found that messages that reduced offensiveness garnered the most positive engagements from audiences (Vanadia, 2020). Reducing the offensiveness of the crisis helped lessen the damage done but did not completely repair it (Vanadia, 2020). It was also noted that this strategy was the initial response most of the time, followed by other strategies (Vanadia, 2020). Messages conveying corrective action did not generate the highest overall audience engagement and reactions, as found by Vanadia (2020). Among the six analysed posts on X utilising corrective action, four failed to garner over 1,000 likes, replies, or reposts. These messages explicitly outlined the companies' efforts to rectify the issues that caused the crises (Vanadia, 2020). The study suggests that messages reducing offensiveness resonate more than those communicating corrective action (Vanadia, 2020). On the contrary, Chang *et al*.'s (2013) study, which examined the use of Benoit's Image Repair Theory in different cultural contexts, found that corrective action worked well when communicating to audiences in a collectivist culture. The study used Taiwanese-based consumer electronics contractor manufacturer, BenQ, as a case study to examine the communication strategy they used to communicate within a collectivist cultural setting during a reputational crisis related to insider trading (Chang *et al*., 2013).

Yi, Leng, Chen, Gupta, and Ning (2019) researched the impact of post-crisis apologies on an organisation's subsequent reputation. The study found that the positive effects of an organisation's apology and reputation depend on online media interactivity (Yi *et al*., 2019). More precisely, individuals are more likely to appreciate a company's apology when online media interactivity is high, and they are more likely to appreciate a company's reputation when online media interactivity is low (Yi *et al.,* 2019). Although companies are hesitant to apologise due to the risk of experiencing legal issues, apologising has proven to reduce the likelihood of litigation and defuse tense situations (Schweitzer, Brooks & Galinsky, 2015). However, Vanadia's (2020) study contradicts this notion in their study assessing racial crises that occurred between Prada, Gucci, and H & M as it found that, despite apologetic posts on X receiving the most engagement, the apologies received the least number of positive responses from the audiences.

In an African political environment, Chimbarange, Mukenge, and Kombe (2013) study the use of Benoit's (1995) communication strategies for image restoration using the case study of Zimbabwean Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and his short-term marriage of 11 days with then-wife, Lorcadia. The study focuses on Tsvangirai's reputation as a politician and the risk it faced when the media took this situation as an opportunity to accuse him of poorly handling his relationship with Lorcadia (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). Former leader of Zimbabwean political party, The Movement for Democratic Change, Morgan Tsvangirai, employed a combination of image restoration strategies, notably mortification, evasion of responsibility, corrective action, and reduction of offensiveness (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013).

Tsvangirai extended an apology to the public for the debasement caused by his involvement with Lorcadia Karimatsenga (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). He stated, "There are many things I have learnt in the process, and one is that, with the benefit of hindsight, I could have done things differently. In this regard, I apologise to every single Zimbabwean for any discomfort caused by any of my actions" (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013: 150). Through this apology, Tsvangirai accepted liability for the harm his involvement with Karimatsenga had inflicted on his reputation (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). However, he frames his apology within the context of what he perceives as a politically manipulated situation, orchestrated by his opponents (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013).

Notwithstanding, this dual approach presents him as a political figure who is apologising while simultaneously portraying himself as a victim of external circumstances. The apology did not address other public concerns regarding his conduct towards women, specifically omitting mention of the three other women with whom he has been linked (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). This silence may be interpreted as an implied confirmation of these relationships (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). Tsvangirai also recognises the harm inflicted on his political career but did not discuss it openly, instead making a general statement that leaves the public to infer the specifics (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013).

Tsvangirai employs denial as a key strategy to rehabilitate his tarnished reputation (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013: 150). Although he acknowledges his involvement with Lorcadia, he contends that the media's stories are exaggerated and politically motivated (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). By attributing the controversy to a hidden political agenda, he shifts the blame and encourages his followers to interpret marriage within the context of political maneuvering by his adversaries. He attributes the brief relationship with Lorcadia to the actions of the state, Lorcadia herself, and presumably his political opponents within the inclusive government (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013).

Additionally, Tsvangirai reinforces the denial strategy through the evasion of responsibility strategy. He concedes that an event occurred regarding his relationship with Lorcadia, yet he maintains that he intended to rebuild his family following the death of his wife. Upon learning of Lorcadia's pregnancy, he attempted to address the situation by sending a delegation to the Karimatsenga family to resolve the matter traditionally. This approach aims to bolster his image by mitigating the offensiveness of the issue and portraying him as someone with fundamentally good intentions, despite media portrayals (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013: 152).

Tsvangirai also endeavours to reduce offensiveness by discrediting his accusers (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). He accuses his political enemies of enlisting the state media and agencies to exploit the excitement of the media surrounding the alleged marriage (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013: 152). Tsvangirai's message to the public also incorporates the strategy of taking corrective action to restore one's damaged image (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013). He pledges to prevent a similar incident from damaging his reputation in the future, as it detracts from his larger mission of "fighting for democracy" (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013: 152). By making this commitment, he appeals for leniency in public judgement and seeks to persuade his audience that he will not repeat such a lapse in judgement (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013).

With his audience's questions not being answered, it leaves ambiguity and space for more questions (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013:152). Therefore, although Tsvangirai's apology may have won him empathy through his efforts to shift the blame and victimise himself, he has not addressed all concerns of the public, and as discussed in the case of Starbucks, a lack of transparency increases the reputational risk (Harvard Business Review, 2020). This proves that an apology will not be fully effective if not completely sincere and transparent (Harvard Business Review, 2020).

Also playing a role in image repair is the cultural orientation of the audiences and how they receive messages and the different crisis communication strategies suggested by Benoit (Low, Varughese & Pang, 2011). Cheng *et al*.'s (2013) study established that Taiwan is an example of a collectivist culture. While the United States of America is categorised as an individualistic culture (Moon, Tavaglino & Uskul, 2018; Wong, Wang & Klann, 2018). This offers a cultural context for analysing how different governments with varying cultural orientations communicate during crises. Low *et al*.'s (2011) study aimed to understand the differences in image repair strategies used by governments in Western and Asian societies when faced with similar crises.

The MA Administration's handling of Typhoon Morakot in Taiwan serves as an example of how a collectivist-orientated government communicates during a crisis and how the public responds (Low *et al*., 2011: 223). In contrast, the Bush Administration's response to Hurricane Katrina illustrates crisis communication in an individualistic cultural context and the public's reaction (Low *et al*., 2011: 223). The MA Administration primarily used strategies such as shifting blame and simple denial in their initial response, with reducing offensiveness employed only once and not repeated (Low *et al*., 2011: 223). From the beginning of the disaster, the Ma Administration placed the entire blame for the death toll on the villagers themselves (Low *et al*., 2011: 223). Premier Liu Chao-Shiuan, from the Ma Administration, later denied accusations of slow response and used bolstering by visiting survivors to understand their problems (Low *et al*., 2011: 224).

When examining the US government's crisis communication strategies, they employed tactics to reduce offensiveness similar to the Ma Administration (Low *et al*., 2011). However, unlike the Taiwanese government, the US government used strategies to evade responsibility without shifting blame (Low *et al*., 2011: 225). To evade responsibility for neglecting citizens who took shelter at the convention center, the government claimed ignorance of their presence (Low *et al*., 2011: 225). Additionally, the US government attempted to reduce offensiveness by bolstering its position, emphasising its strength and ability to manage without external aid (Low *et al*., 2011: 225).

Representing the African cultural context, the case of Zimbabwean Prime Minister Tsvangirai, discussed earlier, used a similar strategy to the MA Administration. Like the MA administration, Tsvangirai also used blame-shifting and denial in his initial strategies, indicating a similar crisis communication strategy used between collectivist cultures (Chimbarange *et al*., 2013: 152). However, Tsvangari also demonstrated mortification by apologising almost immediately in his communication to the public (Chimbarange *et al.,* 2013: 152). Whilst the USA and Taiwanese governments only demonstrated mortification at the end of their communication strategies (Low *et al*., 2011: 225).

When analysing Chimbarange *et al*.'s (2013) and Low *et al*.'s (2011) studies side by side, the Western (individualist culture) did not shift blame like the two collectivist culturally orientated governments of Taiwan and Africa. However, the Taiwanese MA Administration and the Zimbabwean Prime Minister did have a slight difference in their strategies; the Zimbabwean Prime Minister immediately apologised, whereas the MA Administration only apologised halfway through their communication protocol. This helps signal the similar approaches that collectivist cultural leaders have during a crisis and the possible differences so that this researcher can have a protocol to compare to when analysing Eskom's communication approach during a crisis.

3.2.3. Limitations of Image Restoration Theory

Despite presenting a descriptive framework of message strategies for crisis communication, the Image Restoration Theory does not address the use of silence during a crisis (Ferguson, Wallace, & Chandler, 2018). However, it is crucial to emphasise that silence is a strategy used by organisations, and scholars should focus more on how silence can be used strategically and how the public perceives it when it is utilised (Ferguson *et al*., 2018; Saaawalha, 2020). Silence as a crisis communication approach carries the risk of appearing inactive and uncertain in the circumstance (Le *et al*., 2020).

3.2.4. Concluding Remarks on the Theory

Benoit (1995) introduced the idea that communication is fundamentally goal-driven, highlighting that human interactions are motivated by specific agendas. He built upon previous apologia research to develop a five-strategy system for image management (Benoit, 2024; Compton, 2016). Benoit's work provides an extensive array of crisis response strategies, surpassing the basic four strategies from traditional apologia (Benoit, 2024; Coombs, 2010). Mortification, often viewed as the best response strategy, connects an apology with an apology, emphasising responsibility and forgiveness (Coombs *et al*., 2010; Vanadia, 2020).

Therefore, Image Restoration Theory, together with the case studies of how the theory can be applied to social media in Vanadia's (2020) study, provides a detailed framework for the possible ways in which organisations can communicate during a crisis to repair their image, which can help guide the identification of themes during the data analysis process and answer the research questions 'How did Eskom respond (if at all) to residential consumers' comments on X during the Stage 6 load shedding?' and 'What were the discernible crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X?' (Benoit, 2024; Ferguson *et al*., 2018). The tenets of Image Restoration Theory also allows the researcher to identify themes in consumers responses that pertain to how consumers perceive Eskom through their views expressed in their comments on X, thereby helping to answer the research question 'How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?' The researcher has considered the strategic use of silence from an organisation during a crisis in the literature review and has used Coombs' (1995) crisis mitigation strategies to explain silence as an evasion of responsibility, therefore addressing the limitations in the theory unraveled above.

3.3. DIALOGIC THEORY

Dialogue is regarded as one of the most ethical modes of communication since it reduces power imbalances, respects individual dignity and self-worth, and encourages people to engage in conversation and decision-making (Kent & Taylor, 2014; Zhou & Xu, 2020). Dialogic communicators not only consider the values and beliefs of others but also feel responsible for constructing their communication in a way that promotes engagement, self-discovery, and meaning co-creation (Kent & Taylor, 2014). These communicators are open-minded, patient, and compassionate (Kent & Taylor, 2014).

This interaction necessitates engagement, making engagement fundamental to the discussion (Kent & Taylor, 2014). Every dialogic interaction contains engagement elements such as presence, synchronous interaction, respect, and focus (Kent & Taylor, 2014).

3.3.1. Tenets of Dialogic Theory

Kent and Taylor (1998; 2018) refer to dialogic communication as any exchange of ideas and opinions involving negotiation. The Internet has proven to be a valuable tool for spreading information and reaching a broad audience (Kent & Taylor, 2018). However, this communication is not dialogic; its goal is to spread information rather than foster public dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2018).

There must be actual dialogue to establish effective dialogic relationships with the public (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Saunders, 2008). Without feedback loop in web-based communication, public relations online are little more than another form of one-way communication, like broadcasting (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Although different internet platforms are useful communication tools, public relations professionals need to focus on real dialogue to build relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kletzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011).

Kent and Taylor (1998) developed five strategies that communication professionals can follow to build dialogic relationships with Internet users. The first principle is the dialogic loop, or the feedback loop, which is a starting point for dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The first principle of the dialogic loop is that the internet platform should allow the public to ask the organisations questions and provide feedback and further create the opportunity for organisations to respond to these questions and feedback (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Stanoevska-Slabeva & Muraro, 2025). Considering X, the platform allows organisations to post to their profiles for audiences to respond in the comments section and for the author of the original post to respond to the comments of consumers, as well as consumers responding to each other (Fuoli, Clarke, Wiegand & Maklberg, 2021; Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015).

Websites, in this case, social media, should aim to provide valuable information to all audiences (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural, Degirmen & Unuvar, 2022). Internet platforms should have clear, accessible information; this is stipulated in principle two (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017; Veltri, Lupianez-Villanueva, Folkvord, Theben & Gaskell, 2020). Building trust through reliable information allows the public to depend on an organisation's online platform for useful, trustworthy content (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Rothchild, 2008; Veltri *et al*., 2020). As established, X provides the opportunity for organisations to provide valuable and timely content, but whether organisations do this is questionable (Fuoli *et al*., 2021; Shin, Pang & Kim, 2015).

The generation of return visits is the third principle stipulated by Kent and Taylor (1998) that needs to be implemented by organisations to build trusted relationships with audiences online. To ensure return visits, websites, or any online social platform, should include features such as updated content, new discussions, and expert answers (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). Sites with outdated or static information lose value after one visit; therefore, websites must regularly update their information to build trust and credibility (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). Updated information will show the organisation is active and responsible, creating a platform for dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). More recent online communication tools, like X, are used for real-time updates (Kletzmann *et al*., 2011; Momeni, 2020). These platforms allow organisations to timeously provide updates on their X profile and in the comments sections of posts to respond to consumers (Kletzmann *et al*., 2011; Mzizi & Govender, 2024).

Simply updating content represents a one-way communication approach, but it should be combined with two-way, interactive strategies like Q&A sessions and interaction from executives to foster relationships, which platforms like X facilitate (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). The aim of encouraging return visits is to build a loyal audience and promote overall engagement on the website (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). When it comes to X, users seem to revisit X due to its dynamic nature, offering swift updates on news and trending topics, creating a space for meaningful conversations, which builds a community (Bonsón, Perea, & Bednárová, 2019).

The fourth principle set out by Kent and Taylor (1998) states that visitors, no matter their reasoning for using the site, should have no trouble navigating and comprehending the site. Furthermore, sites providing information to the public should not require technical abilities beyond those possessed by typical users (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). Well over half the content on the site should be delivered in text, not graphics, because graphics slow access to the content and because a well-organised page can grab attention better than a graphic that takes time to expand (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Vural *et al*., 2022). When looking at X, it does provide the option to upload text as a copy or in an image (Chen & Dredze, 2018). However, in saying this, using text only with no imagery is not the best practice, as most people consume social media on their phones, and so the first thing they see will be an image; if the image engages the individual, they will then read the text in the copy of a social media post (Chen & Dredze, 2018). Essentially, imagery is important to engage consumers with content on social media platforms like X (Chen & Dredze, 2018). In terms of the ease of interface principle, digital platforms like Facebook and X provide the same user experience for all, indicating that researchers should start questioning how well these principles fit with social media and consider adjusting them as needed (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018).

The fifth and final principle is the rule of the conservation of visitors, which expresses that organisations should keep the audiences engaged on their online platform instead of providing links that will take them off the site (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Safitri, Kriyantono & Veronika, 2022). If public relations in web environments aim to build and maintain relationships with audiences, rather than just entertaining them, websites should only include necessary links to their online pages (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Safitri *et al*., 2022).

3.3.2. The Approaches of Dialogue to Communication

As indicated earlier, dialogic communication is about having meaningful conversations that involve deep discussions where people listen to each other and are willing to change their opinions, rather than superficial conversations (Escobar, 2011: 8; Kent & Taylor, 2021). Scholars have studied this concept for a long time and believe it's essential for good communication (Kent & Taylor, 2021). Kent (2017) established a set of concepts for their Dialogic theory that was established to promote interaction between two or more people. These principles of dialogue highlight the importance of collaboration and consultation with stakeholders, trust, willingness to take relational risks, and commitment to genuine communication and are represented as follows (Kent & Taylor, 2021).

As defined by Kent (2017; Kent & Taylor, 2021), risk involves embracing vulnerability, being open-minded and responsive unforeseen events and their consequences, and acknowledging the uniqueness of individuals. Mutuality encompasses collaborative efforts with others and the principle of mutual equality (Kent & Taylor, 2021). According to Kent (2017; 2021), propinquity denotes the immediacy of presence or instantaneous communication, the recognition of the temporal flow of relationships, appreciation of past, present, and potential future connections with others, and engagement with diverse beliefs and ideas. Kent (2017; 2023) outlines empathy as validating others, providing support, and embracing the collective notion that the well-being of others is equal to or greater than one's own. Commitment involves sincerity, active participation in an open and ongoing conversation, and a responsibility to interpret others' communications (Kent, 2017; 2023).

In public relations, the idea of dialogue has often been a response to older management theories (Kent, 2017; 2023). Scholars discussing dialogue in public relations often highlight its ethical aspects (Kent, 2017; 2021). They see it as a different approach that values relationships more and aims to create a more civil society, or what's been described as a Fully Functioning Society (Kent, 2017; 2023). With the increased use of social media by organisations, online communication has become more vital for public relations practitioners in creating meaningful relationships with stakeholders through meaningful communication (Kent & Taylor, 2021).

3.3.2.1. Risk

Kent (2017; 2023) defines risk as being susceptible and open to unexpected experiences and results. It also entails understanding and respecting the uniqueness of others unconditionally (Kent, 2017). To be vulnerable to its audience, a company must engage in the conversation without knowing how it will end and without attempting to control it (Kent, 2023). The dialogue aims not to reach an agreement but to gain understanding (Kent, 2023). In a real conversation, people take risks by sharing important, personal, or meaningful information with the other person; this, in a way, is also vulnerable (Kent, 2023). Sharing personal or private details is a key part of building any relationship and requires vulnerability (Kent, 2023). With the rise of social media, people are participating in online discussions through social networks where they can share their thoughts and opinions about their experiences with organisations (Capriotti, Zeler & Oliveira, 2021; support 2021). Therefore, organisations need to be willing to be vulnerable and communicate with audiences on social platforms for there to be a dialogue (Capriotti *et al*., 2021).

3.3.2.2 Mutuality

Mutuality entails cooperating with others and considering them as equals (Kent, 2017; 2023). It implies that interactions should be equal (Kent, 2017; 2021). People in mutual relationships do not depart feeling misled, disregarded, or disrespected. Mutuality is not about giving in or stating what the other person wants to hear; rather, it is about better understanding a problem, topic, or person (Kent, 2023). Mutuality implies that audiences and organisations are intimately related. So, risk communication efforts should be directed by collaboration and mutual understanding (Kent & Taylor, 2021).

Yang, Kang, and Cha (2015) suggested a way to measure the dialogic communication between organisations and the public. Yang *et al*. (2015) found that good relationships develop when the organisation and the public focus on mutual understanding and openness and recognise and value each entity's different perspectives (Yang *et al*., 2015). The characteristics of mutuality include six key elements: responsiveness, respect, empathy, grounding, collaboration, and equality (Yang *et al*., 2015). Responsiveness is when organisations and stakeholders are attentive and sensitive to each other (Yang *et al*., 2015). Respect means showing unconditional support to the other side (Yang *et al*., 2015). Empathy is the ability to understand the needs and feelings of the other when communicating (Yang *et al*., 2015). Grounding is about finding a compromise between organisations and stakeholders, while collaboration means both sides work together towards a shared communication goal (Yang *et al*., 2015). Confirmed equality is when organisations and stakeholders are treated equally in discussions (Yang *et al*., 2015).

3.3.2.3. Propinquity

Propinquity is defined as being present and engaged in real-time, as well as being aware of how relationships evolve (Kent, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2021). This entails acknowledging past, current, and potential future interactions with others while also being open to engaging with various opinions and ideas (Kent, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2021). Interacting in real-time fosters a sense of connection between the organisation and the public (Kent, 2023).

Propinquity is defined by three elements: immediacy of presence, temporal flow, and engagement (Mohamad, Hassan, Hamid, & Fadzil, 2019). The immediacy of presence implies that communication should occur throughout a shift, particularly in the present, rather than just after. Temporal flow postulates that everyone involved should anticipate a common future, and decisions should be acceptable to all (Mohamad *et al*., 2019). Propinquity requires organisations to evaluate how their activities may affect the public and even solicit their feedback before making decisions (Bentley, 2012). This close relationship naturally promotes empathy (Bentley, 2012; Smith, Lee & Place, 2023).

3.3.2.4. Empathy

Empathy entails acknowledging and supporting others while also caring equally, if not more, about their well-being (Kent, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2021). Empathy is founded on trust and support, which means that meaningful discourse cannot take place without comprehension and support

(Kent & Taylor, 2021; Palenchar & Lemon, 2018). Empathy and sympathy are frequently used interchangeably; however, to differentiate between the two words, empathy is about understanding how another person feels, while sympathy is about providing warmth and support to them (Kent, 2023).

3.3.2.5. Commitment

Commitment denotes being real, remaining committed to having an open, ongoing conversation, and attempting to comprehend what people say and how they feel (Kent, 2023; Kent & Taylor, 2002). To commit to communication, one must be willing to work hard to comprehend others' beliefs, values, and attitudes (Kent, 2023). It also implies being willing to continue addressing difficult things rather than simply giving up (Kent, 2023). A dialogic discourse is an ongoing process in which both partners must be willing to evolve and work to clarify their points of view while understanding one another (Kent, 2023).

3.3.3. The Application of Dialogic Theory

According to Du Plessis (2018), dialogic interaction on social media can be used to manage reputation. When there is a social media crisis, organisations should be open and engage in interactive communication with stakeholders to manage the crisis among stakeholders who are actively genuinely seeking important information (Du Plessis, 2018). Du Plessis (2018) infers that dialogic communication can help increase stakeholder support and foster relationship building to help an organisation recover from a crisis (Du Plessis, 2018).

While Du Plessis (2018) focused on the use of dialogic communication strategies by private entities, Lai, Yu, and Chen (2020) examined the use of dialogic communication tactics on social media by government institutions in Taiwan. Lai *et al*. (2020) discovered that public organisations largely promote dialogic communication via messages that develop connections and encourage offline engagement. Furthermore, original material is affiliated with more advanced types of interaction via likes, comments, and shares, allowing for the development of relationships with stakeholders (Lai *et al*., 2020).

In the age of social media, numerous organisations have established official accounts and consistently share content with their audiences, including consumers and followers (Taylor, Kent & Xiong, 2019). Despite its widespread use, social media often portrays a one-directional public image and does not naturally facilitate genuine dialogic communication (Taylor *et al*., 2019). Nonetheless, Kent and Taylor (1998; 2021) proposed that both the internet and social media possess the capacity to support authentic, two-way dialogue, moving beyond shallow or performative exchanges.

More recently, Kent and Taylor (2021) looked at the use of dialogic communication in social media and its effect on social change and movements. It is argued that, while social media can facilitate dialogic exchanges, it requires public relations practitioners to treat dialogue with proper attention rather than reducing it to simplistic metrics (Kent & Taylor, 2021). This means that providing feedback to customers on a social media site or posts on X or Facebook are not examples of dialogue (Kent & Taylor 2014). Interactions that are dialogic need to allow all participants the chance to decide if they will engage (Kent & Taylor, 2014; Anderson, Swenson & Gilkerson, 2016). Organisations do not simply drop out or stop participating when their goals have been met; this is not dialogue (Kent & Taylor 2014).

Capriotti *et al*. (2021) support the notion that organisations do not use social media's full potential to create dialogue in their study, which explores how companies in six Latin American countries use Facebook to communicate with people (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). By looking at how willing these companies are to interact and what kind of interactions they have, the research aims to understand how communication works in this context (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). The study found a notable reluctance among companies to engage with users on Facebook (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). Despite having a discernible presence on the platform, companies appeared to be unenthusiastic about fostering interaction, evident in their failure to interact and a lack of effort toward meaningful engagement (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). Even though companies are active on Facebook, they mainly focus on sharing content rather than encouraging interaction (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). Just posting things is inadequate to get people to talk back (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). Companies must share content that makes users want to engage (Capriotti *et al*., 2021).

The study also noted that companies tend to communicate in one direction, giving out information rather than having real conversations (Capriotti *et al*., 2021; Kent & Taylor 2014). This lack of two-way communication makes it hard to build trust and have meaningful interactions with users (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, there was a lack of consistent dialogue between companies and users on Facebook (Capriotti *et al*., 2021). While users often respond to posts, companies do not seem to engage in meaningful conversations with them. This one-way interaction suggests a significant communication gap between companies and users (Capriotti *et al*., 2021).

Overall, the study raises the possibility that companies are not making the most of Facebook's capacity for meaningful communication. This is consistent with the idea put forth by Kent and Taylor (2021), who contend that public relations professionals are not making the most of social media platforms in general for generating conversation. It may be more difficult for them to interact with consumers and establish relationships if they just communicate in one direction (Capriotti *et al*., 2021: 25; Du Plessis, 2018). Consequently, the study by Capriotti *et al*. (2021) posits that businesses reconsider their communication plans and take a more participatory and conversational stance on social media.

3.3.4. The limitations of Dialogic Theory

One significant criticism of dialogic communication is that researchers often treat dialogue as a process, confusing it with symmetrical communication (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). In this context, any type of two-way communication is mistakenly considered dialogue. This is especially evident in research studies where interactive elements on organisations' websites and social media accounts are interpreted as proof of a dialogic approach (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018).

Moreover, the principles of dialogic communication face challenges from practitioners who either fail to perceive the practical value of the dialogic approach or are constrained by their positions on specific issues or the resources available within their organisations (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). Thus, the theory's failure to account for power imbalances between organisations and their audiences, as well as the impact of numerous circumstances, such as social, political, and economic settings, on dialogic communication, has been criticised (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018).

3.3.5. Concluding Remarks on the Theory

Communication goes beyond a means of exchanging information, and it actively shapes realities and constructs meaning in people's daily lives (Aririguzoh, 2022; Escobar, 2011). While traditional models of communication often focus on disseminating information, dialogic approaches emphasise open dialogue and collaboration, offering new ways for interactive engagement (Escobar, 2011; Kent, 2023). (Kent & Taylor, 2021) has expanded on what dialogic communication looks like, outlining its characteristics, which highlight the importance of collaborative orientation, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment.

In public relations, dialogue has emerged as a response to older management theories, focusing on ethical engagement and relationship-building (Kent, 2017; 2023). Social media has further established the significance of dialogic communication in managing reputation and fostering stakeholder relationships (Du Plessis, 2018; Pompper, Place & weaver, 2023). However, organisations are not using social media's potential to foster dialogue (Du Plessis, 2018). Therefore, it demonstrates the need for public relations practitioners to adopt a more dialogic approach, whereby they participate in two-way conversations rather than just sharing the information and not responding to any questions or providing scripted communication (Capriotti *et al*., 2021).

Overall, embracing dialogic communication offers opportunities for more meaningful engagement and relationship-building; however, addressing existing challenges requires a nuanced understanding of communication dynamics and a commitment to ethical and inclusive dialogue (Kent, 2017; 2023). Essentially, Dialogical Theory suggests communication is done within a set of rules, however, it also recognises the relational process of dialogue (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). The insights gained from Du Plessis's (2018) study provide context for how dialogic content can be used for social media crisis communication to repair reputation and ensure meaningful content reaches stakeholders. Therefore, despite its limitations, dialogic theory provides an applicable framework for this study as it provides the guidelines in which dialogue takes place. Du Plessis (2018) further frames the use of dialogic content on social media and its value in building stakeholder relationships. This study will use the characteristics of dialogue when analysing consumers comments under Eskom's X posts to identify any references to the presence or lack of dialogue in Eskom's online crisis communications from the perspectives of the consumers. This, therefore, assists in answering the research questions: 'How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?' and 'What were the discernible crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X?'

3.4. CORPORATE BRAND IDENTITY AND REPUTATION MATRIX

Urde and Greyser's (2016) Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation matrix was developed off of Urde's (2013). Corporate Brand Identity Matrix. The main objective of Urde's (2013) Corporate Brand Identity Matrix is to close the gaps between the internal (mission and vision, culture, competencies), external (value proposition, relationships, and position), and both internal and external (expression, personality, and brand core) aspects of corporate brand identity.

Urde and Greyser (2016) identified a gap in the literature regarding the integration of corporate brand identity and reputation ideas. They intended to accomplish filling the gap by expanding the company brand identity matrix and including reputation features gleaned from the literature and enhanced by their case study (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The phrase corporate branding has gained popularity in characterising how businesses seek to acquire and maintain strong symbolic reputations with their stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2023).

Reputation is the accumulation of these images over time, and corporate brand reputation is directly tied to the idea of image, which is defined as a present perception (Urde, 2022; Urde & Greyser, 2016). According to Veh, Göbel and Vogel (2018), a company's reputation is an attitude notion, co-created by stakeholders who are the evaluators of the organisation. To address the relationship between corporate brand identity and reputation, Urde and Greyser (2016) developed the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM), a framework that integrates elements and linkages with a core set of values supporting a promise. This matrix is designed to help organisations manage their corporate brand identity and reputation, including their communications.

To address the relationship between corporate brand identity and reputation, Urde and Greyser (2016) developed the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM), a framework that integrates elements and linkages with a core set of values supporting a promise. This matrix is designed to help organisations manage their corporate brand identity and reputation, including their communications.

3.4.1. The Tenets of the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix

Urde and Greyser (2016) examined pertinent literature to find and choose reputation-related components for the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix. They then connected these components to the nine CBIM brand identity components. The reputation elements were then given exact, non-overlapping meanings by Urde and Greyser (2016) using dictionary definitions. Therefore, their interpretations in both general and particular settings became more uniform. Lastly, Urde and Greyser (2016: 106) developed guiding questions to differentiate between identity and reputation based on the accepted criteria. Reputation questions, which represent the opinions of stakeholders, begin with “how” and use “they,” whereas identity questions begin with “what” and use “we.”

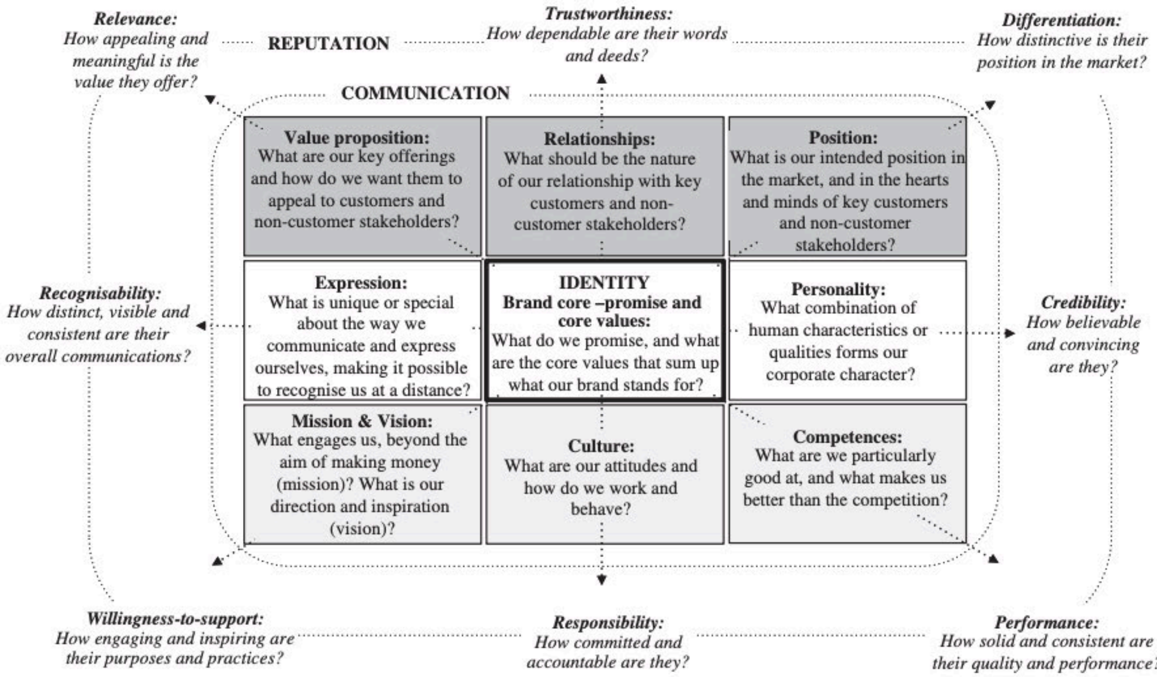


Figure 3.1: The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM). (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 103).

The guiding questions and the organisation of elements assist management in understanding how various stakeholders perceive the brand (Urde & Greyser, 2016). They also help determine the alignment between external perceptions and the internally defined identity (Urde & Greyser, 2016). By integrating corporate brand identity elements (shown in the boxes within the matrix) with reputation elements (positioned around the matrix), a unified and coherent framework was created, as seen in Figure 3.1 (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The logic and connections between the CBIM and reputation are illustrated by the four dashed arrows where two are moving diagonally, one perpendicular, and one parallel, this is discussed further herein the section.

3.4.1.1. External Elements of Brand Identity

a. Value Proposition

The value proposition is one of the exterior components that comprise a brand and relates to the organisation’s major products and services, as well as how it attracts customers and other stakeholders (Urde, 2022; Urde & Greyser, 2016). The value proposition part of CBIM entails developing persuasive arguments for both customers and other stakeholders (Urde, 2022; Urde &

Greyser, 2016). A solid value proposition should build an agreeable correspondence amongst stakeholders and the brand, leading to favourable purchasing behaviour and a good reputation (Urde, 2022; Urde & Greyser, 2016).

b. Relationships

The evolution of relationships over time forms and establishes the identity of a corporate brand (Urde, 2022; Urde & Greyser, 2016). Trustworthiness is a reflection of the type of relationships an organisation aims to establish with its stakeholders (Urde & Greyser, 2016). However, recent academia has also identified the effect corporate reputation can have on stakeholder relationships, indicating that the impact of these elements are not linear (Khan, Salamzadeh, Iqbal & Yang, 2022).

c. Positioning and Brand

The position element delineates how management aims to position the corporate brand in the market and the perceptions of key stakeholders (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The position element further serves as a reference point for the positioning process that follows the establishment of the corporate brand identity (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

3.4.1.2. Internal Elements of Brand Identity

a. Brand Expression

The expression element focuses on the verbal, visual, and other forms of identification that constitute a corporate brand identity (Urde & Greyser, 2016; Kumar & Sathish, 2017). Brand expression comprises of all forms of communication used by an organisation including advertising, design and traditional or digital communication platforms, makes up the way a brand articulates itself (Urde & Greyser, 2016). A brand's expression is mainly associated with discernability, identified as an element that affects brand reputation in the CBIRM, discussed further on in this chapter (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

b. Personality

Personality defines the unique character of a corporate brand, encompassing a combination of traits and qualities that shape its overall identity (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Brand personality involves assigning human-like traits to a brand, which help communicate product attributes and foster relationships between the brand and consumers (Robertson, Ferguson, Eriksson & Näppä, 2019). Rojas-Méndez, Hine, and Rod (2017) agree that the personality of the brand represents the anthropoid aspect of how the brand is perceived.

a. Brand Core

The brand core is defined as a set of essential principles that underpin and lead to a promise (Urde & Greyser, 2016). This puts fundamental values at the heart of the CBIM, emphasising their critical function and significance (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The corporate brand promise combines these key values into a cohesive whole (Urde & Greyser, 2016). A brand core is important because it provides focus, guidance, and coordination in brand management (Urde & Greyser, 2016). A well-defined core allows for a dynamic approach to developing corporate brands over time (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

3.4.1.2. General Core Values of Brand Identity

a. Mission and Vision

A key component of the corporate identity is the corporate mission and vision (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The mission describes the company's goals and motives outside of generating profit (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Missions are contributions, and a contribution is essentially a service, a specific method of addressing real-world issues impacting individuals, communities, or society as a whole (Cardona & Rey, 2018). Missions are contributions that define the purpose of the organisation, giving a certain firm, department, team, or employee a cause to exist (Cardona & Rey, 2018).

The vision of the brand refers to the direction it wants to take or its inspiration (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Therefore, a vision statement represents the company's prospects and where it wants to stand (Toh, Tehseen, Mahmoud, Cheok, Grigoriou & Opute, 2022). Most companies adopt mission and vision statements to reach the companies aspirations by strengthening organisational principles (Abdullah, Anumudu & Raza, 2022).

b. Culture

Culture reflects the attitudes and behaviour of an organisation (Urde & Greyser, 2016). According to Kubat and Swaminathan (2015), brand cultural symbolism refers to a brand's perceived representation of a specific cultural group's values and conventions. According to Fritz and Schoenmüeller (2017), a strong connection between a brand and its culture might enhance consumer perceptions of authenticity. Fritz and Schoenmüeller (2017) found a substantial association between brand legitimacy. For which authenticity has already been established as a characteristic of a successful brand earlier in Chapter one (Portal, Abratt, & Bendixen, 2019).

c. Competence

According to the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (2016), expertise contributes considerable strategic value to gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage. Customers establish trust in a brand when they think it can satisfy their demands, demonstrating the influence brand competence has on instilling brand trust amongst consumers (Setyawan & Kussudiyarsana, 2015). When a corporation exhibits proficiency in its field, it contributes to the satisfaction of client demands and desires, promoting a positive reputation among stakeholders (Baruah and Panda, 2020; Narteh and Braimah, 2019).

3.4.2. The Elements of Reputation which extend CBIM into CBIRM

As discussed previously, Urde and Gresyer (2016) explored various literature, definitions, and perspectives of linguistics experts to identify the elements of reputation. First, the relevant literature on reputation was reviewed to select elements that comprehensively capture the concept's dimensions (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). These elements were logically linked to the nine CBIM brand identity elements (Urde and Gresyer, 2016). Fieldwork on the Nobel Prize provided a holistic view of its identity and reputation (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Through transcribing, coding, and pattern-matching empirical data, relevant quotes were aligned with the corresponding identity elements (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Bench tests with managerial groups in executive programs also supported the selection process (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). The aim was to avoid overlapping elements and ensure they fit well within a managerial context (Urde & Gresyer, 2016).

Second, dictionary definitions were used to provide generally accepted meanings for the reputation elements, helping to avoid overlaps and achieve linguistic precision (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Inspiration was drawn from de Saussure's distinction between language and speech (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). For example, the word 'credibility' has a general dictionary definition but can also have a specific meaning in theoretical and managerial contexts (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Using dictionary definitions helped standardise the meanings (Urde & Gresyer, 2016).

Third, the general meanings of each reputation element informed the formulation of the 'guiding questions' (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). For example, 'How consistent and solid are their quality and performance?' reflects the performance element (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Initially, 'reliability' was used but was found to be easily confused with credibility and trustworthiness, so performance was chosen instead (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Notably, identity questions begin with 'what,' while reputation questions start with 'how' (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). This distinction underscores that identity pertains to the organisation itself (framed as 'we'), while reputation reflects stakeholders' perceptions (framed as 'they') and must be understandable in general language (Urde & Gresyer, 2016). Table 3.1 below illustrates the elements of reputation, their definitions, and the guiding questions that would help with measuring reputation

Table 3.1: Comparing corporate brand identity management and corporate brand reputation management (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 98).

Element of reputation	*Dictionary definition*	*Guiding question*
Relevance (Young & Rubicam)	Closely connected or appropriate to the matter at hand. The condition of being relevant. Pertinent, to the purpose, applicable, suitable	How appealing and meaningful is the value they offer?
Trustworthiness (Fombrun, 1996)	Firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability. A relationship built on mutual trust and respect: confidence, belief, faith, freedom from suspicion	How dependable are their words and deeds?
Differentiation (Young & Rubicam)	Distinction, distinctiveness, contrast, difference, demarcation	How distinctive is their position in the market?
Credibility (Fombrun, 1996)	… the quality of being convincing or believable	How believable and convincing are they?
Performance (Fombrun, 1996)	Consistently good in quality or performance, able to be trusted	How solid and consistent are their quality and performance?
Responsibility (Fombrun, 1996)	… a moral obligation to behave correctly towards or in respect of	How committed and accountable are they?
Willingness-to-support (Greyser, 2009)	Approve of, encourage, stand-behind, stand up for, endorse, recommend …	How engaging and inspiring are their purposes and practices?
Recognisability (Young & Rubicam)	Identification from previous encounters or knowledge. Recollection, recall, remembrance	How distinct, visible and consistent are their overall communications?

3.4.2.1. The Link Between Corporate Brand and Reputation

As previously stated, four dotted arrows connect the logic and connections between CBIM and reputation (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

The CBIRM contains two diagonal lines (Urde 2016). One of the diagonal lines, known as the 'strategy diagonal', cuts across the matrix (as shown in figure 3.1), connecting the reputation element 'willingness-to-support' to the brand identity elements mission and vision, then to the brand core at the centre of the framework, and finally to another reputation element is differentiation (Urge & Greyser, 2016). This diagonal is essential for developing and coordinating corporate brand identity because it connects the organisation's mission, vision, and desired position (Urge & Greyser, 2016). Urge and Greyser (2016: 106) found that 'willingness to support' and 'differentiation' reflect stakeholders' attitudes.

The second diagonal line, coined as the competition diagonal, involves value-creating processes (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The identity element competencies refer to an organisation's proficiencies and assets and the way in which these are used simultaneously to create value and possible unique selling proposition (Urde & Greyser, 2016). These competencies are essential to support the value proposition, with the interdependence amongst these two identity components forming the overall promise (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The weight and lucidity of the brand's competitive status is reflected in stakeholders' judgments of the reputation components "relevance" and "performance" (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 103).

The horizontal line, called the communication horizontal, links the identity elements of expression and personality with the reputation elements — recognisability and credibility (Urde & Greyser, 2016). In the framework, the identity element — personality — is closely tied to credibility (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Brand personality refers to the combination of human characteristics or qualities that form the corporate character, which answers the reputational guideline question of credibility, "How convincing and believable are they?" (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 108). An organisation's expression, as discussed earlier, includes all forms of communication, such as advertising, design, and media choices (Urde, 2023). Expression is mainly connected to recognisability, which is a key reputation element in the framework (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

The vertical line, termed the interactive vertical line, shows how the reputation elements — trustworthiness and responsibility — are connected to and influenced by a corporate brand's identity, as seen in Figure 3.1 (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Trustworthiness, in accordance with CBIRM, reflects the nature of the relationships an organisation aims to build with its customers and non-customer stakeholders (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The perception of an organisation's responsibility is primarily shaped by its culture (Urde & Greyser, 2016). As with all connections in the framework, the brand core forms the centre (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

3.4.3. The Application of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix

The primary focus of Urde and Greyser's (2016) qualitative study, which promoted the development of the CBIRM, is the Nobel Prize organisation. Initially, Urde and Greyser's (2016) fieldwork premised on corporate brand identity, but it soon became apparent that reputation is a crucial aspect for fully understanding the Nobel Prize. Established around the same time as the modern Olympics in 1896, the Nobel Prize was likely the first intellectual award of its kind. The Nobel Prize served as a unique case for investigating the application of the CBIRM due to its high visibility and global prominence, engaging multiple stakeholders (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The Nobel Prize's rich identity is deeply rooted in Alfred Nobel's will, which aimed to benefit mankind (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

The strategy diagonal in the matrix connects the reputation element "willingness-to-support" with the mission, vision, the brand core, and then to position, ultimately leading to "differentiation" (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 103). This diagonal is essential for defining and aligning corporate brand identity, linking the organisation's mission, vision, desired position, and stakeholders' perceptions (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The Nobel Prize identity is derived from Alfred Nobel's will, which encapsulates its mission and vision (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The willingness-to-support reputation element is linked to this mission and vision, assessed by the engagement and inspiration of the Prize's purposes and practices (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The Nobel Prize highlights the pursuit of knowledge and the significance of science for human progress (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The framework also connects position (identity element) and differentiation (reputation element), where the desired position is to be recognised as "the world's most prestigious award", aiming to influence perceptions among key stakeholders (Urde & Greyser, 2016: 91).

Moving on to the competition diagonal, described by Urde and Greyser (2016), is how an organisation's capabilities and resources are combined to create value and competitive advantages. This diagonal effectiveness is reflected in stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation's reputation for relevance and performance (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The Nobel Prize's value proposition is described as the celebration and promotion of scientific discovery and cultural accomplices, focusing on how offerings appeal to various stakeholders, including the scientific community and researchers (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The perceived relevance of this proposition is crucial for the Nobel Prize's identity, reflecting its basis in enlightenment and progress (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The competencies of the Nobel Prize network are characterised by rigorous processes for evaluating award candidates, with the performance reputation element assessing the consistency and quality of these processes (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

As mentioned previously, communication horizontally links the identity elements of expression and personality with the reputation elements of recognisability and credibility (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Brand personality influences credibility by shaping the corporate character, while expression, encompassing advertising and media choices, primarily affects recognisability (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The expression of the Nobel Prize blends traditional symbolism with a modern, open approach, utilising both physical and figurative symbols to convey its heritage (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Recent initiatives, such as Nobel Dialogue Week and the use of NobelPrize.org, demonstrate the organisation's modern approach (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The various awards enhance interest and prestige, with Literature and Peace awards attracting expansive attention, while awards associated with science gain respect from industry specialists, creating recognisability (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The Nobel Prize's brand personality reflects Alfred Nobel's personality as someone who has a passion for science and cultural enlightenment (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Related to personality is credibility (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The thorough process of selecting Nobel Prize winners contributes to its credibility and places the Nobel Prize above the rest (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

Consequently, the interactive vertical line illustrates how the reputation elements—trustworthiness and responsibility—are influenced by a corporate brand's identity (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Trustworthiness reflects the nature of relationships (brand identity element) with stakeholders, while responsibility is shaped by organisational culture (brand identity element), with the brand core serving as the central element in this framework (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The nature of the Nobel Prize's relationships within its network is defined by integrity, respect, and dialogue, which emphasises their trustworthiness (Urde & Greyser, 2016). In the CBIRM framework, culture (brand identity element) and responsibility (reputation element) are linked and shaped by the institutional attitudes of the Nobel Prize network, which is characterised as objective, independent, and collegial (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Responsibility, related to culture, is demonstrated by the Nobel Prize's commitment to quality assurance (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

3.4.4. The Limitations of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix

One of the main limitations of this model is that, although it was included, the communication dimension—that is, the path from identity to reputation and vice versa—was not thoroughly examined (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The data was not quantified after Urde & Greyser's (2016) study of the CBIRM in practice using the Nobel Prize brand. To improve the model's generalisability, they advise researchers to investigate and incorporate the communication dimension into the framework and to quantitatively assess its components (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

3.4.5. Concluding Remarks on the Model

The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) addresses a critical gap in the management of corporate brands by offering a comprehensive framework that integrates internal and external elements of brand identity (Urde & Greyser, 2016). It bridges the disconnect between theory and practice, providing a structured approach to align mission, vision, culture, competencies, value proposition, relationships, and positioning (Urde & Greyser, 2016). This alignment is essential for effective brand management and long-term development (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

Urde and Greyser's (2016) extension of the CBIM to include reputation elements through the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM) further enhances its utility. The CBIRM provides a holistic view of corporate brand identity and reputation, incorporating reputational elements such as willingness-to-support, differentiation, relevance, performance, recognisability, credibility, trustworthiness, and responsibility (Urde & Greyser, 2016). By linking these elements with the core brand identity components, the CBIRM offers a unified framework that helps organisations manage their corporate brand identity and reputation comprehensively (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The CBIRM supports research in reputation management by offering a structured approach to understanding and measuring how stakeholders perceive a brand (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The framework's guiding questions and the clear distinction between identity and reputation elements facilitate the identification of alignment or misalignment between internal identity and external perceptions (Urde & Greyser, 2016). This structured approach aids in assessing the effectiveness of brand strategies and identifying areas for improvement.

The Nobel Prize case study illustrates the practical application of the CBIRM, confirming the importance of integrating corporate brand identity and management (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The case study highlights the framework's usefulness in providing a holistic view and reveals a tension between brand orientation and market orientation (Urde & Greyser, 2016). However, a key limitation is the lack of detailed exploration of the communication dimension, which Urde & Greyser (2016) suggest should be addressed in future research. Quantitative testing of the model's elements is also recommended to enhance its generalisability (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Consequently, the CBIM and CBIRM provide valuable tools for managing corporate brand identity and reputation, addressing critical gaps in both theory and practice. (Urde & Greyser, 2016). These frameworks support a more structured and comprehensive approach to brand management, ultimately contributing to more effective and sustainable corporate brand strategies (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

The elements of the CBIM provides the themes that relate to brand reputation management which can guide the thematic analysis process in identifying how consumers reference the Eskom brand and reputation, thereby answering all three research questions: How did Eskom respond (if at all) to residential consumers' comments on X during the Stage 6 load shedding?; What were the discernible crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X?; How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?

3.5 CONCLUSION

The theories discussed were Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory, Taylor and Kent's (2017) Dialogic Theory, and Urde and Greyser's (2016) Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix. The Image Restoration Theory provides an extensive array of crisis response strategies, surpassing the basic four strategies from traditional apologia (Coombs, 2010). Despite the limitations of The Image Restoration Theory, it provides a detailed framework for the possible ways in which organisations can communicate during a crisis in order to repair their image which can help guide the identification of themes during the data analysis process (Ferguson *et al*., 2018).

Dialogic Theory suggests that communication occurs within a set of rules, however, it also recognises the openness and relational process of dialogue (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). Du Plessis's (2018) study provides context of how dialogic content can be used for social media crisis communication to repair reputation and ensure meaningful content reaches stakeholders. Therefore, despite its limitations, Dialogic Theory provides an appropriate framework for this study as it provides the guidelines with which dialogue occurs.

The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIM) addresses a critical gap in the management of corporate brands by offering a comprehensive framework that integrates internal and external elements and their relationship to managing a brand's reputation (Urde & Greyser (2016). Together with the case study of The Noble Prize, the CBIRM validates the importance of integrating corporate brand identity and management which and further reveals a tension between brand orientation and market orientation (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

The researcher will discuss the research design and methodology in the next chapter addressing interpretivist approach of the study. The exploratory nature of the study will also be explained, along with the chosen qualitative data collection and analysis methods.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The approach used in this study is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, which places a strong emphasis on understanding individual subjective experiences and recognises the inherent unpredictability of human behaviour (Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). Therefore, the researcher adopted a qualitative approach, specifically using qualitative thematic analysis to extract insights from posts published by South African residential consumers in response to Eskom's announcement of Stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023.

This research aim is exploratory, seeking to the perceptions of consumers towards Eskom’s crisis communication during the stage 6 load shedding crisis. Due to time constraints, this study was a cross-sectional analysis, focusing on X comments made by South African consumers on Eskom’s posts. The researcher used a social media monitoring tool called Brandwatch to study mentions made between June 28, 2022, and 31 December 2023, to pinpoint the time when there were the most mentions. Following this, the Eskom posts with the greatest number of comments were chosen from the various peaks in conversations to ensure a substantial amount of valuable data could be gathered for analysis.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The epistemological aspect of this research centers on understanding what individuals expect from brands during a crisis, shaped by their personal experiences (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The researcher aims to explore the diverse experiences of different South African individuals regarding Eskom’s crisis communication on X by embracing interpretivism's ontological stance, which allows for multiple perceptions of a single phenomenon (Al-Ababneh, 2020), This chapter aims to present the research design discussing the research paradigms and traditions concerning this study. Further outlined in this chapter are the data collection and data analysis methods, and ethical considerations.

The interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises understanding specific instances over generalisability, may limit the verifiability of study findings (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Because of its subjectivity, interpretivism allows the researcher's bias to impact the results (Al-Ababneh, 2020). When a researcher inserts their own interpretations, beliefs, attitudes, or culture into their research, it may be termed biased (Al-Ababneh, 2020). However, these disadvantages do not diminish the importance of interpretivism in this study because it provided the researcher with a framework for gathering a variety of perceptive information about Eskom's crisis communication plan on social media (Al-Ababneh, 2020). To eliminate bias in the data analysis procedure, the researcher recorded each thought during the interpretation stage.

This researcher approached the research process from the perspective of an interpretivist paradigm, as it focuses on individual subjective experiences and suggests people are not predictable (Nieuwenhuis, 2019a). Therefore, a qualitative approach was used in this study using qualitative content analysis to collect data from posts published by South African residential consumers in response to Eskom's posts announcing Stage 6 load-shedding. This helped identify patterns in semantics and quantify the relationship between all the grouped content.

This study is cross-sectional because of time limitations. Comments from South African consumers were gathered at one point in time. A tool called 'Brandwatch' was used to collect and analyse the comments between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023 to find the peaks in conversations driven by comments on Eskom's posts on X. Eskom posts with the most comments were selected from the highest peak in conversations to ensure enough rich data can be collected.

This study's epistemological focus was on the subjective experiences of consumers stated in comments which are regarded as useful resources for deepening our understanding of consumer expectations (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Since interpretivists' ontological views suggest that a single occurrence might have many perceptions (Al-Ababneh, 2020), this study explored the various expectations that South Africans have of corporate brands during a crisis. One shortcoming of the interpretivist method is that it focuses on providing a nuanced understanding of unique events within their contextual complexities rather than generalising these findings to larger populations and contexts (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). This tendency creates a gap in the verification of the validity and value of study findings (Ali, Shah, & Shah, 2021). Another constraint of interpretivism stems from its ontological position, which favours subjectivity over objectivity (Ali *et al*., 2021; Pulla & Carter, 2018). Thus, research findings are susceptible to the researcher's interpretation, belief systems, attitudes, or cultural preferences, which might introduce bias into the findings (Ali, Shah, & Shah, 2021; Pulla & Carter, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm provides broad and rich data collection options, facilitating the researcher's approach to gathering numerous consumer viewpoints on Eskom's strategic aim to use social media crisis communication to manage its reputation.

As mentioned before, axiological perspective within an interpretivist paradigm is concerned with the study of values and judgments, and questions of whether scholars can set aside their values to obtain insight, or whether their values influence what they understand (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). Therefore, this interpretative research aims to understand consumers' interactions with Eskom to identify their perception and judgement regarding Eskom's crisis communication efforts. The researcher also maintains reflexivity throughout the study by keeping a voice recording log of their ideas as they analyse the data to track their own interpretations.

4.2.1. Units of Analysis

A unit of analysis is the smallest component or thing noticed, as well as the specific subject or element under examination (Kumar, 2018; Pascoe, 2021). The choice of units of analysis has a significant impact on the research process, particularly when determining the study's sample (Kumar, 2018; Pascoe, 2021). Kumar (2018) and Pascoe (2021) define social artefacts as tangible products generated by individuals, such as written documents, artworks, photographs, films, video games, novels, television shows, X, and Facebook posts. Thus, comments on Eskom's X posts indicating stage 6 load-shedding served as the social artefacts' unit of analysis for this study.

4.2.2. Population

According to Babbie (2020), a population is a collection of research components assembled using a theoretical framework. Accordingly, the sampling unit's population consists of individuals or artefacts (Thacker, 2019; Pascoe, 2021). Research question-related traits should be shared by the artefacts under study (Thacker, 2019; Pascoe, 2021). The population of this research project consisted of social artefacts, specifically public comments and posts posted on X in response to Eskom's X posts informing customers of stage 6 load shedding from June 28, 2022, to December 31, 2023. This specific timeframe was chosen after using Brandwatch to identify peak periods of conversations about stage 6 load shedding. It was assumed that during these peak periods, there would be more comments and posts available to collect and analyse. Brandwatch portrays posts on a timeline that has received the highest number of engagements (comments, shares and reactions). A target population was determined when the population and its parameters had been established (Pascoe, 2021). The target population included all posts and comments during the period used to establish peak periods by Brandwatch. This population included all posts but not reposts (formerly retweets) and not all mentions because that would have been a duplication based on the nature of X posts. A 'mention' is a reference to posts and reposts but excludes comments.

> *"A single article of content with a message by an author with corresponding metadata returned as a result to a Query or Channel search, such as a Tweet, Comment, Blog Post, Forum Message, News Article, Image or Video. The message of text within a Mention is the source that will be analyzed by the system. Referred to by other vendors as a "verbatim" or "document" (Brandwatch, 2020).*

However, due to their extensive nature, the researcher was unable to examine every comment on X under Eskom's announcement of stage 6 load shedding. Thus, it was necessary to identify a population that is accessible (Pascoe, 2021). In contrast to the accessible population, which only refers to the portion of the population that was included in the study, the target population included everything or everyone within the population boundaries (Pascoe, 2021). Those comments who met the following demographic criteria was determined as the available population for this study:

- The comment and posts were made by South African citizens.
- The comment was posted on a post by Eskom and not a personal profile.
- The comment/post had words/ phrases in the form of text or image.

4.2.3. Sampling Methods

Non-probability purposive sampling, which required the researcher to deliberately pick the specific elements wanted in the sample, guided by a predetermined set of characteristics, was used. The entire population is first considered, and the research question is used to identify which characteristics are crucial to the study (Andrade, 2021; Pascoe, 2018). A sample was then thoughtfully selected from the population that possessed these important characteristics, leaving out those who did not (Pascoe, 2021). Purposive sampling had limitations, including reservations about the researcher's bias (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Andrade, 2021).

Brandwatch, a social media conversation monitoring tool, was used to pinpoint a time frame in which comments on Eskom's X posts were at their highest to ensure a sufficient number of artefacts (comments) to gather rich data from. The sample size was limited to comments by X users on Eskom's posts about stage 6 load-shedding within a particular timeframe chosen according to the highest number of mentioned volumes. Due to the need for rich data, the exact sample size depended on data saturation. Data saturation was achieved when the researcher gathered data from subjects until no new information could be obtained (Mwita, 2022). Reaching the saturation point ensured the validity and credibility of the study's information (Mwita, 2022). The sample size included three posts by Eskom that were published to X between peak periods whereby the researcher analysed a total of 886 comments at the end of the data collection and analysis process.

4.2.4. Case Study Design

The case study research design required the researcher to plan carefully, collect data that was both rich and reliable, and analyse the data (Aczel, 2015). In discussions, it was essential to consider not only the views and perspectives of those directly involved but also their environment and interactions (Aczel, 2015; Tight, 2017). This helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the context surrounding the phenomenon being studied (Aczel, 2015; Tight, 2017).

Case studies have been commonly criticised for their lack of objectivity, being hard to quantify, and having limited representativeness (Aczel, 2015). However, case studies have proven to be valuable in helping this researcher gain a richer interpretation of the meanings behind the phenomenon that was studied (Aczel, 2015). This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of consumers towards Eskom's crisis communication on X during the electricity crisis between 2022 and 2023 through analysing comments on Eskom's X posts. Therefore, a case study approach was best suited it allowed the researcher to analyse the behaviour of consumers in their natural social setting without interference (Tight, 2017).

4.3 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Qualitative data collection methods allowed the researcher to gather rich and deep insights from which the researcher developed a comprehensive understanding of the study (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Qualitative data was presented in words or sentences and not as numbers (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Taherdoost, 2021). The researcher adopted an unobtrusive data collection method called directive qualitative content analysis (QCA), whereby the researcher adopted the process of slimming down the conversations on social media about stage 6 over the last couple of years, down to a a period of 1 and a half years of relevant data, with the researcher settling on. A time frame between June 28, 2022, to December 31, 2023. The data was refined by entering specific key words pertaining to stage 6 load shedding, into a social media conversation. T`herefore further refining the data to be commenst that fit the criteries of mentioning stage 6 loadhsedding. From there we identified peaks in conversation between 2022 and 2023, thereby refining the data down to fit certain criteria.

4.3.1. Directed Qualitative Content Analysis

Since this study was rooted in an interpretivist approach, the researcher employed unobtrusive content analysis to gather data. Content analysis methods were used to find and understand patterns of meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Finlay, 2021). Using qualitative content analysis proved to be beneficial in allowing the researcher to refine the data that was to be analysed by identifying a specific point in time where there were most mentions bout stage 6 load shedding.

Using Brandwatch to pinpoint peaks in conversation between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023, that were specifically related to stage 6 load shedding, did restrict the researcher in terms of exploring a broader timeframe, however, to keep the data relevant and recent, this was necessary.

4.4. DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Azungah (2018) denotes data analysis as the process of arranging data, looking for patterns, pinpointing the most important elements in the data, and sharing the results. Specifically, qualitative data encompasses diverse materials like conversations, images, observations, and different types of interviews (Lester, Cho & Lochmiller, 2020). Qualitative data analysis involved organising and understanding written content to draw conclusions about both the obvious and hidden aspects of meaning within the material and what it conveys (Jowsey, Deng & Weller, 2021; Lester *et al.*, 2020).

4.4.1. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a data analysis method that was used to find patterns within qualitative data (Lester *et al.*, 2020). Braun and Clarke (2021) proposed a six-phase approach to conducting thematic analysis, which was used in this study, adopting a deductive approach, to analyse South African consumers X comments on Eskom's post announcing Stage 6 load-shedding at a pint between 28 June 2022 and 31 December 2023, where mentions peaked.

While the six steps are presented in a sequential order, the analysis did not consistently follow a linear progression through these phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Finlay, 2021). Instead, the analysis is iterative, compelling the researcher to navigate back and forth through the phases as needed, facilitating new interpretations of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This may necessitate additional iterations of earlier phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4.4.1.1. Data Familiarity

In thematic analysis, familiarity with the dataset was crucial since as it helped the researcher uncover preliminary patterns that could be utilised to form categories. (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lommiller, 2021). By making informal observations about the data in the margins, the researcher began the process of becoming acquainted with the literature review, and the theoretical framework outlined in this proposal. This required looking over the data numerous times and making fast notes on any analytical notions or insights that occur (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4.4.1.2. Generation of Codes

A code is seen as an analytical element or instrument that this researcher used to create initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this context, codes represent, at the very least, one observation and typically highlight just one aspect (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Elliot, 2018). Coding involved breaking data sources into smaller, meaningful pieces that formed the basis for drawing broader conclusions about human processes that applied to individual participants (Lochmiller, 2021).

In this step, the researcher was required to systematically work through the existing literature discussed in the proposal, which was categorised into themes (discussed further in the next subsection) (Byrne, 2022). The data was coded line-by-line on a Word document where the researcher used the comment feature to note the different codes in the side margin and highlighted the codes using different colours for the same coding units. The researcher used brief phrases as their coding unit. When the researcher came across a situation where there were multiple interpretations of the data, the researcher considered each interpretation and identified the most appropriate code. The evolution of the codes was tracked to provide transparency.

4.4.1.3. Generation of Themes

A theme should cover a broad range of data that reflects a common idea, sometimes clearly and sometimes less so, and occasionally in very different ways (Braun & Clarke 2021). The thematic analysis involved reassembling the data fragments that emerged from the coding process into meaningful constructs that contributed to the more significant theme (Jowsey *et al*., 2021; Lochmiller, 2021). The reassembly process was carried out by pinpointing robust categories that encapsulate the essence of the underlying codes (Lochmiller, 2021). These categories aided in recognising both connected and disparate patterns in codes, which the efficacy of themes might have not unveiled, marking them as the initial step in pattern identification (Lochmiller, 2021).

Once all the relevant data sets had been coded, the researcher deductively categorised the codes developed in the previous step by combining multiple codes that shared a similar underlying concept into one single code. Each code and theme was defined, so it was straightforward for the researcher to consistently apply the coding system to the comments on X.

4.4.1.4. Review of Themes

The researcher had to first categorise the data into themes before proceeding through a rigorous process to check that these topics were correct. This was performed by repeatedly inspecting the data to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the entire dataset and that all the data bits acquired under a specific topic genuinely related to that theme. As a result, additional themes were identified. The researcher summed up the participants' experiences and opinions and created a thematic 'map' of the analysis to address the research question.

4.4.4.1.5. Mapping Definitions and Naming of Themes

Once a set of themes had been created that fitted the coded data and tells a coherent story, where each theme added something unique, the focus shifted back to revisiting the entire dataset. This process required the same careful approach as before, including being prepared to refine or discard themes if needed. This stage was crucial since coding creates distance from the original data. During initial theme development, there were two layers of separation: first, from the full dataset to the coded data, and then from the coded data to the list of code labels. At this point, only the code labels were considered. When moving on to theme development and revision, the focus moved closer to the original data again but still only looked at selected segments. Each step of separation increased the risk of losing context or missing key details. For this reason, thorough engagement with the entire dataset was necessary to ensure accurate analysis.

4.4.1.6 Writing-up the report

At this phase, the researcher conducted a final inspection of the report that they began writing throughout this process (Byrne, 2022). The report included a succinct description of the themes, which were supplemented by compelling data points (Jowsey *et al*., 2021).

4.4.2. Reflexivity

The researcher's subjective viewpoint was deeply connected to qualitative research. Whilst this could have many positive effects, ignoring reflexivity could have negatively influenced the knowledge produced through qualitative research and those involved. Reflexivity is an approach that values subjectivity and requires researchers to consider their influence on the research (Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage & Young, 2020). Reflexivity involves the researcher taking time to critically reflect on the role of the researcher and the research methods and process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity can be implemented by keeping memos throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which the researcher adopted in this study.

Reflexivity acknowledges the researcher as more than merely an outside spectator of a phenomenon; it acknowledges the researcher as an active participant in the process of knowledge formation (Alejandro, 2021; Patnaik, 2013). This method goes beyond self-awareness or introspection (Alejandro, 2021; Patnaik, 2013). This necessitates that the researcher fathomed how their personal experiences and viewpoints may affect the subject, methods, and themes they choose (Dowling, 2006: Unger, 2021). According to Dowling (2006), the researcher is a co-creator of reality as well as a recorder of happenings. The researcher changes the reader’s perspective by selecting what to stress (Dowling, 2006; Unger, 2021). The author of this research was conscious throughout the process that, as an Eskom customer, their prejudices regarding the company’s subpar service delivery ran the danger of affecting the data. As a result, the researcher was conscious of this potential bias throughout the analysis of the comments on X.

4.5. TRUSTWORTHINESS

In quantitative research, the main concerns are about reliability and validity (Lochmiller, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). In contrast, in qualitative research, what matters most is the trustworthiness of the study (Lochmiller, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four criteria that qualitative researchers should consider making sure their study is trustworthy: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

4.5.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility serves a similar function to internal validity in quantitative studies, focusing on the trustworthiness or truthfulness of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Credibility is concerned with how congruent the findings are with reality (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). To enhance credibility, researchers may use several techniques, such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Establishing credibility was done using a tried-and-tested research techniques, a research design that allows for the answering of the research question, and a sound theoretical infrastructure (Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). The researcher implemented qualitative research methods, including a thematic data analysis for the comments on Eskom's X post.

4.5.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to how well the findings of a study can be applied or useful for another study with a similar context and seeking similar results in both theory and practice (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). To address transferability, researchers should offer a detailed, rich description of the research process, to allow readers to determine whether the results of the study are relevant to their own circumstances (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). To achieve transferability, this researcher used a representative sample population of South Africans by analysing comments made by those who have commented on Eskom's X post announcing stage 6 load shedding. The researcher further described the findings in detail to allow readers to decide whether the study is applicable to their setting or environment (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b).

4.5.3 Dependability

Dependability concerns the reliability of the process that links the method of data collection, data analysis, and the theory created from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It's about how well the research procedures are recorded and explained, making it possible for other researchers to evaluate, follow, and review the process, ensuring that the study can be replicated (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). On the other hand, confirmability refers to the research's objectivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

The researcher described the data gathering and analysis in as much detail as possible, recording their thoughts and any changes in the technique of collecting and analysing data to ensure dependability (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). Documenting thoughts and processes in detail made the study more transparent (Koonin, 2021). Therefore, maintaining dependability throughout their research findings.

4.5.4 Transparency

Transparency in qualitative research has three aspects: data transparency, analytic transparency, and production transparency (Moravcsik, 2019). Data transparency was achieved by expanding and enriching the data to capture the complexity and diversity of social activities and contexts studied in this qualitative research (Koonin, 2021).

Since qualitative research often involves abstract ideas and bias analytic transparency requires researchers to openly explain how they analyse and interpret data, whether they use deductive, inductive, or abductive reasoning to understand participants' lived experiences (Koonin, 2021). Production transparency pertains to how researchers describe the decisions they made in the research design and methodology, the strength of their methods, and the contextual factors that might have influenced their judgements (Koonin, 2021).

4.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is about how well the data gathered aligns with the researcher's interpretation and the study's conclusions (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). It measures how well the findings logically follow from the data (Koonin, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). Confirmability is increased when a researcher takes action to avoid the influence of their bias on the findings, such as keeping a detailed (Nieuwenhuis, 2019b). In this case, the researcher ensured they included quotes that are both negative and positive towards Eskom to truly identify the perceived success and expectations of South African consumers.

4.6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this section, the researcher discussed the considered ethical factors that were adopted throughout the research process.

4.6.1. Respect for People

According to Friesen, Kearns, Redman, and Caplan (2017), the concept of individual value has two essential ethical components. For starters, it encourages researchers to treat people as if they are capable of thinking and making their own judgements and decisions, and it also calls for the protection of those who may find it difficult to make their own decisions (Friesen *et al*., 2017). Respecting autonomy, according to Friesen *et al*. (2017), requires listening to what these people believe and decide and abstaining from interfering with their decisions unless doing so would hurt others. According to Friesen *et al*. (2017), respecting autonomy entails paying attention to what these people think and decide and refraining from interfering with their choices unless doing so would cause harm to others. According to Friesen *et al*. (2017), disrespecting an autonomous person entails dismissing their well-considered judgments, blocking them from acting on their decisions, or withholding crucial information from them when there is no justification for doing so.

Nonetheless, Friesen *et al*. (2017) posits that some people require protection since they are unable to make their own decisions due to immaturity, disease, mental incapacity, or other factors that severely limit their liberty. When users created an X account, they were asked to agree to terms and conditions that stated that content submitted to or through X could be used for syndication, broadcasting, distribution, reposting, promotion, or publication by other companies, organisations, or individuals (Information Regulator, 2019; X, 2023). Therefore, users have practiced autonomy in deciding to accept these terms and conditions facilitating the researcher's ability to respect the individuals (Friesen *et al*., 2017).

4.6.2. Confidentiality

In qualitative research, safeguarding participants' sensitive information is a major concern (Louw, 2021; Maree, 2019). Confidentiality was maintained in this study by leaving out the names of the authors of the comments and only copy and pasted the comments into a word doc to be analysed.

4.6.3. Evasion of Harm

It can be more difficult than it seems to avoid or prevent harm in a research study. For instance, participants may experience embarrassment, have their prospects harmed, or be compelled to recollect unpleasant memories (Louw, 2021; Friesen *et al*., 2017). In this study, since the researcher was not in contact with the sample population that had left comments on Eskom's article, it was not possible to put the participants in an uncomfortable or distressing scenario for this study. Furthermore, the commenters' identities were kept private, posing no harm to their future employment or other opportunities.

4.6.4. Falsification of Results

It is always unethical to deliberately create false or altered data (Louw, 2021; Resnik & Shamoo, 2011). Researchers may engage in such behaviour for a variety of reasons, including protecting their reputation or enhancing their status; securing funding for their research; pleasing their employers or maintaining their job; avoiding the challenges of data collection and analysis; obtaining a specific desired result; and meeting the clients' expectations (Louw, 2021). The results of this study were not fabricated for any of the purposes listed above, as it was a strict academic study with rigorous data collection and analysis processes (Louw, 2021; Resnik & Shamoo, 2011).

4.6.5. Distortion of Results

Results are distorted when a researcher intentionally highlights certain findings as more important while neglecting to explain other equally important aspects or when they use numbers in a way that does not consider the broader context (Louw, 2021; Resnik & Shamoo, 2011). The researcher did not distort information by placing emphasis on some elements over others or include numbers where not necessary (Louw, 2021).

4.6.6. Bias

Bias is regarded as an unethical activity that is not always visible to the researcher (Louw, 2021). In research, bias refers to having a preference or hoping for a particular outcome (Louw, 2021). This preference can influence where and how the researcher collects data, as well as how they interpret it (Louw, 2021). Objectivity was maintained throughout the research process, from the selection of the sample population to being faithful to what the data stated and without stressing certain parts when the findings were assessed and discussed.

4.6.7. Misuse of Information

Data collected from participants should only be used for research and not for any other purposes unless the participant has given written consent to avoid misusing their information (Louw, 2021). Similarly, it's unethical to sell participants' contact details or demographic information (Louw, 2021). Under no circumstances was data, captured from the comments, sold to anyone. All data that was collected was password protected.

Furthermore, X discloses clearly how the data of the people who have signed up, is used and stored at when the users sign up and create a profile on the platform (X, 2023). This disclosure also includes the possible use of the users' data for research) (X, 2023). X further permits in their policy that researchers can use X data for non-commercial research purposes (X, 2023). X's policy, in conjunction with Section 12(2)(a) of POPIA, stipulates that information should not be collected directly from the data subject unless it is found in a public record or has been publicly disclosed by the data subject (Information Regulator, 2019).

4.8. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researcher provided a comprehensive overview of the research design and methodology that guided the investigation into how South African consumers perceived Eskom’s online crisis communication efforts. The interpretivist paradigm offered a framework to investigate consumers' subjective experiences. The epistemological and ontological elements of interpretivism had been examined in greater depth, as have their shortcomings in terms of sensitivity to researcher bias. However, this paradigm was chosen because it best permits the collection of diverse and comprehensive data on Eskom's crisis communication strategy.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter detailed the methodological approaches adopted in this study, including the unit of analysis, sampling techniques, and data collection methods, along with the procedures used for data analysis. This chapter presented the conceptual framework, briefly outlined the coding method employed, and delivered a thorough analysis of the themes uncovered in the data. This analysis provided a deeper insight into how consumers responded to Eskom's online crisis communication during the stage 6 load shedding crisis between June 28, 2022, and July 2024.

5.2. DATA COLLECTION

The researcher identified conversation peaks about stage 6 load-shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023, using Brandwatch, a social media conversation analysis tool. Brandwatch is an all-in-one platform that allows licensed users to manage their social media accounts, monitor discussions on certain topics, and assist with influencer marketing. Consumer Research, the conversation monitoring suite utilised in this study, allows a researcher to observe posts and comments under those posts and information on sentiment, the timeline of mention volumes, the demographics of the conversation participants, and other details. To determine the time when the stage 6 electricity crisis was most widely discussed, the researcher used the tool on July 24, 2024, to build a query containing terms connected to Eskom and stage 6 load shedding, a date range with entered into the filter to view conversations between June 28, 2022, and July 2024. It was noted that most of the conversations about stage 6 load shedding happened between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023, therefore, the time frame in which data was collected was reduced to these specific dates to ensure rich data collection. Data was mined from the main period of the implementation of stage 6 load shedding. The Brandwatch search terms used are mentioned below:

```
((author:(@Eskom_SA)) AND ("stage 6"))
```

Figure 5.1: Query string on Brandwatch. 24 July 2024.

A dashboard was then created, which included a mentions volume graph that illustrated the different peaks in conversations over time. The first two highest peaks were explored to locate Eskom's posts that had the most comments. The researcher found that there were not enough comments to reach data saturation with the initial two peaks, and so they included the third highest peak too, to explore comments, after which, data saturation was reached. An example of what the graph looked like is depicted in Figure 5.2 below.

Figure 5.2: Mention Volumes on Brandwatch. 24 July 2024.

Each peak was analysed, where an influx of comments was driving the conversations around 3 posts made by Eskom announcing stage 6 load-shedding. These three posts are explained in Section 5.3 for context. The comments from the 3 posts were then copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document on a computer for coding and analysis. Some of the comments included images with no text or were written in a different language than English, which the researcher decided to exclude from the study as they did not have the resources to translate the information accurately.

5.3. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The researcher utilised thematic analysis to deductively identify patterns in the data and to interpret the data to generate meaning. This process aimed to explore the comments left on X by Eskom's consumers to understand their feelings and perceptions towards Eskom's online crisis communication focusing on mentions towards Eskom's reputation and any expectations expressed by consumers regarding Eskom's online communications during the electricity crisis. The researcher engaged a QDA Miner to assist with data organisation and coding. A tool for analysing qualitative data, QDA Miner assists researchers in tracking their coding and seeing trends in the dataset. Before using QDA Miner, the researcher copied and pasted the remarks from the original Microsoft Word document. Following that, the researcher developed the various codes based on the themes and subthemes listed in Table 5.1. The researcher then went through the data set, which consisted of 886 comments, to familiarise themselves with the data without coding.

The researcher subsequently re-examined the data, classifying each line per the themes found in the body of previous literature. Since customers are forced to use Eskom's services, the researcher discovered a new theme: Eskom does not view its customers as significant stakeholders, which leads customers to believe that this is the reason it does not provide them with accurate and frequent updates. The researcher also found it difficult to differentiate between reliability and consistent quality performance and redefined these two themes and codes more clearly so that reliability is understood as Eskom restoring power as per the schedule, and the schedule is accurate, and consistent quality performance referred to the complaints about the initial power cuts and the inconsistency of the implementation of load-shedding, in terms of not implementing load shedding in certain areas. Each interpretation aims to identify the most acceptable code. The progress of the codes is monitored to ensure openness.

Since the researcher is also an Eskom customer, a voice memo was recorded to keep track of the researcher's emotions while analysing the data. At various moments, the researcher recorded feelings of empathy and aggravation on behalf of the consumers. However, the researcher printed out the codes and compared each potential interpretation to ensure an appropriate interpretation regardless of their personal feelings before choosing which code to apply to words and phrases. In the end, the researcher used pertinent data points to bolster their interpretations and conclusions in their writing. To verify the findings' significance, they were also contrasted with the themes found in existing and recent literature.

5.4. POSTS BY ESKOM AS CONTEXTUAL UNDERPINNINGS FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In South Africa, Eskom owns and uses most of the power stations in the country, and the South African government is its sole shareholder, represented by the 2023 Minister of Public Enterprises (African Energy Chamber, 2023). Since 2007, repeated episodes of planned electricity outages have been implemented by Eskom, known as load shedding (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). Load shedding is a controlled and deliberate interruption of electricity supply (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). It entails different areas of the country taking turns experiencing these power shutdowns during specific time periods (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). Initially, load shedding was introduced to respond to a situation in which the demand for electricity surpassed the power grid's capacity, mostly because not enough electricity was being generated (African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). However, the situation has worsened overtime due to problems with the power infrastructure and an inadequate maintenance schedule for the existing machines that generate electricity (African Energy Chamber, 2023).

5.4.1. Post 1

On June 28, 2022, Eskom's official X handle posted a power alert informing people that stage 6 load shedding would be implemented from 16:00 to midnight, followed by stage 4 load shedding, allegedly because of illegal industrial action. This was the first post from which comments were gathered. In addition to stating the organisation’s capacity, the post shows that three of the ten generation units have tripped. This post is displayed below:

Eskom Hld SOC Ltd
@Eskom_SA

#PowerAlert1

Due to unlawful industrial action, Stage 6 loadshedding will regretfully be implemented at 16:00
until 22:00 this evening. Stage 4 will then continue to be implemented until midnight.

Eskom

POWER ALERT 1

Due to unlawful industrial action, Stage 6 loadshedding will regretfully be implemented at 16:00 until 22:00 this evening. Stage 4 will then continue to be implemented until midnight.

Tuesday, 28 June 2022: Eskom regrets to inform the public that Stage 6 loadshedding will be implemented from 16:00 until 22:00 this evening. Stage 4 loadshedding will then be implemented at 22:00 – 00:00. Loadshedding will then be reduced to Stage 2 until 05:00 on Wednesday morning. From 05:00 until 16:00 on Wednesday loadshedding will be implemented at Stage 4. Loadshedding 6 will then again be implemented at 16:00 – 22:00 tomorrow evening.

This is due to the unlawful and unprotected labour action, which has caused widespread disruption to Eskom's power plants. This has compelled Eskom to continue taking precautionary measures to conserve generation capacity and safeguard plant from damage. There is a high risk that the stage of loadshedding may have to change at any time, depending on the state of the plant.

Eskom continues to closely monitor the system, adjust and communicate any changes as may be necessary. We appeal to all South Africans to help limit the impact of the shortages by continuing to reduce the usage of electricity and to switch off all non-essential items.

Three of the 10 generation units that had tripped during the night have been returned to service. This, however, is still insufficient to stave off the implementation of Stage 6 loadshedding for this evening and tomorrow evening.

We currently have 3 218MW on planned maintenance, while another 17 621MW of capacity is unavailable due to breakdowns.

We would like to remind the public that loadshedding is implemented only as a last resort to protect the national grid. We therefore urge all South Africans to continue using electricity sparingly especially during these uncertain times on the power system.

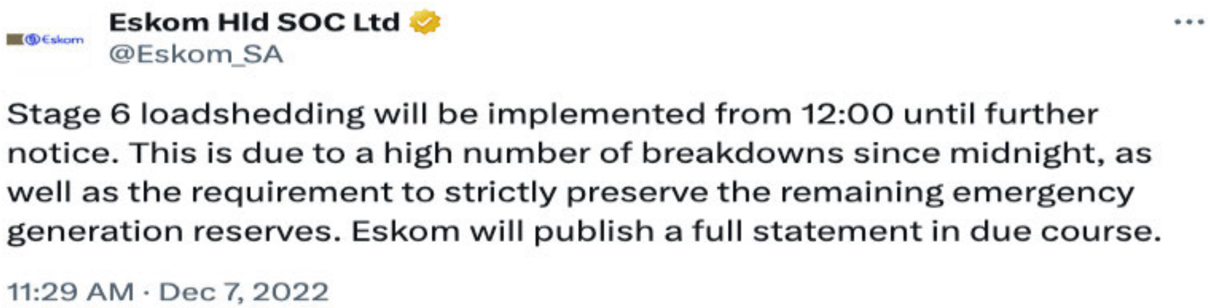
ENDS

Issued by: Eskom Media Desk
Tel: +27 11 800 3304/3343/3378
Fax: 086 664 7699
Email: mediadesk@eskom.co.za

Figure 5.3: Eskom. 28 June 2022. (X, 2022).

5.4.2. Post 2

The second post was posted on 7 December 2022, in which Eskom announced that stage 6 load shedding would be implemented as a result of an increased number of breakdowns since midnight that day, as well as the need to stringently preserve the remaining emergency generation reserves. This post is displayed below:



Eskom Hld SOC Ltd
@Eskom_SA

Stage 6 loadshedding will be implemented from 12:00 until further notice. This is due to a high number of breakdowns since midnight, as well as the requirement to strictly preserve the remaining emergency generation reserves. Eskom will publish a full statement in due course.

11:29 AM · Dec 7, 2022

Figure 5.4: Eskom. 7 December 2022. (X, 2022).

5.4.3. Post 3

Eskom announced stage 6 load-shedding on February 19, 2023, in response to eight generator failures. This was the third post from which comments were collected. The following is a feature of the post:

Eskom Hld SOC Ltd
@Eskom_SA

#POWERALERT2

Due to the breakdowns of eight generation units on Sunday afternoon, Stage 6 loadshedding will be implemented continuously until further notice.

Eskom

POWER ALERT 2

Due to the breakdowns of eight generation units on Sunday afternoon, Stage 6 loadshedding will be implemented continuously until further notice.

Sunday, 19 February 2023: Stage 6 loadshedding will be implemented continuously until further notice. Since Sunday afternoon a generating unit each at Arnot, Hendrina, Lethabo and Majuba, as well as two units at Camden Power Station have suffered breakdowns and taken offline for repairs.

Further, two generating units at the Lethabo Power Station were shut down due to coal constraints as the New Vaal Mine that is supplying the station has been unable to deliver the expected amount of coal during the past week because of the heavy rains. The three running units are operating at minimum capacity and are at risk of shutdown should the coal supply constraints not be resolved.

Given the high number of breakdowns, there is a possibility of further changes on the stages of loadshedding at short notice. A further update will be published as soon as any significant changes occur.

Breakdowns currently amount to 21 243MW of generating capacity while 3 566W of generating capacity is out of service for planned maintenance.

ENDS

Issued by: Eskom Media Desk

Tel: +27 11 800 3304/3343/3378

Email: mediadesk@eskom.co.za

10:32 PM · Feb 19, 2023 · 1M Views

Figure 5.5: Eskom. 19 February 2023. (X, 2023).

5.5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework provides the grounds for conducting a study (Varpio *et al*., 2020). It serves three main purposes: it lays out the existing knowledge, normally through a literature review; it calls attention to the gaps in the researcher's understanding of a particular phenomenon; and it details the methodological infrastructure of the research (Varpio *et al*., 2020). The framework is intended to answer two key questions: "Why is this research significant?" and "How might these findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge?" (Varpio *et al*., 2020: 990). The conceptual framework below provides the researcher with themes to track in consumers comments to analyse their feelings towards Eskom's crisis communication by identifying references to Eskom's brand identity and reputation management. The conceptual framework for this study is demonstrated in Figure 5.6 below:

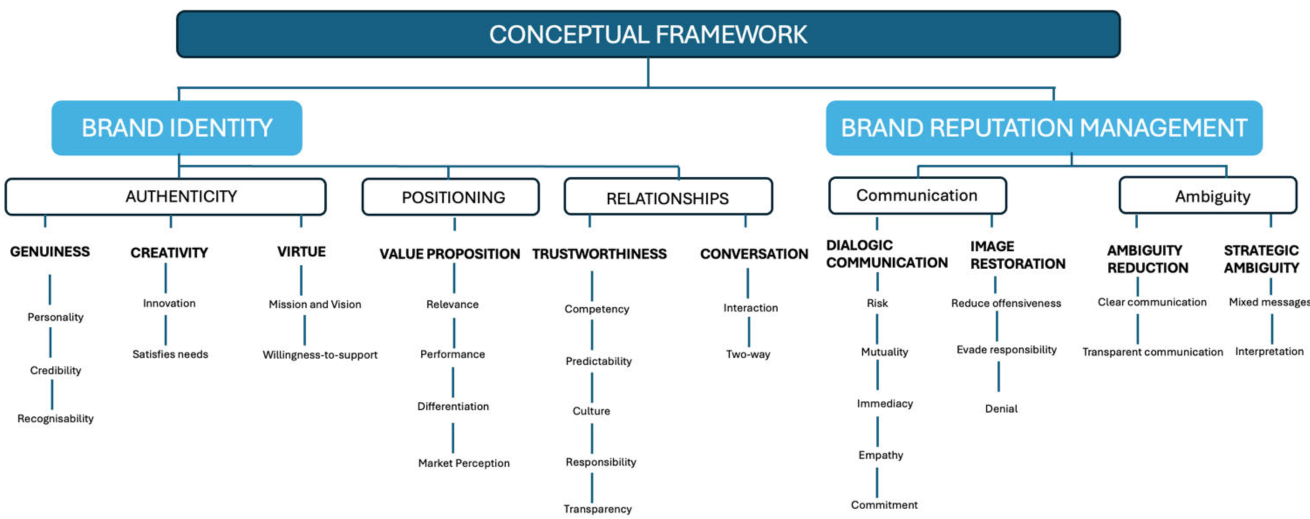


Figure 5.6: Conceptual Framework

5.6. THE PROCESS OF GENERATING AND FORMULATING CODES AND THEMES

In qualitative research, open coding is the first stage of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To classify the data, the researcher finds unique concepts and themes throughout this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To assemble the information, the first step is to organise the data by establishing large subject domains (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A code is given to a theme after it has been recognised and identified (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To improve meaning and explanation, the data should be methodically arranged so that it may be categorised, grouped, and regrouped (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The development of sub-codes within the data is another benefit of open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A key element of the research design is determining what information to collect and how to display it (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A list of codes and categories connected to the text, along with code comments that elucidate each code's meaning, should be the result of open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). According to Braun and Clarke (2021), these notes frequently contain noteworthy observations and insights that are crucial for the theory's growth. The researcher's coding scheme is shown in Table 5.1 below. The information gleaned from the comments on X (social artefacts) was then analysed using the categories and themes that were found. Handles and usernames were excluded from the data to protect commentators' identities.

Table 5.1: Codes and Themes

BRAND IDENTITY DIMENSION		
Main Theme	Authenticity = **AUTH**	**Codes**
Sub-Theme Genuine= **G**		Consumers expression towards the organisations believability and sincerity to define its credibility = **C**; Consumers expression of the Recognisability of Eskom in the form of distinct and consistent communication = **R**; Personality in the form of expressed human characteristics such as tone of voice = **P**

Sub-Theme Creativity= **Cr.**		Evidence of Eskom making innovative solutions to satisfy consumer needs = **Inn.**
Sub-Theme Virtue= **V**		Evidence showing the Eskom demonstrates expression of staying true to their mission and values= **MV**
Main Theme	Positioning = **P**	**Codes**
Sub-Themes Value Proposition = **VP**		Expression of how the consumers perceive the brand in terms of its profitability and value the service adds to their lives = **PMP** Consistent quality performance = **CQP**
Main Theme	Relationships = **Rel.**	**Codes**
Sub-Themes Trustworthiness = **Tr.**		The organisation shows it is capable of carrying out it promises = **Pr.** Reliability in the form of predictability and dependability = **Rlb.** The organisation is accountable= **Acco.**

		The consumers express the level of competence they perceive Eskom to be = **Comp.**
Conversation = **Con.**		There is a two-way communication taking place on Eskom's X account where the organisation is both interactive and responsive= **TWC**
REPUTATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES		
Main Theme	Communication = **COM**	**Codes**
Sub-Themes Risk = **R**		Receptive to unexpected events and its consequences= **RU** Recognition of strange otherness= **ROO** Vulnerability= **Vul**.
Mutuality		Collaboration between stakeholders and Eskom = **Colab.**
Propinquity =**Pr.** Immediacy = **Im.** Commitment = **Commit.**		Immediacy of presence, full commitment to dialogue from both the organisation and consumer

Empathy = **Emp.**		Validating others and showing a willingness-to-support = **WTS**
Reduce offensiveness = **RO**		Mortification (apology) = **M** Taking responsibility = **TR** Asking for forgiveness/Redemption= **AFF** Admitting a lack of justification= **ALJ** Expressing feelings of shame = **EFS** Emphasising harm caused = **EHC** Rectification/corrective action by rectifying the damage caused or implement measures in place to prevent the offensive action from happening again= **Rect.** Remediation in the form of compensation to offset the offensive act by providing money, good or services to the victim/s = **Rem.**

		Attach the user by: suggesting the accuser of the organisations wrongdoing is the actual one who is causing harm; suggesting the accuser deserved the outcome or intimidates the accuser = **AU** Implements transcendence by saying the act was warranted by a higher principle = **Trans.** Differentiation through acknowledging the offensive act is negative but not those severe as previous situations = **Diff.** Minimising the severity of the situation= **Min.** Bolsters image by; highlighting good qualities and actions; associated with values of audience; endorsement of outside experts like influencers; or praises others = **Bolst.**

		Communicates suffering by claiming they are the victim of a malicious third party = **Suf.**
Evade Responsibility = **ER**		Communicates good intentions by admitting to the offensive act while asserting that the intent was positive, or using excuses to minimise responsibility = **GI** Saying the act was an accident = **Acc.** Implements defeasibility by asserting that the accused did not have enough information about or authority over the disagreeable behaviour and consequences therof **= Def.** Suggesting that they were provoked by a third party which left them no choice but to carry out the offensive act = **Prov.**

		Stonewalling by withdrawing from conversation = **StW**
Denial = **D**		Simply denying that there is no crisis or that the act performed was not offensive = **SD** Shift blame by reallocating the blame to the alleged culprit = **SB**
Main Theme	Ambiguity = **AMB**	**Codes**
Sub theme Ambiguity reduction = **AR**		The organisation provides clear and transparent communication
Strategic ambiguity= **StA**		The organisation uses different message intent strategies to emphasise certain possible interpretations of a message without obscuring or misleading the audience away from the truth.
Main Theme	**Other Themes = OT**	**Codes**
Sub theme **Recognising consumers as stakeholders (RCS)**		Including all stakeholders in communication efforts (IAS)

5.7. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This part of this chapter offers an analysis of the comments, organised by themes and their related sub-themes, alongside an interpretation of the data. It is important to highlight that in qualitative research, the processes of analysis and interpretation are iterative, often occurring in overlapping cycles (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014). As a result, data analysis and interpretation are not distinct, separate stages (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014). Instead, meaning is derived through repeated cycles of analysis and interpretation (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014).

5.7.1. The Brand Identity Dimension

Given the qualitative nature of this study, descriptive summaries rather than numerical or statistical representations were used to offer data analysis and interpretation. These summaries demonstrated whether Eskom's use of X as a crisis communication tool was strategic in nature. The next section digs into the first stage of the analytical process, focusing on Eskom's brand identity in its online communications on X. Authenticity, value propositions, and relationships are the themes highlighted within these categories. Each of these topics, along with its sub-themes, have been addressed below.

5.7.1.1 Authenticity [AUTH]

Authenticity (AUTH) is one of the main themes identified under the brand identity dimension and speaks to how the brand is perceived in terms of how genuine (G) it is, its creativity (Cr.) and virtue (V).

5.7.1.1.1. Eskom's Perceived Genuineness (G)

Authenticity is determined by the experience consumers have with the brand's genuineness (Bruhn *et al*., 2012; Tran & Keng, 2018). Consumers in all three posts expressed a lack of genuineness from Eskom in terms of the organisation's trustworthiness. Figure 5.7 depicts an example from a comment on post 1 of how Eskom's credibility is being called into doubt after many customers requested confirmation of the strikes that occurred.

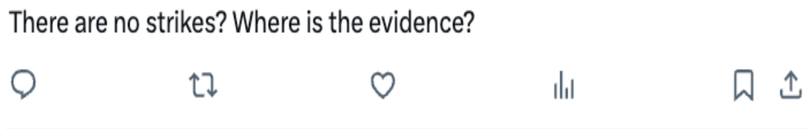


Figure 5.7: Example of Eskom’s credibility being questioned (C).

Integrity is one factor that influences a brand's reputation (Rust *et al*., 2021). Eskom’s credibility was also called into question in various ways, such as its integrity, which was frequently accused of corruption, as shown in Figure 5.8 below:

Figure 5.8: An example of Eskom’s integrity being questioned leading to a decreased perceived credibility (C).

The recognisability (R) of Eskom in terms of its distinct and consistent communication was not commented on by the consumers, and neither was the expressed personality (P) of the brand. Therefore, genuineness was the main aspect of Eskom’s credibility that was focused on by consumers, for which they expressed negative perceptions. Napoli *et al*. (2016) suggest that without good integrity, a brand will be perceived as less authentic.

5.7.1.1.2 Eskom’s Perceived Creativity (Cr.)

Creativity (Cr.) refers to the company’s efforts to create innovative solutions to meet consumers’ needs (Tran & Keng, 2018). In the first post, the consumers expressed a lack of innovation (inn.) on Eskom’s part, where one consumer was noted saying, “What you are doing is OBVIOUSLY not working” under post one.

Another consumer expressed that they "wish all political parties could put their differences aside and come up with one voice to find a way to stop the electricity crisis." This indicates that the current perceived efforts from Eskom to solve load shedding are not working and consumers are asking for a new innovative solution that can put an end to the electricity crisis. This concurs with the findings of Li and Feng's (2022) study, which suggested that audiences respond more positively when an organisation is creative and innovative. The negative comments around Eskom's lack of innovation support the notion that audiences do not respond well to a lack of creativity.

There have been a few comments expressing Eskom coming up with solutions or that their current efforts are not working, which indicates that Eskom is not creating innovative solutions to meet consumers' needs for electricity. Therefore, weakening the brand's perceived creativity (Cr.) and subsequently its authenticity (AUTH).

5.7.1.1.3 Eskom's Perceived Virtue (V)

As stated in the preceding subsection and illustrated further below in Figure 5.9, which is a response to another consumer's comment on Eskom's X post 3, Eskom's integrity is called into question, which contradicts one of its five basic values.

Figure 5.9: An example of Eskom's integrity being scrutinised (MV).

As previously indicated, Eskom's innovation is not evident in its communication. Figure 5.10 depicts another client requesting that Eskom reveal their plan for repairing the breakdown and procuring more coal. This goes further against Eskom's basic principle of innovation.

Figure 5.10: Example of a lack of communication of Eskom's innovations (MV).

Consumer dissatisfaction with Eskom's services is obvious throughout the comments studied, as seen in Figure 5.11. This demonstrates that Eskom is not adhering to its core value for preserving customer satisfaction and quality.

Figure 5.11: An example of a dissatisfied consumer on X towards Eskom's service delivery (MV).

Consumers have also expressed numerous times that Eskom is disrupting their work, which does not cause physical harm but does interfere with their productivity at work and the broader economy. Figure 5.12 is an example of a consumer expressing how Eskom is negatively impacting the lives of consumers with load-shedding (MV).

Figure 5.12: Example of consumers feeling that Eskom is causing them harm (MV).

There has also been a consensus that Eskom's leaders, the ANC and current President Cyril Ramaphosa, do not care about the consumers. In Figure 5.13, it is demonstrated how consumers have expressed their concern for the lack of care from Eskom's leaders (MV), which shows that Eskom is not keeping to its core value of sinobuntu (caring).

Figure 5.13: An example of consumers expressing that they feel that Eskom do not care about them (MV).

The comments pertaining to the mission and vision of Eskom express an absence of Eskom’s mission and visions in their communications and have been addressed through negative comments. The obvious lack of mission and vision being communicated validates Urde and Greyser’s (2016) study, which highlights the brand promise and values that are important to the brand, as unfavourable remarks about Eskom are the result of Eskom's failure to deliver on its brand promises.

5.7.1.2 Positioning [Pos.]

The Positioning of a brand is established through their perceived profitability and value add to consumer’s lives (PMP), and their ability to meet consumer needs consistently (CQP).

5.7.1.2.1 Eskom’s perceived position in the minds of consumers (PMP)

Communication from consumers in the comments section of the three Eskom’s posts indicates that they perceive the brand to be non-profitable, as seen in Figure 5.14, where a consumer indicates that Eskom wants to increase their prices but can’t deliver on their service, suggesting the brand is not cost-effective (PMP).

Figure 5.14: An example of Eskom’s perceived profitability (PMP).

Additionally, customers have stated that they do not trust Eskom, calling it "useless." As seen in Figure 5.15, a customer characterises Eskom as worthless and goes on to recommend that the company shut down and further demonstrating that the brand is not profitable.

Figure 5.15: An example of Eskom's failure in providing value to consumers' lives. (PMP).

Customers have also expressed concerns about inconsistent quality performance (CQP); in addition to the fact that load-shedding itself impairs Eskom's capacity to reliably supply energy, customers have also voiced dissatisfaction apart from the fact that load-shedding does not occur in all locations, as shown in Figure 5.16 below.

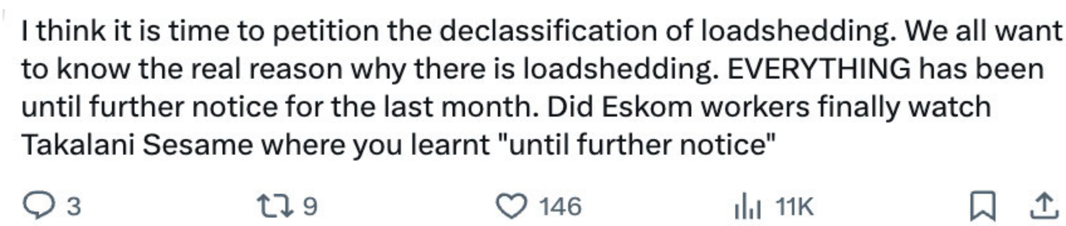


Figure 5.16: Example of Eskom's inconsistent quality performance (CQP).

The examples above indicate that consumers believe Eskom is unprofitable and does not bring value to their lives. There is also a sense that load-shedding is implemented inconsistently across areas, with some areas receiving no load-shedding while others do. This shows that Eskom has a low-value proposition (VP). This finding is consistent with Baruah and Panda (2020), who argue that failing to meet customer expectations leads to mistrust and diminishes purchase intent.

5.7.1.3 Relationships (Rel.)

5.6.1.3.1 Eskom's Perceived Trustworthiness (Tr.)

One of the most important components for building brand loyalty—the bond between audiences and brands—is trustworthiness (Tr.) (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). A company is considered trustworthy when it fulfils its commitments (Pr.), is competent (Comp.), dependable (Rlb.), and accountable (Acco.).

Eskom's failure to fulfil its promises (Pr.) has been mentioned by customers. For instance, in Figure 5.17 below, a customer complains that Eskom is unable to adhere to the load-shedding phases that they claim the nation will be on "permanently."

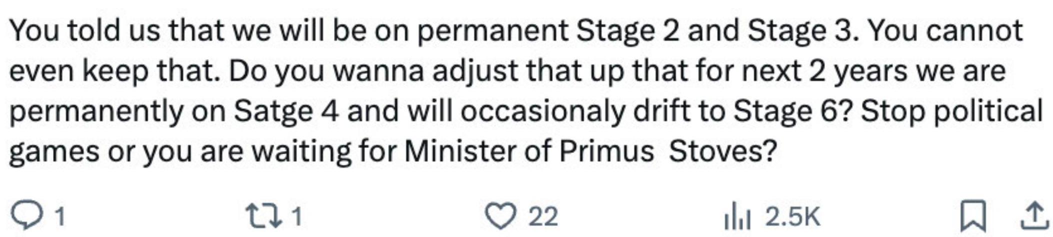


Figure 5.17: Example of consumers expressing that Eskom doesn't keep its promises (Pr.).

The competence of Eskom as a brand has come into question along with its employees. Figure 5.18 is an example of consumers directly suggesting Eskom incompetent, aimed at the brand itself The employees and mainly leadership like the CEO at the time, Andre De Ruyter and the ANC government have also been called incompetent by consumers in the comments section, seen in Figure 5.19.

Figure 5.18: An example of Eskom being called incompetent (Comp.).

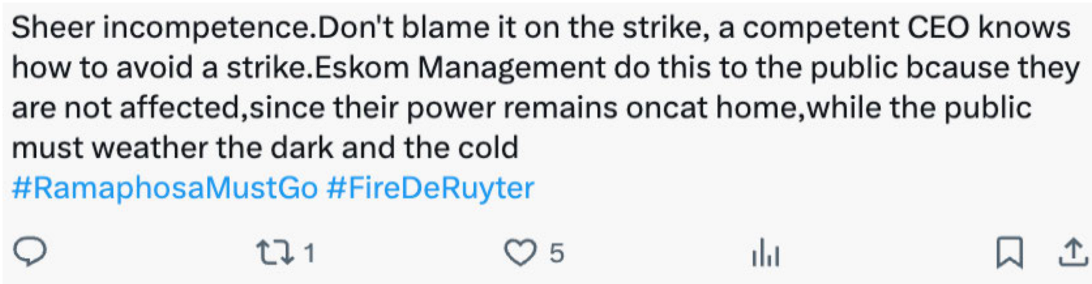


Figure 5.19: An example of Eskom's leadership being called incompetent (Comp.).

Eskom has also been called out for not being reliable (Rlb), in the comments section. There have been cases where consumers have reported that the power hasn't come back after being switched off for the scheduled load shedding time, seen in Figure 5.20 below.

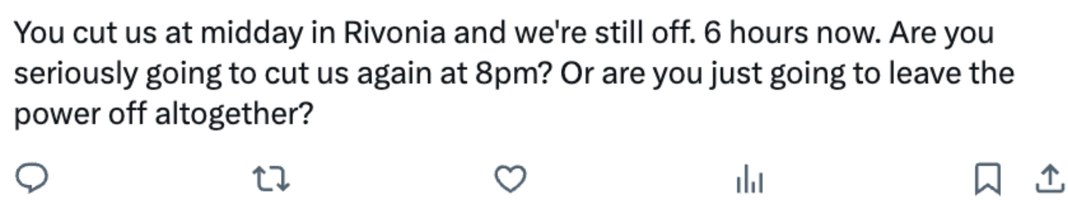


Figure 5.20: An example of consumers expressing that Eskom is unreliable (Rlb).

Consumers have asked a few times in the comments section for Eskom to take accountability instead of blaming load shedding on other causes. This indicates that the consumers feel that Eskom is not taking accountability, demonstrated in Figure 5.21. Consumers have also requested current ANC president, Cyril Ramaphosa take accountability by asking where he is in their time of need and as well as simply stating that he needs to take accountability as seen in Figure 5.22 .

Figure 5.21: Example of consumers feeling that Eskom is not taking responsibility (Acco.).

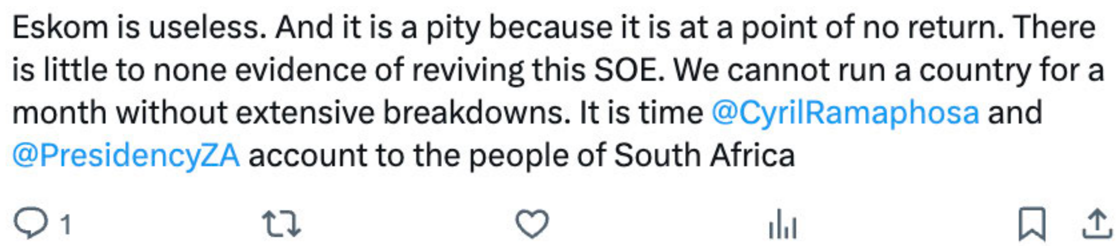


Figure 5.22: An example of consumers asking current ANC President and Eskom owner, to take accountability (Acco.).

The comments above indicate that Eskom lack reliability, accountability and do not keep to their promises, and further show the negative comments that arise towards the Eskom brand, confirming Barfi *et al*. (2021) study in which they suggested that if a brand fails to deliver, the brand's trustworthiness is called into question (Barfi *et al*., 2019).

5.7.1.3.2 Perceived conversation between Eskom and Consumers (Con.)

Eskom and its customers do not appear to engage in two-way communication (TWC). TWC occurs when customers respond to one another's enquiries, as shown in Figure 5.23. As seen in figure 5.24, Johannesburg City Power, Eskom's Johannesburg-based subsidiary, made a comment in the data pool under analysis encouraging customers to download an app but did not respond when the user reported that they were unable to log in. This demonstrates a lack of communication between the Eskom brand and its customers, supporting the findings of a study by Srivastava (2018) that found that consumers became irater when an organisation failed to respond, which is also the case with Eskom.

Figure 5.23: An example of two-way-communication between consumers (TWC)

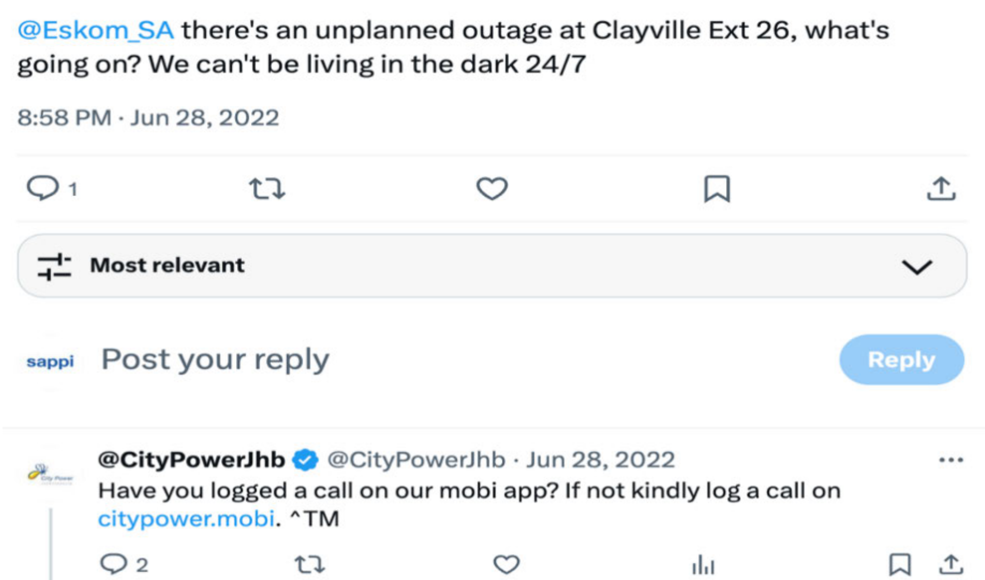


Figure 5.24: An example of two-way-communication between an Eskom subsidiary and Eskom's consumers.

5.7.2 The Brand Reputation Management Dimension

This section dives into the perceptions of consumers towards Eskom's crisis communication and how they perceive Eskom's reputation by what they have expressed in X comments. The themes identified within this dimension include risk, mutuality, propinquity, immediacy, commitment, empathy, reducing offensiveness, evasion of responsibility and denial. Each of these themes and their respective sub-themes are discussed below.

5.7.2.1 Communication [COM]

Communication [COM] is one of the main themes identified under the brand identity dimension and speaks to how the brand engages with a brand through dialogue and using various message intent strategies.

5.7.2.1.1 Eskom's willingness to interact with consumers on their own terms (R)

After analysing the comments area, Eskom did not respond to what the consumers had to say, implying that they were not interested in the effects of load-shedding on consumers or the effects of consumers' reactions to load-shedding. According to Taylor and Kent (2017), the lack of communication to consumers in the comments section demonstrates that Eskom did not understand the varied points of view of consumers and their vulnerability, highlighting the importance of interaction.

5.7.2.1.2 Eskom's recognition of their relationships with consumers (Mut.)

Eskom's failure to respond to consumers' comments indicates a lack of mutuality (Mut.) as they do not validate the viewpoints of consumers, and they do not make the effort to connect to consumers through dialogue. This strengthens the view of Yang *et al*. (2015) who found that good relationships develop when the organisation and the public focus on mutual understanding and openness and recognise and value each entity's different perspectives and quite the opposite is happening between Eskom and its consumers as consumers are feeling ignored.

5.7.2.1.3 The perceived connection between Eskom and its consumers (Pr. + Im. + Commit.)

Eskom has minimal commitment to connection with consumers; their immediacy in communication is non-existent because they do not engage in discourse, indicating a weak affinity between Eskom and consumers. As a result, there is no evidence of propinquity because it is not available during real-time talks. Consumer complaints about Eskom's lack of response back up Bentley's (2012) view that proximity increases empathy, which deepens ties even further. The absence of empathy is addressed further below.

5.7.2.1.4 Eskom’s Expression of Empathy (Emp.)

Eskom’s failure to engage in dialogue with consumers in the comments area demonstrates a lack of empathy and a willingness to support. Consumers have remarked that the government is self-serving and does not care whether citizens have access to energy, implying that Eskom’s officials are unwilling to support consumers. This is shown in Figure 5.25 below. The lack of empathy created by Eskom’s lack of interaction lends credence to Palenchar and Lemon’s (2018) assertion that genuine dialogue is required to demonstrate empathy.

Figure 5.25: An example of consumers expressing the Eskom is not willing to support them WTS.

5.7.2.1.5 Eskom’s Perceived Attempt at Reducing Offensiveness (RO)

There were some indicators that customers wanted Eskom to demonstrate shame; this suggests that Eskom was not already doing so in their messages. Figure 5.26 shows an example of a consumer asking Eskom to be ashamed. This lends weight to Benoit's (1995) assertion that a mortification technique is required in crisis communication strategies for audiences.

Figure 5.26: An example of consumer's asking Eskom to have shame (EFS).

Consumers demanded that Eskom take steps to resolve the load-shedding issue, implying that Eskom had not revealed its plans to address the crisis. Figure 5.27 depicts consumers' requests for Eskom to resolve load-shedding by borrowing money from another municipal department.

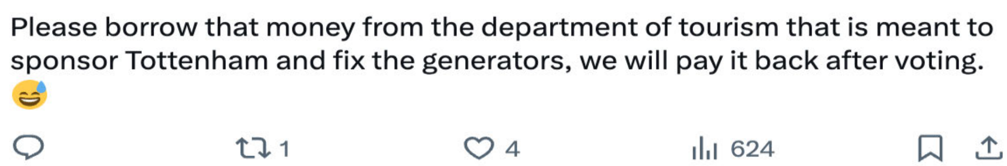


Figure 5.27: An example of consumers asking Eskom to rectify the crisis (Rect.).

Customers have also stated that Eskom must accept responsibility, proving that Eskom was not already informing customers that they were taking responsibility for load shedding (TR), as seen in Figure 5.28 below.

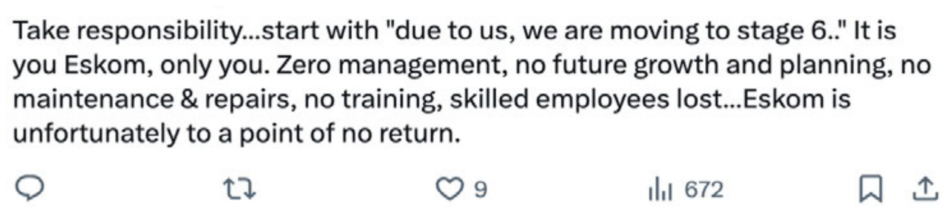


Figure 5.28: An example of Consumers asking Eskom to take responsibility (TR)

5.7.2.1.6 Eskom's Perceived Attempt at Evading Responsibility (ER)

Eskom's propensity to ignore customer feedback is known as stonewalling (StW) since it involves distancing themselves from the dialogue with customers. As illustrated in Figure 5.29, customers have also complained that they believe Eskom is using GI to justify load shedding. This could be interpreted as a potential communication tactic that uses a message type intended to avoid accountability.

Figure 5.29: An example of a consumer feeling that Eskom is making excuses for the cause of load shedding (GI).

5.7.2.1.7 Eskom's Perceived Attempt at Denial (D)

Consumers have also expressed that they feel that Eskom is shifting the blame to the striking workers in Post 1, as seen in Figure 5.30 below (SB). This can be seen as a message intent strategy used in Eskom's communication in their post.

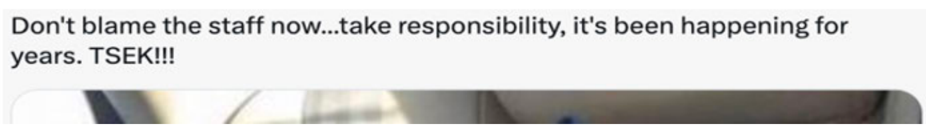


Figure 5.30: An example of a consumer accusing Eskom of shifting blame (SB).

The data shown above confirms the importance of signals demonstrating mortification, rectification, and acceptance of guilt in Eskom communication, which is consistent with Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory. Eskom's current perceived tactic is avoidance of accountability and denial, which is consistent with Chimbarange *et al*. (2013), who also observed the Zimbabwean Prime Minister's usage of the technique, showing it is a frequent strategy in African and collectivist societies.

5.7.2.2. Ambiguity (AMB)

Ambiguity can be reduced (AR) to manage a crisis satiation, but it can also be used strategically (StA) to leave messages open for interpretation or different messages can be used to communicate indifferent cultural contexts.

5.7.2.2.1 Eskom’s use of ambiguity (AMB)

The comments made by customers, which are displayed in Figure 5.31 below, provide evidence that Eskom’s communications are unclear. Eskom consistently conveys the same message “until further notice,” which is a lack of the strategic usage suggested by the customers’ comment. As illustrated in figure 5.31, this bolsters the argument put forth by Sohn and Edwards (2018), who contend that ambiguity is only effective when employed strategically. Failure to do so leads to audience members becoming frustrated.

Figure 5.31: An example of a consumer expressing that Eskom is using the ambiguous message throughout its communications.

5.7.3 Other Themes Discovered (OTD)

When analysing the consumers comments, another theme arose which was related to how Eskom build relationships with all stakeholders (IAS).

5.7.3.1 Eskom’s efforts to recognise consumers as stakeholders (RCS)

In a few comments, consumers indicated that Eskom does not see them as customers because they are the only provider of electricity and therefore have no consequences (IAS). Figure 5.32 below is an example of how this theme presented itself in the consumers’ comments. This finding concurs with the finding in the study conducted by Royo *et al*. (2019), in which they noted that some governments do not view citizens as key stakeholders or feel an urgency to disclose information to them.

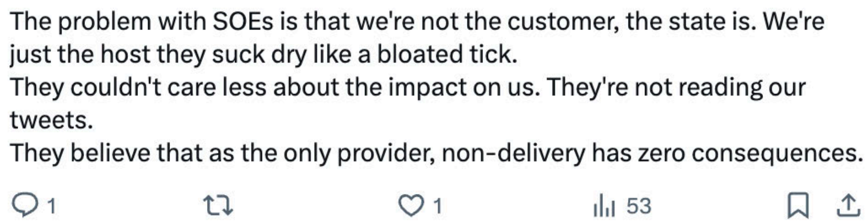


Figure 5.32: An example of a consumer's perception of Eskom overlooking the as a stakeholder (IAS)

5.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

The researcher received ethical approval before collecting the data. The data was collected from publicly available social media posts on X, and all images of comments maintained the anonymity of the commenters by excluding their X handles.

Trustworthiness was established by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was maintained by using an established research method, thematic analysis, to analyse the comments on Eskom's X post.

Transferability was achieved whereby researcher described the findings in detail to allow readers to decide whether the study applies to their setting or environment.

Dependability was maintained by providing as much detail as possible about the data collection and analysis process, as well as noting their thoughts and any modifications in data collection and analysis techniques (refer to chapter 4). In-depth documentation of concepts and procedures also helped to increase transparency. To begin, transparency was maintained by explicitly stating that the data had been examined and interpreted to better understand participants' experiences. Secondly, production transparency was maintained by sharing the decisions taken in the study design and techniques, to the strength of the methods utilised, and any contextual considerations that may have influenced the decisions.

To be conscious of their own prejudices regarding Eskom's subpar service delivery, the author of this research study, who is an Eskom customer, maintained reflexivity by documenting their emotions throughout the data analysis process.

Unbiased data collection and interpretation preserved credibility. The researcher cannot change the data because it already exists on X. Accurately analysing the data from the customer comments and concentrating on the data rather than the researcher's viewpoint was also essential to the study's legitimacy.

5.9. CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the methods used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Comments were analysed under three posts published by Eskom to explore how consumers received Eskom's online communication during the electricity crisis between 28 June 2022 to 31 December 2023. The analysis was informed by three key theories: dialogic theory, image restoration theory, and the brand and reputation matrix developed by Urde and Greyser (2016). Given the qualitative nature of the study, deductive reasoning was employed to develop a conceptual framework comprising two dimensions and five main themes, each associated with specific indicators or identifiable codes. The analysis was conducted iteratively, focusing on themes such as authenticity, value proposition, relationships, communication, and ambiguity. Since the study is qualitative, the findings apply only to three (3) posts by Eskom and should not be generalised to all state-owned entities engaging in X. The final chapter will present the researcher's findings, along with the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher provides the study's findings, which were obtained through data analysis and interpretation. Chapter Five included the research methodologies, describing qualitative content analysis to collect data and thematic analysis to evaluate and understand 886 comments. The researcher used the material discussed in Chapter Two and the theories at work in Chapter Three to create a conceptual framework presented in Chapter Five, as well as to identify important themes that led to the analysis and interpretation of comments. The theoretical framework addressed in Chapter Three comprised three theories: dialogic theory, image restoration theory, and brand reputation matrix.

This researcher used an interpretive approach in this qualitative study to gain a deeper understanding of consumers feelings towards Eskom's online communciation efforts during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and July 2024 June 28, 2022, and July 2024. Additionally, the findings help answer the research questions, address the research problem, and meet the objectives outlined in Chapter One.

The research questions addressed are: How did Eskom respond (if at all) to residential consumers' comments on X during the Stage 6 load shedding? What were the discernible crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X? How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?

The research questions help address the research problem that is linked to a gap in research that explores consumers feelings towards crisis communication (Spoljaric, 2021). By exploring consumers' reactions to Eskom's online crisis communication, the researcher can further address feelings and possibly the expectations that consumers have from state-owned entities in their online communication efforts within a South African context.

6.2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The primary research problem was that, despite social media's emerging importance in customer engagement during a crisis, many organisations only use it to disseminate information rather than utilising it strategically as a crisis communication management and engagement tool (Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, Fromm & Melzer, 2018). Customers of Eskom have expressed their dissatisfaction with the load-shedding issue on social media. The five primary themes found in the conceptual framework's brand identification and reputation management dimensions were used to discuss the findings. The following research questions were addressed in the discussion of the findings: How did Eskom respond (if at all) to residential consumers' comments on X during the Stage 6 load shedding? What were the discernible crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X? How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?

6.2.1. Authenticity

Authenticity is important for developing and maintaining a strong brand, as it helps create a distinctive brand identity (Beverland, 2005; Leonaviciute *et al*., 2024) and fosters positive consumer associations (Keller, 1993; Leonaviciute *et al*., 2024; Napoli *et al*., 2014). It is evaluated based on consumers' experiences with the brand, particularly regarding its genuineness, which is influenced by the brand's perceived personality (Urde & Greyser, 2016), credibility (Bruhn *et al*., 2012; Tran & Keng, 2018), and recognisability (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Consumers expressed a perceived lack of credibility from Eskom in their comments on X, often requesting evidence for the different causes behind the various stages of load-shedding, particularly stage 6. The recognisability and personality of the Eskom brand were themes not evident in the data analysis. Eskom's perceived lack of engagement with consumers in the comments section and its use of the platform for solely sharing information instead of participating in two-way communication likely diminished its brand recognisability and personality. Consequently, consumers did not seem to form a well-rounded relationship with Eskom, leading to accusations of a lack of credibility, while no comments addressed Eskom’s recognisability or personality, indicating a weak perception of the brand’s genuineness.

Brand creativity is one of the elements of brand authenticity, which speaks to its ability to innovate and meet consumer needs (Bruhn *et al*., 2012; Tran & Keng, 2018). Many consumers expressed dissatisfaction with Eskom's current efforts to address load-shedding, often urging the company to find new solutions. The demand for innovation that comes from the consumers in their comments on X suggests that Eskom is not viewed as a creative brand. This takes away from the brand's authenticity. When consumers say that Eskom lacks innovation, it's an encompassing statement that makes it hard to focus on one specific complaint. Eskom's brand authenticity has further been negatively affected by the brand’s lack of communication about an effective plan to end load shedding, which has caused consumers to feel unhappy.

Virtue is another critical subtheme of authenticity, evaluated through a brand’s adherence to its mission and vision, as well as its capacity to act beyond financial motives, offering support and validation to consumers (Urde & Greyser, 2016; 2022). Eskom’s core values include zero harm, integrity, innovation, sinobuntu’ (caring), and customer satisfaction and excellence (Eskom Holdings, 2024). Nevertheless, the South African public is not entirely satisfied with the integrity of their state power utility, criticising it for alleged mismanagement, corruption, and crime. Eskom’s value of integrity appears to be out of sync with what it is perceived to be delivering. Thus, Eskom has also been criticised for its failure to innovate and communicate any plans to resolve the breakdowns or secure resources. Again, indicating the company’s stated value of innovation seems to be contradicted by its performance, or lack thereof.

In consumer comments, widespread dissatisfaction is observed due to poor service, which seems to be what the brand is known for in the eyes of its consumers. Interestingly, on Eskom's website, the company claims to do zero harm. Yet, consumers reported that load-shedding disrupts their work and is thus harmful to the South African economy.

Lastly, some consumers accused Eskom and its leadership of failing to care about their well-being, which suggests that Eskom has not upheld their value of sinobuntu (caring). These findings indicate that the brand's virtue has weakened in the eyes of its consumers, due to Eskom's failure to demonstrate and reinforce its core values in its online communication efforts.

From these findings, we can see that consumers view Eskom as uncredible. Consumers have also criticised the lack of innovation and communication around any efforts towards finding a resolution to load shedding and are further dissatisfied with Eskom's current crisis management. This answers the research question that asks, 'How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?" and addresses the objective of the study to determine the opinions of Gauteng residential consumers expressed in X posts during Stage 6 published by Eskom on 28 June 2022.

6.2.2 Positioning

Brand positioning relates to the unique and credible space the brand owns in the minds of consumers, created by focusing on consumers' perceptions and emotions, rather than solely on product features, which enables a brand to differentiate itself in a competitive market (Gordon, 1996; Urde & Greyser, 2016). Brand positioning is closely related to the brand's value proposition and is a result of how the product or service offered attracts and retains customers and stakeholders (Schultz, 2001; Urde & Greyser, 2016). Effective positioning requires consistently delivering high-quality performance and meeting consumer expectations (PWC, 2015).

Consumers expressed negativity towards the brand's profitability, where one consumer indicated that Eskom's proposed price increase is inconsistent with its competence to deliver reliable electricity, implying that the brand is not cost-effective due to rising prices without corresponding service improvements. Several comments further labeled Eskom as "useless," with some calling for its shutdown, indicating a poor market perception and weakening Eskom's brand position.

Furthermore, consumers raised concerns about Eskom’s inconsistent quality performance, particularly in the uneven implementation of load shedding across regions. Complaints about certain areas not experiencing load shedding while others are affected suggest a lack of consistency in Eskom’s service delivery. The inconsistent service delivery, together with Eskom's negative market positioning, deteriorates Eskom’s value proposition and its relationship with consumers, evident in the negative sentiment expressed by consumers.

Consumers opinions towards Eskom’s value proposition is negative, referencing the perceived decreased profitability of the brand and inconsistent service delivery across areas in South Africa. Thereby answering the research question: ‘How did a selection of Gauteng consumers respond in comments on X to Eskom regarding their communications during stage 6 load shedding between June 28, 2022, and December 31, 2023?’ and addressing the objective of this study to explore the opinions of Gauteng residential consumers expressed in X posts which has been identified as negative towards Eskom’s value proposition.

6.2.3. Relationships

When a corporate brand's identity is aligned with its stakeholders, those stakeholders are more likely to advocate for and support the brand within their circles, emphasising the need for strong stakeholder relationships to sustain a resilient corporate brand (Urde & Greyser, 2016). Trustworthiness, integrity, and honesty are shaped by the opinions and suggestions of consumers and further affect the brand’s reputation (Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpande, 1992; Rust *et al.*, 2021). Effective marketing and customer relationships are key to building a brand’s reputation and standing (Creed & Miles, 1996; Baruah & Panda, 2020). However, Eskom’s corporate brand reputation has been called into question by consumers, with many expressing dissatisfactions over the company’s failure to keep promises. Comments revealed frustrations regarding Eskom’s inability to maintain load-shedding stages as communicated and a perceived lack of progress in maintenance activities, indicating that Eskom is not fulfilling its commitments. The trust consumers had instilled in the Eskom brand, has been broken due to the organisation not carrying out its promises.

Accountability is another critical factor that affects brand loyalty and trust and as a state-owned enterprise, Eskom is expected to practice transparency and accountability (PWC, 2015). However, there is evidence in consumer comments that indicate Eskom has not taken accountability for load shedding, with many calling for the company, and even the ANC and President Cyril Ramaphosa, to take responsibility for the ongoing power issues. The absence of timely communication from both Eskom and its leadership further supports the view that the organisation's communication is unreliable which further negatively impacts Eskom's overall brand reputation.

A brand’s competence is another important factor in fostering trust (Butler, 1991; Deutsch, 1960; Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021). Competency is perceived as the value an organisation provides in satisfying customer needs (Butler, 1991; Deutsch, 1960; Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021). Eskom is frequently described as incompetent seen in consumer comments on X, whereby they demand the resignation of the CEO and the board, demonstrating the desire for Eskom to rectify load shedding by changing the company’s leadership. These negative comments diminish the Eskom brand's trustworthiness and compromises the predictability of the brand (Baruah & Panda, 2020).

Consumers have expressed frustration with Eskom’s failure to restore power according to the load-shedding schedule, making it difficult for them to plan their lives. The unreliability of Eskom has created negative experiences for consumers, thereby decreasing the trust consumers had instilled in the Eskom brand. Eskom’s failure to engage in two-way communication (TWC) with consumers, as seen in the lack of responses to consumer comments, negatively impacts Eskom’s brand reputation. Eskom’s lack of engagement in conversation with consumers prevents them from building relationships with its audience (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016), jeopardising both its own reputation and that of the South African government.

In these finding we answer the research questions that ask how consumers responded in X comments and what were their opinions. It is evident hat consumers were unhappy in their comments often expressing their opinion that Eskom is incompetent, unreliable and that they do not trust Eskom. The question asking how did Eskom respond was also answered in these findings where consumers expressed that Eskom has not taken accountability in their crisis communication efforts.

6.2.4 Communication

An effective brand communication strategy is key to building a strong corporate reputation in times of crisis (Saqina & Ambarini, 2020; Srivastava, 2018). However, a successful communication strategy needs to be interactive and dialogic to foster relationships and manage reputational crises effectively (Kent & Taylor, 2021). Dialogic communication involves meaningful, deep discussions where participants actively listen and are open to changing their views rather than simply engaging in casual exchanges (Escobar, 2011; Kent & Taylor, 2021). Kent's (2017) *Dialogic Theory* outlines principles to facilitate this type of interaction, emphasising the importance of collaboration, stakeholder consultation, trust, relational risk-taking, and a commitment to authentic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2021).

An analysis of consumer comments on Eskom's X (formerly Twitter) posts shows that Eskom fails to engage in meaningful two-way communication, indicating a lack of dialogic intent in using the platform as a crisis communication tool.

Consumers expressed their frustrations about load shedding and its effect on them and the economy, but Eskom did not respond to these comments. This suggests that Eskom is not willing to take risks to communicate with consumers on their terms or engage in open dialogue. This answers the research question that asks what was the discernable crisis communication strategy used by Eskom, and the answer was that they did not facilitate any dialogue in their crisis communication and that engagement on their part was lacking. Eskom's failure to respond to consumer comments also demonstrates a lack of mutuality, as the brand does not validate consumer viewpoints or attempt to connect through dialogue. This shows that Eskom did not generate any responses to consumers comments on X, addressing the research objective to explore the nature of the responses generated by Eskom in response to residential consumers.

Additionally, the company shows no commitment to real-time communication, with no evidence of *propinquity* or immediate engagement with consumers following the announcement of Stage 6 load shedding. As a result, Eskom's communication appears impersonal and disconnected, further undermining its relationship with consumers.

Eskom's lack of dialogue in the comments section shows an absence of empathy and a failure to demonstrate willingness to support consumers, as evidenced by numerous comments expressing dissatisfaction with the government and Eskom leadership. This reinforces the notion that Eskom uses X solely as a platform for disseminating information rather than building relationships or engaging in meaningful conversations. This addressed the research question regarding how Eskom responded, which they didn't, as well as the research question that concerns the discernable crisis communication strategies used by Eskom, which there is no discernable crisis communication efforts being used.

The demand for Eskom to solve the load shedding issues suggests that the organisation has not effectively communicated any plans for rectifying the crisis. There are multiple comments where consumers have also asked Eskom to take responsibility for the situation, indicating that the brand was not proactively communicating accountability. Eskom's failure to respond to consumer comments constitutes stonewalling, as the company effectively removes itself from the conversation. Many consumers expressed frustration, accusing Eskom of making excuses for load shedding. This silence can be seen as a strategic decision to avoid responsibility, as Eskom is not addressing the issues raised by consumers. Additionally, some consumers noted that Eskom appeared to be shifting blame onto other entities, such as striking workers. This strategy aligns with Benoit's (2015) identification of blame-shifting as a message intent used to restore a brand's image, but it is not effective in managing Eskom's reputation, as consumers have criticised both the lack of communication and the blame-shifting tactics. This also answers the research question that asks what was the discernable discernable crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X. The answer to this question from these finding indicate that Eskom shifted blame to other people in their initial crisis response post.

6.2.5. Ambiguity *versus* Strategic Ambiguity

Uncertainty is inherent in a crises situation and often results in ambiguous communication (Sillince *et al*., 2012). In some cases, organisations might intentionally heighten ambiguity to create competing perspectives about a crisis due to ambiguity facilitation of multiple interpretations, which can be leveraged by organisations to emphasise one interpretation over others, often casting their industry in a more favourable light (Sillince *et al*., 2012). Although extreme ambiguity has the potential to paralyse an organisation, it can also be wielded strategically. When ambiguity is present, whether it stems from the organisation itself or the nature of the crisis, it enables the communication of seemingly contradictory messages to different audiences.

In the case of Eskom, there is evidence of ambiguity in their communication demonstrated in consumer comments seen where consumers express frustration towards Eskom's repeated use of the phrase "until further notice," which fails to provide a clear timeframe for when repairs will be completed. While demonstrated ambiguity might have been a discernable crisis communication strategy, there appears to be no deliberate strategic intent behind it. Eskom uses this same message across various cultural contexts and Eskom does not appear to leverage one interpretation over another. Consumers have consistently point out that Eskom's communication relies on the same ambiguous phrase, "until further notice," which proves a lack of strategic use of ambiguity in their communication. This addresses the research question around what the discernable crisis communication strategies used by Eskom on X.

6.2.6. Other Themes

Unlike the private sector, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) must balance financial sustainability with creating value for citizens and society (PWC, 2015). As a result, SOEs should be assessed not only on their financial performance but also on their contributions to societal value through an integrated and holistic approach (PWC, 2015). Royo *et al*. (2019) found that Spanish SOEs do not view citizens as key stakeholders nor feel compelled to disclose information to them. This reflects the traditional public administration model found in Continental and Southern European countries, which prioritises upward accountability over downward accountability (Royo *et al*., 2019). In these regions, citizens are often perceived as passive service recipients rather than active participants (Royo *et al*., 2019).

A similar pattern is observed with Eskom, as evidenced by consumer comments. A new theme emerged from a comment under one of Eskom's posts, suggesting that the company does not treat consumers as key stakeholders. It was implied that Eskom, being the sole electricity provider in South Africa, does not view consumers as customers with alternative options, thus facing no consequences for failing to deliver electricity. This perception supports the notion that Eskom's lack of response on X to residential consumers may be plausible, as the absence of consumer responsiveness appears to carry no significant repercussions, given that consumers have no alternative service provider.

6.2.7. Summative Findings

Eskom's response to consumer comments on X was notably limited, with a clear absence of two-way communication. Despite widespread consumer engagement, Eskom did not directly address concerns or provide meaningful updates, primarily using the platform to broadcast information rather than engaging with consumer feedback. As Kent and Taylor (2021) note, the increasing use of social media by organisations has made online communication essential for public relations practitioners, particularly in creating meaningful relationships with stakeholders through interactive communication. Transparent and interactive dialogue during a crisis can help maintain the relationship an organisation has with its stakeholders, as stakeholders are actively seeking information in times of uncertainty (Du Plessis, 2018). Moreover, dialogic communication has been shown to boost stakeholder support and foster relationship-building, which is crucial for helping organisations recover after a crisis (Du Plessis, 2018).

Eskom did not engage in dialogue with consumers which led to the consumers feeling frustrated as they demanded Eskom to take accountability and provide clear information on the cause of load shedding and their plan to end it. However, they were met with minimal interaction. This reinforces the importance of clear and interactive dialogue in managing relationships with stakeholders. By neglecting the relational and dialogic aspects of communication, Eskom missed the opportunity to build trust and address the concerns raised during the crisis, further weakening its communication strategy.

It was evident that Eskom avoided responsibility for load shedding by not commenting on consumers' posts. Shifting blame was a message intent that was present in their communications, according to the perspective of consumers, indicating there was no discernable crisis communication strategy being used by Eskom and that consumers perceived their initial post in response to the crisis as an effort to shift blame. in their lack of communication to avoid responsibility, and when they did communicate, they shifted the blame of load shedding onto striking employees. Shifting blame has been used by leaders in other collectivist cultures, which confirms the findings as seen in Chimbarange *et al.*'s (2013) and Low *et al.*'s (2011) studies, which demonstrated that the collectivist culturally orientated governments, analysed in their study, often shifted the blame of the crisis in their communications, whilst the west's (individualist culture) did not shift blame.

Eskom seemingly used ambiguity seen in their frequent use of the phrase "until further notice", to delay accountability without offering clear solutions. The absence of direct responses to consumer queries indicates that Eskom missed an opportunity to strategically use X as a tool for managing its public image and addressing concerns. There is no evidence that ambiguity was intentionally used by Eskom in an attempt to manage the crisis, as Eskom didn't share various messages to address the different concerns expressed by consumers.

Gauteng consumers expressed significant dissatisfaction with the way in which Eskom managed the load-shedding crisis. Consumers often expressed their frustration in their comments on X due to the company's inability to provide reliable service, indicating that there is no transparency, innovation, and accountability, being demonstrated by Eskom. Many consumers asked Eskom to take responsibility whereby they demanded that Eskom give them an explanation for the cause of load shedding. Consumers further expressed their distrust in the company's leadership, suggesting that Eskom's Leaders should be forced to resign, and the employees should be reprimanded. The delayed updates and unresponsiveness of Eskom further caused some consumers to question the company’s integrity, with its failure to deliver electricity reliably becoming an inherent character of the Eskom brand in the eyes of consumers.

This dissatisfaction extended to Eskom’s failure to communicate concrete solutions to the power crisis, further eroding consumer trust. The company's lack of engagement and proactive communication on X suggests that Eskom made no effort to build or maintain its corporate brand during the crisis. A company’s brand reputation is closely tied to its image, with image referring to immediate consumer perceptions and reputation being the accumulation of these perceptions over time (Urde & Greyser, 2016). As such, the absence of transparent communication significantly impacted Eskom’s brand reputation.

Consumers repeatedly questioned Eskom’s credibility and criticised its inability to deliver services in line with expectations, which crippled both Eskom's image and reputation. Eskom's inability to uphold its brand values and maintain open communication prevented them from establishing a strong brand identity through its online communications. Eskom’s trustworthiness, competence, and transparency came under further scrutiny due to Eskom not providing timely and clear correspondence on maintenance or load shedding schedules. Consequently, the breakdown in communication and failure to deliver reliable service reinforced consumers’ negative perceptions, damaging Eskom’s reputation and eroding any trust that remained.

Overall, Eskom did not respond to consumers comments on X, as evidenced by the absence of meaningful engagement or efforts to resolve concerns raised on X. The findings suggest that Eskom’s approach to communication was reactive rather than proactive, with the company avoiding difficult conversations and failing to use social media to its full potential as a platform for crisis communication. The findings suggest that Eskom missed critical opportunities to build trust, repair relationships, and strategically position itself during the crisis.

6.3 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

Despite the growing importance of social media in engaging with customers during crises, many organisations fail to use these platforms strategically for crisis communication and engagement, relying instead on them merely to broadcast information (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018). This highlights a general lack of understanding regarding the strategic use of social media to manage crises effectively (Stieglitz *et al*., 2018).

In Eskom's case, its failure to provide a reliable power supply has led to increasing consumer frustration, with many expressing their dissatisfaction and opinions on social media platforms like X (Govender, 2020; African Energy Chamber, 2023; Ayuk, 2023). While Eskom does have a profile on X, the brand did not demonstrate any crisis communication efforts on the platform. The findings further suggest that Eskom lacks a commitment to maintaining consistent engagement with consumers, as reflected by the absence of two-way communication in response to consumer comments.

Eskom has made no effort in engaging in dialogue with consumers which indicates negligence in directing their efforts towards developing or managing relationships with consumers, which compromises any potential crisis management strategy. Consumer comments frequently criticise Eskom for failing to take responsibility for stage 6 load shedding, despite repeated calls for accountability. Consumers have also accused Eskom of trying to shift blame, in the little communication Eskom does share, indicating that consumers opinions of Eskom are low.

The findings further prove that consumers have lost trust in Eskom, questioning the company's credibility, with Eskom's failure to deliver on its core brand values further eroding its relationship with consumers. This study supports the idea that a strong brand identity, built on consistent, transparent, and honest two-way communication, is essential for maintaining a positive corporate brand reputation.

The heuristic value of this study lies in its contribution to existing research on how state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in South Africa use X as a crisis communication tool. It emphasises the importance of using social media strategically to manage a brand's reputation during a crisis. Notably, the findings reveal a new theme: consumers feel Eskom does not view them as important stakeholders, possibly due to its monopoly as the sole electricity provider in the country which may explain Eskom's inadequate communication efforts, suggesting a need for further research into this phenomenon to better understand its implications for crisis management and stakeholder engagement.

6.4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Literature is scarce on the South African state-owned entities' use of social media for crisis communication which posed a challenge for the researcher in understanding this area. Furthermore, with Elon Musk's takeover of X the continuous updates he is making, and the current controversy around the use of X due to Musk's relationship with US former president, Donald Trump, the findings of this study could become quickly outdated, with the future of X being questioned. The use of purposive sampling also introduces potential bias, as the sample selection may reflect the researcher's own preferences, which could influence the overall results, however, the researcher used the immersivity and reflexivity in analysing X content, ensuring the credibility of the data and findings.

6.5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Quantitative sentiment analysis is suggested to further explore consumer perceptions of "Day Zero" and the risk of grid failure by Eskom, the state-owned national power provider. To better understand the relationship between dialogic communication and social media platforms, future studies should explore the use of social media by other South African SOEs and incorporate interviews to capture the experiences and perceptions of both SOEs and stakeholders.

Additionally, further research is recommended to assess how the lack of competitive pressure on Eskom being the sole electricity provider in South Africa, explains the inadequate communication efforts from SOEs.

Finally, SOEs should re-evaluate their strategic use of social media platforms to establish their brand identity online, and manage their relationships with all stakeholders, to manage their corporate brand reputation. Using message intent strategies to address the unique issues of consumers. This would help SOEs communicate authentically and more effectively, resulting in a stronger relationship with consumers and further strengthening the corporate brand reputation.

6.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researcher has explored the opinions of Eskom's crisis communication efforts on X during the ongoing load shedding crisis where it is evident that consumers are dissatisfied and have little value for Eskom. Despite the growing importance of online communication in crisis management, Eskom has primarily used the social media platform, X, to broadcast information, rather than engage in meaningful two-way dialogue. Eskom's one-dimensional approach to communication has prevented the company from building trust and addressing the concerns raised by consumers, seen in the frequent expressions of frustration and calls for accountability from consumers in comments on X. Eskom's lack of transparency and its reliance on blame-shifting further highlights the absence of a cohesive communication strategy during this crisis.

There was a major oversight on Eskom's part, in valuing social media as an effective communication tool, demonstrated in their Eskom's unresponsiveness and ambiguous messaging. This has affected Eskom's reputation negatively, with consumers suggesting that Eskom does not care about their concerns, due to the unresponsive nature of Eskom and the unclear information.

The findings underscore the critical role of social media in managing a corporate brand's reputation during a crisis, when used with the strategic intent to do so. Eskom's case establishes the importance of having a proactive online communication strategy that prioritises stakeholder engagement and transparency. Future research could add to these findings by examining how other state-owned enterprises in South Africa use social media during crises, potentially providing more comprehensive insight into the function of strategic communication in preserving the identity of a brand and public trust.

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ANNEXURE A

Ethical clearance

Data Classification - Business General

THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

BAC

Our Ref: M. 871223
Enquiries: research@iie.ac.za

4 December 2023

Outcome of Ethics Clearance Application for Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership

Student name: Rachel Rousseau
Student number: [redacted]
Brand and campus: IIE Vega

Dear Rachel,

Thank you for submitting the revised ethics clearance application for the study: ***Exploring Eskom's perceived social media and brand management strategies on Twitter during the 2022-2023 load shedding crisis.***

We are pleased to inform you that the Higher Degrees Committee considered your application and granting of **ethics clearance**.

There are four key aspects raised by the committee that requires your reflection and clarification:

1. Alignment of the research questions and objectives with the research methodology.
2. Population and sampling require more clarity and unpacking so that the selected sample is adequately justified.
3. The research procedure needs to be clearly explained.

This is a low-risk study, and you are requested to critically reflect on the feedback provided by the Higher Degrees Committee (attached to this letter) and address the recommendations under the guidance and to the satisfaction of your supervisor. We are confident that the feedback will address the ethical considerations satisfactory and will assist you in navigating the process to successful ethics clearance application. Please note that any changes made to the methodology section or title of the study requires a resubmission to the HDC Committee.

All the best with your research.

[redacted]

Dr WH Engelbrecht
Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies
On behalf of the Higher Degrees Committee

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