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**Crisis Communication Strategies of Ethiopian Airlines Group:**

**A Case Study of Flight 302 Accident**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to the School of Journalism & Communication**

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled “Crisis Communication Strategies of Ethiopian Airlines; a Case Study of Flight 302 Accident” is carried out by Dawit Temesgen under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Ton Veen and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in PR and Strategic Communication. The thesis complies with the regulations of the University and meets the standards with respect to originality and quality, likewise the books, articles and websites, which I have made use of are acknowledged at the respective place in the text.

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## **Abstract**

Crisis communication is an integral aspect of crisis management that determines the success or failure of an organization. Therefore, an organization is required to have the ability to manage its crisis and effectively communicate with stakeholders. The main purpose of this particular study is to assess the crisis communication strategies employed by Ethiopian Airlines Group to manage its crisis after Flight 302 accident.

Crisis communication is an integral aspect of crisis management in the airline industry. Therefore, crisis managers in the industry are required to effectively communicate in order to weather a crisis. The researcher employed Situational Crisis Communication(SCCT), Image Restoration and Renewal theories to analyze the crisis communication strategies employed by the airline after Flight 302 accident. Relevant literature was reviewed to describe crisis communication in the airline industry.

Qualitative research method was used in this study with a case study research design since this research is about specific case in a specific company. An in-depth- interview and document analysis were used to collect data. The researcher selected 11 corporate communication practitioners and the manager of airline for an in-depth interview based on their involvement in the crisis in particular and corporate communication department in general. Of the total 11 interviewees, 4 interviewees are from the Social Media Team, 5 from the Media Relation Team, 1 from the Corporate Event Team and 1 manager.

The researcher coded and categorized the chunk of primary and secondary data and analyzed the data in relation to the research questions to draw meaning. There are three major findings from this study. Firstly, the communication practitioners and manager of the airline do not work in collaboration with the executives of the airline. Secondly, corporate communication practitioners do not receive regular trainings on crisis communication and management. Thirdly, the airline used of mortification, bolstering and compensation strategies to respond to the crisis. Fourthly, the post- crisis phase emerged as an opportunity to the airline for organizational learning. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended that Ethiopian Airlines Group needs to improve its Corporate Communication management, real-time communication and provide comprehensive trainings to its corporate communication practitioners on crisis communication and management.

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## **Acronyms**

IATA = The International Air Transport Association

ICAO= The International Civil Aviation Organization

MAX -737= Narrow-body jet airliner

PR= Public Relations

SCCT= Situational Crisis Communication Theory

# Chapter One

## 1.1 Introduction

On 10 March 2019, Ethiopian Airlines Group Flight 302 was on a regular scheduled flight from Addis Ababa Bole International Airport to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Kenya. The Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft took off at 08:38 local time from Addis Ababa with 149 passengers and 8 crew members on board. Three minutes into the flight, however, the Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft was forced to accelerate beyond its safety limit, making the pilot to report "flight control problems" and request permission to return back to base. Consequently, the pilot was granted permission to return to Bole International Airport. But, the Boeing 737 MAX 8 lost contact and plunged into a field, killing all 157 people on board. The accident became the second devastating tragedy in less than six months that 737 MAX 8 was involved in a fatal incident after Indonesia's Lion Air flight went down on 29 October 2018.

The crash happened to be the deadliest in the airline's history since it began operation as a Pan-African carrier in 1946. The accident has overwhelmingly captured the attention of the whole world and brought questions on the overall safety, fleet planning, future scenarios and decades-long relationship of the airline with the US aircraft manufacturer, Boeing. The attention that the airline was given by its external stakeholders including the media, the victims' family and the general public placed a great amount of pressure on the airline that it had to deal with, while dealing concurrently with the actual crisis.

Crisis communication plays a significant role in transforming a crisis situation by responding quickly, efficiently, and effectively to it (Coombs, 2010). Massive technological advances and trends of the 21st century such as the proliferation of internet and social media revolutionized communication and necessitate the adoption and implementation of state-of-the-art communication strategies for crisis management. Hence, an organization must act to effectively manage a crisis by intertwining its corporate strategy with communication strategies (Ray, 1999), thereby protect its long-term corporate interest and public image.

An airplane crash brings a crisis that challenges the very existence of an airline. According to Pajunen (2006), organizations rely on other groups and individuals for survival. This notion is elaborated in similar literatures such as Massey (2001) whose definition of stakeholders is those groups “on which an organization relies on to maintain its legitimacy for survival” or Chess (2001) who considers stakeholders as those “group without whose support an organization faces a gloomy future.

An example of a crisis considered in this study is Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 8 airplane crash which occurred on 10 March,2019. The airline’s Flight 302 crisis is the focus of this particular study, as it is an important case which offers the researcher an opportunity to view organizational crisis communication in action.

Ethiopian Airlines Group was chosen by the researcher for the reason that due to the magnitude of the accident and the involvement of multiple stakeholders who were impacted directly or indirectly by the crisis, the Flight 302 crisis has impacted the airline on how it handled the crisis. Additionally, the researcher believed that the crisis serves as an organizational learning opportunity not only for the airline, but also for the aviation industry as a whole. Furthermore, the researcher had access to public records supplied by the Corporate Communication department of Ethiopian Airlines and gained access to many of the company’s corporate statements. Not only could this be seen as a limitation and a bias, but also as gaining insight and knowledge from a global airline that would not be feasible to the general public. Therefore, the study assesses the crisis communication strategies employed by the airline to manage its crisis after Flight 302 Accident.

Before assessing the airline’s crisis communication, however, it is important to understand this topic more broadly. Chapter two, Literature Review, discusses and describes what constitutes a crisis, crisis management, crisis communication, current trends in crisis communication and relevant theoretical frameworks.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

According to the International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2018), from the total of 83% global air traffic, only one in 8.7 million falls under a major accident with a fatality rate of 0.09. Accordingly, an individual needs to fly daily for 6,033 years before experiencing an accident with at least one fatality. Despite the low rate of occurrence, airplane crashes represent a particularly acute form of crisis in the industry and affords examples of good and bad practice in crisis management (Henderson, 2003).

Richardson (1994) contends that crisis jeopardizes the strategic objectives of an organization. Similarly, “an airplane crash results in a crisis that threatens the legitimacy of the airline, its image, and its financial situation” (Ray, 1999, p. 9). Thus, the effects of a crisis in the airline industry may go beyond victims and the crisis hit airline and escalate into affecting multiple stakeholders.

The lightning speed of mass communication and technology coupled with the evolution of the airline industry contribute tremendously to the complexity of a crisis in the airline industry (Ray, 1999). With the new ecology of communication and the abundance of real-time information flow, the circulation of information is faster than ever before, which inevitably has changed the way crisis is developed and perceived (Fink, 2002).

Moreover, a cut-throat competition in the global aviation industry and the growing importance of relationship marketing are making businesses to revisit their communication strategies and devise an integrated communication and execution strategy which can potentially serve both in good and bad times.

Despite all the dangers that a crisis inflicts on organizations, organizations can see likelihood of turning crisis into opportunities with a robust strategy and planning (Darling, 1994).

Kash and Darling (1998, p.180) support the view that “strategic management without the inclusion of crisis management is like sustaining life without guarantying life”. Thus, an

organization needs to adopt integrated and strategic crisis communication strategies to maintain smooth interaction with stakeholders (Niemann, 2005).

Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) argue that communication is a pivotal to fairly balance the interest of an organization with stakeholders. However, contrary to the anticipation of a crisis and preparedness in the airline industry, the unpredictable nature of crisis can challenge even the most prepared airlines (Ray,1991, p.1).

Fink (1986, p.63) also maintains that “probably no industry in the world is as completely vulnerable to crises as the airline industry”. Thus, it is certain that if an airline loses its legitimacy and reputation by those it relies up on for existence, it risks its support base and makes its future uncertain(Pajunen,2006). This implies that to maintain reputation and image, an airline needs to strategically communicate and act with its stakeholders by aligning its crisis communication strategy with corporate strategy.

The global trend in crisis communication research reveals that the number of researches in crisis communication has shown progress, but the number of researches in communication strategies and stakeholder consideration is minimal (Coombs, 2010b; Heath, 2010). Similarly, Ethiopian Airlines Group has dealt with 10 different crisis situations in its entire history, but the crisis communication strategies adopted to manage each crisis case have not been formally investigated. Therefore, this particular case study assesses the crisis communication strategies employed by the airline to manage its crisis after Flight 302 accident.

## **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

### **1.3.1 General Objectives**

The general objective of the study is to assess the crisis communication strategies employed by Ethiopian Airlines Group to manage its crisis after Flight 302 accident.

### **1.3.2 Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of the study are to: -

- 1) Assess the crisis preparedness strategies of the airline in protecting its reputation.
- 2) Examine the extent to which the crisis communication strategies are aligned with the corporate strategies.
- 3) Analyze the crisis communication strategies employed through the crisis phases to maintain corporate reputation and brand.
- 4) Evaluate stakeholders' engagement strategies during the crisis and the organizational learning in the post-crisis phase.

## **1.4. Research Questions**

The overall objective of the study is to examine how Ethiopian Airline Group managed its crisis after Flight 302 accident. In doing so, the researcher tailors the study to the below research questions.

- Q1:** How well did Ethiopian Airlines prepare for the crisis in terms of communication strategy?
- Q2:** What communication strategies did Ethiopian Airlines employ to manage stakeholders' engagement during the crisis?
- Q3:** How did Ethiopian Airlines optimize crisis communication strategy to maintain its reputation and brand?
- Q4:** What crisis communication lessons did the airline take from the crisis to maintain preparedness and turn crises into opportunities?

## **1.5. Significance of the Study**

As there are little or no study conducted in crisis communication and management in the airline industry in Ethiopia, this study may serve as a foundation for further studies in crisis communication and management. The study would serve as a guiding material for airlines and other businesses alike to emulate crisis communication and management strategies, thereby develop preparedness and resilience to mitigate damages that a crisis can potentially inflict on its image and reputation. Generally, the study would be a reference for PR and Communication experts and companies in strategic communication.

## **1.6. Scope of the Study**

In general, the focus of this study is to explore and analyze the crisis communications strategy of Ethiopian Airlines Group; a case of Flight 302 accident. The researcher uses purposive sampling and gathers primary data through one-to-one in-depth interview. Out of the 17 corporate communication practitioners of the airline, 11 practitioners and the corporate communications manager are selected for interview based on their involvement in Flight ET302 crisis communication and management and their experience in the corporate communication department in general. To provide multiple perspectives on the case and reach valid conclusions, the researcher collects secondary data from the airline's corporate Website and Facebook page, which are confined to corporate statements issued to address external stakeholders from 10 March, 2019 to 14 May, 2019.

As the airline used similar statements on Facebook and Twitter pages, data from Twitter are not considered for the study. Additionally, the airline primarily used its Facebook page to create engagements with its external stakeholders with subsequent statements. Therefore, the researcher gathered all corporate statements from the Facebook page. The researcher also collected exclusive interviews from 5 international media for analysis. The international media are selected from the airline's media relation manual based on the number of news stories they produced from 10 March, 2019 to 14 May, 2019.

## **1.7. Limitations of the Study**

Subjectivity is one of the common limitations in conducting a qualitative research. However, the researcher reduced it using varied data sources for analyzing the contents. The researcher gathered data from multiple sources including an in-depth interview with 11 corporate communication practitioners of the airline and statements form corporate Facebook page, Website, Corporate Crisis Communication Manual and 5 international TV stations.

Due to the minimal number of private and state-owned airlines in Ethiopia, the number of researches conducted on crisis management and communication in the context of the airline industry is low. Hence, the researcher faced difficulty in accessing local reference materials inaccessible and that has decontextualized the study. The researcher experienced difficulty in collecting data from the management of the airline and external stakeholders including the victims' families, the aircraft manufacturer and ministries, as the crisis bears multiple pending lawsuit cases. Hence, the data collection methods are limited to an in-depth interview and document analysis. The researcher believes that more result could have been obtained if different external stakeholders of the airline were involved in the study.

The complexity of a crisis in the airline industry was evident by a variety of situations which created barrier in the data collection. For example, there are different crisis terminologies in the industry and the complexity has resulted in the interviewees repeatedly asking more clarification on the terminologies and that interrupted the interview process.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter reviews literatures that are fundamental to the organizational crisis communication field by giving a synopsis of how the field of crisis has evolved over time due to multiple factors. The chapter thematically reviews crisis management and related concepts which are inextricably linked with crisis communication, thereby provides a good foundation for the exploration of this particular study. The review then progresses to the organizational crisis communication concept which is what this research hinges on and how it is evolved from just through the traditional media to the inclusion of social media as part of the crisis communication strategy. The review then finishes off by looking at theoretical framework of the study.

#### 2.1. Strategic Communication

According to Griffin (1997), communication is available in every situation and it encompasses both verbal and non-verbal interactions. Identified goals and perception are elements that make communication strategic (Paul, 2011). Therefore, in strategic communication, message and contents are designed to be communicated with audiences and position an organization's communication goal with structural goal (Paul, 2011).

The two school of thoughts in Strategic Communication are:

- **Transmission-Based (Linear Communication)** – a communication system which focuses on the transmitter and the message (Shannon & Weaver, 1957; Lasswell, 1948).
- **Dialogue-Based Model**- a more complex communication system which considers the "receiver" and meaning construction (Paul, 2011).

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected through a new ecology of communication, strategic communication plays a pivotal role in delivering messages to key audiences (Israelsson, 2013). Hallgren and Ljung(2005) argue that circular approach to communication which includes

feedback and adaptation is what makes communication an art. Hence, in the age of stakeholder management, responsible organizations capitalize on a dialogue-based strategic communication, which corresponds to the concept of crisis communication.

Regarding the strategic approach to communication in corporate governance, communication scholars emphasize on the role of communication in defining corporate strategy, the role of communication in interpreting organizational context and the role of communication in creating symmetric relationship with stakeholders.

Cornelissen (2008) states that communication activities announce the contents of company strategy and important corporate decisions to key stakeholders. In the case of external stakeholders, strategic communication is essential to shape a single and clear company position in the minds of its stakeholders as well as build a robust reputation.

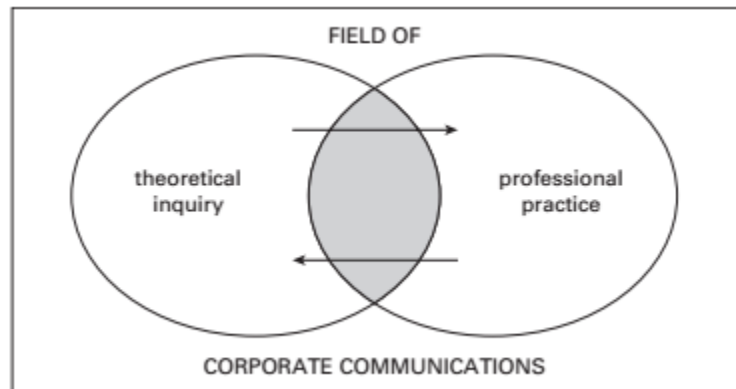
Communication in interpreting organizational context- the role of communication in boundary spanning between an organization and its environment (White, 2011). The boundary spanning role of communication enables corporate communication to interpret environment in which an organization operates.

Communication in creating symmetric relationship with stakeholders- the role implies building bridges between an organization and its stakeholders and fostering long- term relationship.

### 2.1.1. Corporate Communication System

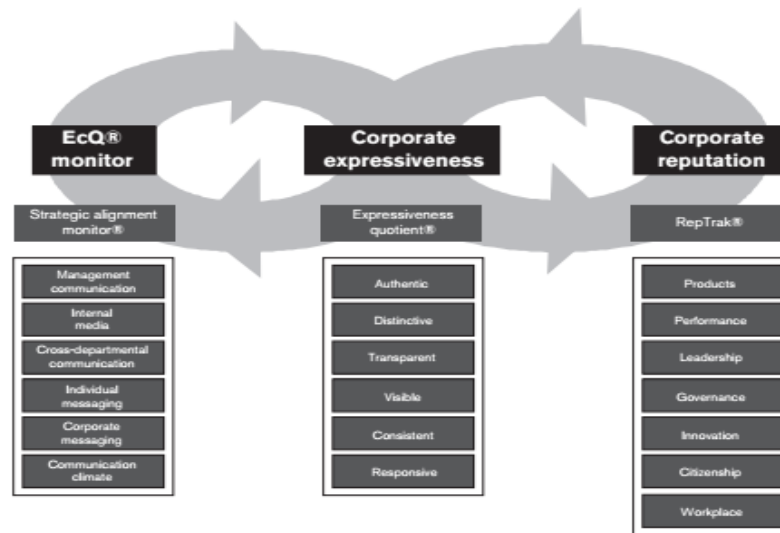
In today's era of stakeholder management, corporate communications is inseparable from corporate and business unit levels (Cornelissen,2004). Corporate Communication serves as a strategic tool by which an organization secures its competitive advantage. Cornelissen (2004) also contends that corporate communication is not just about managing communication resources and programs, but is integrally linked to corporate objectives with long-standing input and output. Thus, with an integrated perspective, communication practitioners need to maintain the alignment of communication strategies with corporate strategies, by participating in the strategy formulation processes (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

Communication practitioners alleviate uncertainty, complexity and instability in the real world with the intersection of theory and practice (Cornelissen, 2004).



**Figure 1** : Intersection of Theory and Practice in Corporate Communications;Adopted from Cornelissen(2004)

The coherent approach to corporate communication is also emphasized by Van Riel & Fombrun (2007) who argue that a holistic approach to communication empowers corporate communications and strategically position it within the management framework. Corporate communication system creates a reputational capital. Therefore, communication managers and practitioners need to approach communication inclusively from stakeholder perspective instead of seeing communication in terms of markets and publics (Cornelissen, 2004).



**Figure 2:** Coherent Corporate Communications System; Adopted from Van Riel & Fombrun (2007, p.28)

## 2.2. Crisis

The word crisis is derived from the Greek word ‘Krisis’, which is translated as a “a moment of decision and highlights on the historical turning points where human choices can make fundamental differences in the future (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). The definition of crisis indicates the approaches as to how crisis is understood and correlated with issue, brand equity and risk (Coombs & Fombrun, 2010).

Crisis is any unexpected situation that poses threats on the priority goals of an organization and compels decision making within in a restricted response time (Herman, as cited in Adebayo, 2017). Any unplanned event that causes a substantial damage or death of employees, customers, public, business operations, environment and public image is a crisis (Clark, Inkash & Darling, 1998). Fink (1986, p.15) defines crisis as “unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending-either one with the distinct possibility of highly undesirable outcome or one with a distant possibility of highly desirable or extremely positive outcome.”

Benoit (1997) states that crisis can only threaten the reputation of an organization if the accused bears a responsibility for the event and stakeholders determine on its offensiveness. Hence, crisis is viewed as the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and impacts the organizations performance (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Accordingly, stakeholders' perception of an event is central to crisis and determines whether an organization is in crisis or not. Walski (1989) also concurs that a crisis is a major occurrence that results in unfavorable outcomes which strikes an organization, industry, publics, products, services or good name.

Omnipotent media, financial means and other tools manipulate the global public with artificial reality and increase the complexity of crisis with multiple forms (Farazmand, 2014). Despite the differing perspectives of scholars on crisis and crisis management, organizations are in accord on knowledge and competencies for preparedness or recognize the fact that “no organization is immune to crisis in the world” (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Thus, the wide-ranging perspectives on crisis highlight on the importance of crisis communication for an effective crisis management.

In order to avoid confusion on the terms and accompanying concepts that give rise to misinterpretation of crisis, the researcher tries to describe the below allied terms based on the thematic areas of the research and scope, which emphasizes on organizational crisis.

### **2.2.1. Issue and Issue Management**

Coombs and Holladay (2010) state that issue is “a problem ready for resolution and typically involves policy discussion”. Hainsworth and Meng (as cited in Regester & Larkin, 2008, p.44) define issue as:

A consequence of some action taken, or proposed to be taken by one or more parties which may result in private negotiation and adjustment, civil or criminal litigation, or it can become a matter of public policy through legislative or regulatory action.

Issue management entails functions that strategically flourish to reduce friction and strengthen the bond between an organization and their publics in the public policy arena (Heath ,2005). Finding a balanced resolution between the expectation of stakeholders and the interest of an organization is crucial (Regester & Larkin, 2005).

According to Coombs and Holladay (2010) issue management and crisis management are reciprocally linked in a way that issues can create a crisis and vice versa.

### **2.2.2. Risk and Risk Management**

Risk is a term that is frequently used as a substitute for crisis. However, risk carries a different meaning. Risk represents a potential to pose danger or loss (Coombs & Holladay,2007) and requires organizations to apply risk management to reduce potential threats. To reap the benefit that risk management offers, organizations identify and communicate potential threats (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Therefore, it can be concluded that risk communication and crisis communication are non-identical with risk communication basically underscoring information delivery to inform public about impending risks and corresponding measures (Regester&Larkin,2008). Crisis communication, on the other hand, is defined as “the dialogue between the organization and its public sector to, during, and after the negative occurrence” (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p.9).

### **2.2.3. Disaster and Disaster Management**

According to Coombs and Holladay (2007), disaster is wider in scope and involves the coordination of different agencies. Disaster differs from crisis that it creates disruption on communities and institutions. Disaster management needs external engagement that involves communities or a country (Jacques,2007). Thus, it is can be argued that irrespective of their peculiarities, risk communication, issue, disaster and reputation management are highly interconnected areas of Public Relation (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

### **2.3. Crisis Management**

In order to understand the crisis communication which this research rests up on, the researcher believes that crisis management needs to be elaborated initially.

Organizations need to understand the role of effective crisis management in shaping the perception of stakeholders and building reputation. Sapriel (2003) states that organizational crises are regularly non-event related which cause management problems.

This idea is also illustrated by Heath (2010), who claims that bad business management which can be caused by individual, corporate or government wrongdoings highly damages the existence of an organization than single events. Crisis management entails the cautious development of strategies and proactive reaction that ensures normal business by controlling crisis from inflicting harm on the organization (Seeger& Sellnow, 2013).

Crisis management navigates threats and establishes a solid foundation to transform an organization into a brighter future (Tafoya, 2013), and the management of a crisis falls under two processes. The first step is a step where organizations foster stakeholder engagement and prevent occurrence and the second step is minimizing harms that crisis inflicts on an organization and its stakeholders (Darling, 1994). Therefore, the implementation of strategies either avoids or alters the impacts of a crisis (Stocker, 1997).

Coombs (as cited in Gebeyehu, 2018) outlines four interdependent elements of crisis management. These elements are prevention, preparation, response and revision. The prevention phase suggests all the necessary actions that need to be taken to prevent crisis from happening. The creation of plans, crisis communication system and spokesperson delegation fall under the preparation stage.

Under the prevention phase, risks and indicators that are assumed to escalate into crisis need to be identified and appropriate measures need to be taken to reverse the escalation. It can be concluded that aligning crisis management functions with corporate management system with

ongoing risk and issue assessment, sound and tested processes and trainings is crucially important in crisis management.

Under the response phase, organizations practically put action plans into the preparation stage and finally organizations recover and evaluate the overall crisis life-cycle.

Crisis managers pursue staged approach to crisis to integrate plans with crisis communication needs (Seeger&Sellnow,2013). Thus, the most prominent models namely the three-stage model by Coombs and Fink's four-stage model are discussed below.

Coombs (as cited in Bloch, 2013) divides crisis into three macro stages. These stages are the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages.

### **2.3.1. Pre-Crisis Stage**

This is a stage where an organization normally carries out its activities while dealing with recognizable and unrecognizable threats. An organization assumes the possibility of a crisis and the level of threats.

The development of a crisis management plan, the formation of a crisis management team and the provision of spokesperson trainings are included in this stage.

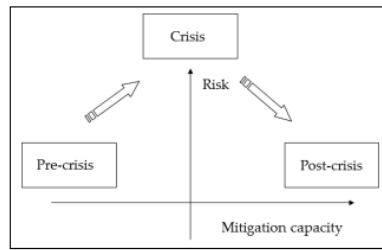
Another important element of the pre-crisis stage is the preparation of pre-crisis messages that can be utilized during actual crisis with minor tweaks. Horsley and Barker (as cited in Adebayo, 2017) argue that during the pre- crisis stage, an organization needs to disseminate information to the members of the press and stakeholders to maintain its relationship and make stakeholders proactively respond during crisis. Communication is a bridge that builds a positive relationship between an organization and its stakeholders and enhances capacity to navigate through challenges during crisis times. To that effect, detecting signals from available information sources, identifying risks and conducting precautionary monitoring are essential before a crisis breaks out.

### **2.3.2. Crisis Stage**

The crisis stage begins with a trigger event and with an actual occurrence of a crisis. This stage entails the actions that can be taken based on the crisis preparation plan. The level crisis preparedness of an organization helps it in developing an integrated crisis response (Coombs,2007), and respond via the preferred media channels during actual crisis besides the pre-identified communication channels in its pre-crisis stage(Argenti,2002). During the crisis stage, an organization needs to inform the public of the crisis and the pre-emptive actions planned to avoid occurrence of a crisis in the future instead of promoting its reputation and image (Sturges,1994). Thus, crisis responses at this stage are designed to prevent damages to victims and protect an organization from reputational damage.

### **2.3.3. Post-Crisis Stage**

At this stage, an organization evaluates the overall situation from the pre-crisis stage to the crisis stage and assess the measures taken to avert crisis in the future. At this stage, the crisis communication strategies are devised to communicate the public, mainly media, employees and customers with positive and recovery messages. Post-crisis management is enormously significant for organizational learning (Bloch,2013). Thus, crisis managers and crisis management team need to extensively analyze and assess the overall life-cycle of a crisis. The below graph demonstrates a cyclical nature of crisis with two variables with a three-stage crisis model. The variables are risk and mitigation capacity.



**Figure 3:** Three stage crisis development model;Adopted from Bloch(2013)

As illustrated above, the mitigation capacity of an organization decreases during the pre-crisis stage in the face of potential crisis. Risk becomes higher when an organization loses capacity to mitigate triggering events before a crisis and vice versa (Bloch, 2013). Seeger and Sellnow (2013) state that the three- stage model is the most prominent model implemented by crisis managers.

The second approach to crisis management is developed by Fink (1986) and divides crisis stages into four. These stages are:

**The Prodromal Stage-**according to Fink (1986), the prodromal stage is considered as a pre-crisis stage where an organization experiences warnings. The anticipation and understanding of crisis alerts crisis managers for the acute crisis.

**Acute Crisis Stage-** this is the shortest phase with high level of uncertainty and intensity in the wake of an actual crisis. At this stage, an organization communicates with the public to gain control over the crisis.

**Chronic Crisis Stage-**During this stage, an organization recovers from a crisis and analyses the overall management of a crisis. An organization is assumed to resolve a crisis after the acute stage (Seeger& Sellnow,2013). The chronic stage may last for years or decades (Fink, 1986), and an organization can protect a crisis from lingering indefinitely with a strong crisis management plan.

**The Crisis Resolution Stage-** an organization translates the turning point emerged in the prodromal stage into an opportunity. As soon as the prodrome is identified, crisis managers need to envision the resolution stage shortly.

### **2.3.4. Features of the Three-Stage and Four-Stage Model of Crisis**

The researcher examines the crisis based on Coomb's three-stage model in view of the fact that the three-stage model offers a simplistic analysis of crisis. However, Fink's four-stage model has expendable and lengthy phases which can be incorporated together. During the prodromal stage, Fink (1986) argues that, crisis managers are acquainted with the probability of a crisis. However, Seeger and Sellnow (2013) assert the opposite that pre-crisis stage can only be recognized after the occurrence of a crisis. The three-stage model by Coombs offers a simplified approach to the analysis of crisis integrates acute and chronic stages of a crisis.

The other rationale behind the selection of the three-stage model over the four-stage model is that Fink's model entails crisis elements that emerge into indefinitely elongated stage with pending issues even after the recovery phases of chronic and resolution stages. Coomb's model, conversely, reaches organizational learning relatively quickly with a comprehensive evaluation of the crisis management.

## **2.4. Crisis Communication**

Coombs and Holladay (2010) state the vulnerability of every organization to crisis and puts the role of crisis communication as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information that serve in the management of a crisis. Corporate communication helps an organization in decision making and strategic communication when something goes wrong (Doorley & Garcia, 2007). Challenges associated with crisis communication make crisis normative and the conditions may trigger to the extent of damaging the reputation and image of an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Communication is linked with crisis management and determines the overall outcome of a crisis management (Sapriel, 2003). However, an organization's ability to

manage a crisis is determined less by the severity of the actual crisis it faces, but by the timeliness and quality of its crisis responses (Doorley & Garcia, 2007, p.327).

This claim lends credence to support the notion that information and persuasion are the fundamental elements that make communication rhetoric (Heath, Toth & Waymer, 2009), as information and persuasion highlight on the strategic use of communication in achieving major crisis response objectives. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) suggest strategic approach to communication in crisis management which focuses on relationship building and safeguarding an organization from harm. Therefore, open and accurate communication helps an organization to sustain its long-term corporate interest and public image (Ray, 1999).

#### **2.4.1. Crisis Response Strategy**

Crisis response is believed to be the most researched aspect in the crisis communication that intrigues scholars to investigate on the role of crisis communication in creating the desired effect on stakeholders and eventually bring positive results.

“Delay in responding to crisis can be perceived not just an indifference, but as arrogance, even an evasion that conforms dishonesty” (Doorley & Garcia, 2007), p.331). The authors argue that routine corporate events can normally proceed with normal communication methods, but in times of crisis, routine communication trends lead to negative outcomes. Crisis response strategies target stakeholders with carefully designed messages which are tailored to alleviate image, reputational and financial damages. Thus, corporate communication professionals need to anticipate likely outcomes of untimely responses in the wake of a crisis (Doorley & Garcia, 2007).

Instructing information, adjusting information and reputational repair are interrelated objectives behind formulating a strategic crisis response (Sturges, 1994). The first objective of a crisis response strategy is to instruct information to stakeholders and ensure safety. The second objective of a strategic crisis response is adjusting information, which basically addresses

stakeholders with messages of sympathy and reassurance and update them on measures taken to avert the reoccurrence of crisis. Finally, crisis response strategies are designed to minimize damages a crisis poses on the reputation of an organization (Struges, 1994).

## **2.4.2. Communication with Media in Crisis Situations**

During crisis situations, media are “primary channels to those who determine reputation and a media strategy is a fundamental component of wider crisis communication strategy” (Griffin, 2014, p.214). Thus, communication plays a pivotal role in shaping stakeholders perception and safeguarding image during a crisis (Ray, 1999). An organization should compile background information with photograph, diagrams, number of employees, year of operation, business description, name of key executives and safety record and practices. Therefore, an organization needs to develop relevant information to help members of the press develop accurate stories (Regester& Larkin,2008). In order to fill the information void in the after math of a crisis, Regester and Larkin (2008) suggest the below.

- Press center- in the aftermath of a crisis, an organization needs to give a press conference and avoid misinformation. All relevant procedures including a press conference hall with two entrances, visual materials, fact sheet, refreshments and security need to be properly arranged.

Regester and Larkin (2008) also suggest that a press conference on a crisis should be given by the company’s most senior executive.

### **2.4.2.1. Dealing with Television Interviews**

An organization needs to train its spokespeople who get messages across with a focus on three main points. People need to be addressed first to be followed by damage to the environment or property and financial consequences (Regester &Larkin (2008). Spokespeople never speculate the cause, but need to announce the time to establish on the cause of an accident, usually after investigation. As blame brings negative consequences, spokespeople are not advised to blame

any part for the cause (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Furthermore, spokespeople should commend parties involved in the rescue operations (Regester &Larkin,2008).

#### **2.4.2.2. Coping with Telephone Calls**

In order to handle incoming calls from media and relatives of employees, an organization needs to dedicate a telephone response room and train staff from different departments. Preparation of background facts and figures about the crisis is essential (Regester &Larkin ,2008).

#### **2.4.2.3. Responding Calls from Relatives**

Answering calls from relatives is one of the most complex aspects of crisis response and failure to sympathetically address queries ignites the interest of relatives to approach media and resort to complaints, which brings with it another PR headache (Regester &Larkin, 2008).

#### **2.4.2.4. The News Release**

An organization needs to develop and release official updates on the overall handling of an accident and messages that contain the feelings of the management team. News releases should be developed frequently with consistent messages and released through the crisis period (Regester &Larkin, 2008).

### **2.4.3. Crisis Communication in the Digital Age**

“With control over corporate reputation, brand and messaging shifting from senior executives to their stakeholders, corporations must evolve their overall business strategy to place an increased focus on the communication function” (Argenti & Barnes, 2009, p.22). Danger and opportunity

share common ground in the digital world (Argenti&Barnes,2009), forcing crisis-prone organizations to involve in the world of modern business.

The variables that catalyze crises are gaining power with a rapid multiplication in the face of factors including stakeholders influence, an increasing global market place, fluctuating economy, and above all, the emergence of digital transformation platforms. Ford (2011) states that the development of social media has brought with it a new ecology of communication and it facilitates the flows of real-time information which creates a significant impact on how crisis emerges and perceived. The sense of urgency associated with a crisis has become a commonplace due to the proliferation of technologies that make information quickly accessible (Fink, 2002).

Argenti and Barnes (2009) state that an organization needs to integrate digital communication into its overall operation during non-crisis situations and protect itself from uncontrollable crisis which harms its brand.

**2.4.3.1. Monitoring Influential Digital Channels**-organizations need to understand where their target audiences communicate and rigorously monitor them online to identify potential threats and control the threats before they grow into full-blown crisis.

**2.4.3.2. Embracing Transparency as Communication's Guiding Light**-an organization need to use platforms including website, corporate blog, and official twitter account to keep its audiences updated regularly regarding the company's domain.

**2.4.3.3. Taking Advantage of SEO and SEM** –organizations need to consider paid searches in order to get connected with stakeholders and address the crisis situation head on.

**2.4.3.4. Identifying Affected Audiences and Customizing Communication**-stakeholders' vulnerability to a crisis varies. Therefore, companies need to address stakeholders based on their consumption habit.

**2.4.3.5. Going Out on a Limb-**contrary to the traditional crisis response strategies, digital platforms facilitate an opportunity for executives to manage their responsibility and risk thereby leverage digital crisis communication to save their organization.

Regarding the new trend in the business climate (IATA,2016) states three trends which led to the evolution.

**2.4.3.6. Connectivity-**With 1/3 of the world population globally using social media channels, coupled with the exponentially rising number of new accounts, communication approaches and the exchange of information take a paradigm shift.

**2.4.3.7. Mobility-** Internet-enabled smartphones and internet connectivity brought the trend.

**2.4.3.8. Streaming Video-** Besides significantly helping the development of citizen journalism, video technologies have come in handy for media houses to break news without a production crew.

Business executives are alert now than any time in the past and look for communicators to strategically disseminate their messages to their audience and new markets with new technologies (Cambie & Ooi, 2009). Thus, it can be argued that a two-way dialogue which facilitates a proactive and real-time engagement with public and stakeholder communication is the order of the day (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015). Generally, “Social media impacts speed, engagement, control of the message, interactivity, authenticity, boundaries, visibility and transparency and crisis facilitation and triggers” (Ford, 2011, p. 18), and organization need to capitalize on it during crisis times.

#### **2.4.3.9. Using Website**

To avoid the risk of public interpretations towards a crisis as well as monitor the opinion and actions of activists, an organization needs to use its website and communicate directly with its stakeholders. A company also needs to consider live webcast “Virtual Press Conference” where questions are emailed to a conference chairperson and real time responses are given.

#### **2.4.4. Crisis Communication Theories**

Different crisis communication theories offer different strategies on the planning and implementation of a crisis communication. Seeger& Sellnow (2013) claim that messages and meaning construction are central to crisis communication theories.

According to the Journal of Public Relation Review and Public Relations (2006) the theories that are applied in the crisis communication are: Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Issue and Crisis Management Theory, Image Restoration Theory, Apology Theory, Attribution Theory, Contingency Theory, Organizational Theory, Excellence Theory, Diffusion and Innovation Theory, Self- Disclosure Theory, Chaos Theory, Commodity Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Post-modern Theory and Co-orientation Theory.

##### **2.4.4.1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory frames crisis with pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis (Coombs& Holladay, 2010). The underlying idea behind the SCCT is that an organization should strategically respond to a crisis based on how its public attributes responsibility. Hence, crisis response strategies should align with the goal of the organization and nature of a crisis (Coombs &Holladay, 2010).

The selection of crisis communication strategy is determined by the level of crisis responsibility of an organization. Coombs (as cited in Jensen, 2014) states that to clearly identify reputational threats, prior identification of a crisis needs to be carried out. Coombs (2007) distinguishes between three degrees of reputational threat, namely mild, moderate and severe with three categories of crisis segmented by the level of responsibility.

<i>Level of likely attributed organizational responsibility</i>	<i>Disaster/crisis cluster type</i>	<i>Disaster/crisis subtypes</i>
Low responsibility	Victim cluster	Natural disasters Rumors Workplace violence Malevolence toward the organization
Moderate responsibility	Accidental cluster	Challenges Technical-error accidents Technical-error product harm
High responsibility	Preventable cluster	Human-error accidents Human-error product harm Organizational misdeeds

**Table 1.** SCCT/Disaster/Crisis Types; Adopted from Coombs & Holladay (2010)

As the above table illustrates, victim’s crisis constitutes low responsibility, as stakeholders assume an organization to be a victim of a crisis. Accident cluster assumes moderate attribution of responsibility, while the preventable crisis constitutes a strong attribution of crisis. Thus, stakeholders’ perception can be shaped by the crisis history and prior reputation of an organization. If an organization has a similar crisis history of the past, stakeholders mostly develop the tendency to attribute responsibility to the organization. As a result, the perception of stakeholders makes it harder for an organization to execute a crisis management strategy during actual crisis times.

#### **2.4.4.1.1. Response Strategies of the SCCT**

According to the SCCT, once the crisis type and the reputational threats have been identified, an organization will proceed with the below response strategies.

<i>Response strategy type</i>	<i>Response strategy subtypes</i>
Denial strategy	Attack the accuser Deny disaster/crisis situation exists Scapegoat
Diminishment strategy	Provide excuses for the situation Provide justifications for the situation
Rebuilding strategy	Compensate the victims Offer apology/accept responsibility
Bolstering strategy	Remind stakeholders of past good deeds Ingratiation Claim victim status

**Table 2.** SCCT Response Strategy Types; Adopted from Coombs & Holladay (2010)

When using denial strategy, an organization tries to disassociate itself from a crisis. Whereas, with a diminishing strategy, an organization tries to control damages that a crisis poses on it by providing excuses. The rebuilding strategy helps an organization to recover its image and protect its reputation by taking on responsibilities. Implementing a bolstering Strategy can help an organization to take advantage of its past performance and reputation to keep its image intact.

Coombs (2007) states the importance of balancing the level of crisis response with crisis responsibility and reputational threat.

<i>Situation type</i>	<i>Situation subtype</i>	<i>Organizational history type</i>	<i>Recommended strategy</i>
Accident cluster		No previous disaster/crisis history No unfavorable organizational reputation	Use diminishment strategies
		Previous disaster/crisis history Unfavorable organizational reputation	Use rebuilding strategies
	Challenge	Challenge is unwarranted	Use denial strategies
		Challenge is perceived to be warranted by stakeholders	Use rebuilding strategies Take corrective action
Victim cluster		Previous disaster/crisis history Unfavorable organizational reputation	Use diminishment strategies
	Rumor		Use denial strategies
Preventable cluster			Use rebuilding strategies

**Table 3.** SCCT Response Strategy Recommendations; Adopted from Coombs & Holladay (2010)

#### **2.4.4.2. Image Restoration Theory (Repair Theory)**

Benoit's image restoration theory (as cited in Swart,2010) focuses on messages that an organization develops to restore its image. The theory places great emphasis on the post-crisis strategies designed to restore organizational image.

The main shortcomings of the theory include the lack of relationship building with stakeholders and its unsymmetrical features (Dozier, Grunig& Grunig, 2002). Central to the argument is that through two-way symmetrical approach, an organization optimizes the power of PR to facilitate dialogue as well as build, maintain and enhance its relationship and manage conflict. However, Benoit (1997) conversely recommends preventive and restorative approach to crisis responses to maintain the safety of an organization. Emphasizing on the stakeholders' perception and level of responsibility, Benoit (1997) claims that the image of an organization would be preserved provided that its salient stakeholders do not consider it to be responsible.

#### **Typology of Image Restoration Theory**

The Image Restoration Theory focuses on message options that an organization uses when faced with a crisis (Benoit, 1997). Accordingly, Benoit (1997) categories image restoration strategies into five.

##### **Denial**

According to Benoit, the denial approach brings with it two variants. The first approach used to repair image by denying the occurrence of an act or the harm the act inflicts. Another approach that can be used to repair image is blame shifting, an approach in which an organization shifts the responsibility to another organization.

##### **Evasion of Responsibility**

This general image repair strategy comes in different ways(Benoit,1997). An organization justifies its action to prevent other's offensive act from damaging its image or repairs its image

justifying that the lack of information control led to the situation. The third approach tries to repair the image of an organization by claiming that the offensive action happened accidentally. Fourth, an organization claims that the offensive act was performed with the noble intention of bringing positive outcome.

### **Reduce Offensiveness**

The image repair strategy tries to reduce the offensiveness of the act that an organization is accused of doing. This image repair strategy has six variations (Benoit, 1997).

First, in order to offset the negativity linked with the act, an organization may use bolstering to maintain the positive feelings of the audience with the emphasis of positive things they have carried out in the past.

Second, an organization minimizes the volume and extent of the harm by diluting negative feelings of the audience associated with the act.

Third, an organization can employ differentiation by outlining the elements that distinguish the act from offenses of different sorts.

Fourth, an organization puts the act on a positive light with glorification of its positive elements.

Fifth, an organization counter-attacks its accusers to restore its image during crisis.

Sixth, an organization considers compensation to victims to reduce offensiveness.

### **Corrective Action**

Benoit's image restoration strategy suggests corrective action to avoid the reoccurrence of an act.

### **Mortification**

An organization confesses and asks victims' forgiveness to the act. Benoit (1997) suggests that an organization needs to anticipate potential crisis and develop crisis contingency plans before a crisis, understand the nature of the crisis and the pertinent audiences and understand the rhetoric nature of image restoration.

#### **2.4.4.3. Renewal Theory**

Renewal theory uses an approach which emphasizes on organizational renewal to tackle a crisis (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007). There are four major characteristics of renewal theory. The renewal theory highlights on the role of leaders in optimizing renewal. The renewal approach emphasizes on the characteristics of a leader and the way they try to inspire and serve as a bridge in utilizing communication for renewal. According to Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) leaders with an executive presence easily influence the opinion of stakeholders.

The renewal theory is all about providing rapid and natural response to an incident. Renewal Theory differs from other theories in a way that it only encourages progression than repairing image and protecting the reputation of an organization. Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) states that the renewal theory focuses on how the incident can be eliminated with new approaches, instead of justifying the reason for the occurrence of a crisis.

#### **2.4.4.4. Chaos Theory**

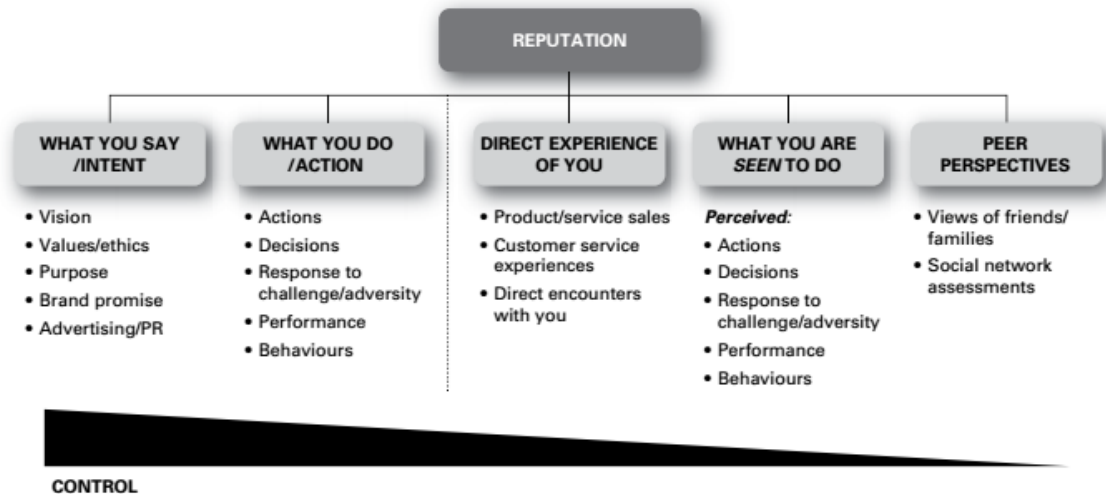
Seeger and Sellnow (2013) contend that organizations become more prone to crisis, provided that their system has interdependence and complexity. Central to Chaos theory is the Butterfly Effect, which highlights on the overarching effects that minor differences can pose on an organization and its crisis. Murphy (1996) states that Chaos theory focuses on unpredictable systems.

Seeger and Sellnow (2013) argue that an organization cannot foresee the outcome of a crisis, but can weather crisis with re-structuring and self-organization. The power of communication has to forms in the Chaos theory (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013). Thus, a communication can help bring

lasting systemic changes and that in turn helps manage crisis by renewing the organization and fostering positive relationship with stakeholders.

## 2.5. Reputation Management

Upholding a good reputation gives an organization enormous benefits and helps it attract new customers, investors as well as improve its financial performance. However, when an organization is faced with a crisis, reputation can easily be at risk (Coombs, 2007). As Doorley & Garcia (2007, p.4) state “just as people develop social capital that helps them build relationship and careers, corporations and other organizations develop reputational capital that helps them build relationship and grow their organization.” Therefore, audience acceptability and legitimacy are the bases of reputation (Griffin, 2014).



**Figure 4:** Reputation Framework; Adopted from Griffin (2014)

As illustrated in the above table, in order to build a good reputation, an organization needs to maintain values, honor promises, make informed decision, uphold ethical standards and principles and meet and exceed performance standards. Unless an organization takes actions geared towards maintaining its reputation, it inevitably risks its reputation that any PR effort cannot suffice to reverse (Griffin, 2014).

Reputation is an intangible asset for companies to capitalize on their competitive advantage and win fierce competitions (Ross, 2008). An organization with a good reputation is likely to employ better candidates for employment, pay less for supplies and enjoy free publicity that is more valuable than advertising (Doorley & Garcia, 2007). This is further affirmed by Anthonissen (2008) who states that a good reputation results in customers giving the company the benefit of the doubt when faced with negative situations. Company history, strategy, identity and reputation are elements that underpin reputational platform in the context of internal and external observers (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Generally, if an organization has to sustain through challenging times, the perception of its stakeholders is of a paramount importance (Doorley & Garcia, 2007), as its stakeholders evaluate its characteristics (Cornelissen, 2004, p.83).

Similarly, to effectively manage reputation, organizational culture and needs to be aligned with corporate image (Cornelissen, 2014). Thus, transforming reputational management to reputational strategy addresses unfavorable situations and restores stakeholders' confidence (Griffin, 2014).

According to Griffin (2014), maintenance, enhancement, protection and utilization are the pillars of reputation strategy.

**Maintenance-** by discharging their responsibilities, organizations accumulate reputational capital, which serves as a shield during crisis.

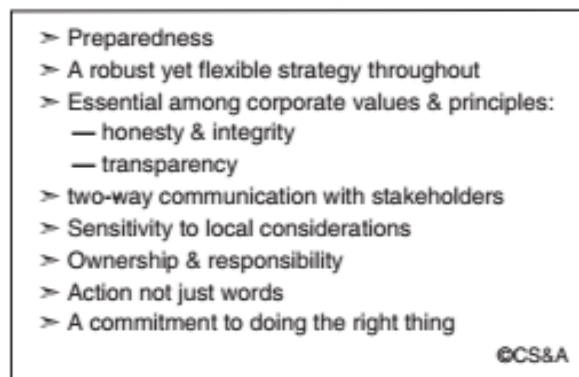
**Enhancement-** Organizations enhance reputation by meeting their objectives, decision changes and new announcements.

**Protection-** with the strategic management of risk, issue and crisis, organizations develop resilience and protect their reputation from harm.

**Utilization-** organizations can capitalize on the value of their reputation to create access, influence and power and achieve better performance in core businesses.

Griffin (2014) states that due to the emergence of citizen journalism and activism backed by the accessibility of information via social networks, organizations face difficulty more than any other time in the past in managing their reputation. As a result, information, revolution, influential micro-constituencies and public trust are factors that contribute to a reputational loss (Ross, 2008). Furthermore, it is argued that reputation management has transformed into a multi-dimensional way with a considerable power of micro trends that help develop rapid response strategies (Kash & Darling, 1995).

With the combination of issue management and reputation management, organizations prevent crisis which threatens their reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). More conclusively, Sapriel (2003) suggests the below graphically stated elements that need to be considered during reputation management process during crisis.

- 
- > Preparedness
  - > A robust yet flexible strategy throughout
  - > Essential among corporate values & principles:
    - honesty & integrity
    - transparency
  - > two-way communication with stakeholders
  - > Sensitivity to local considerations
  - > Ownership & responsibility
  - > Action not just words
  - > A commitment to doing the right thing
- ©CS&A

**Figure 5:** Elements of Reputation Management; Adopted from Sapriel (2003)

Dealing with a crisis is synonymous with dealing with reputational management and companies need to stand firm to utilize opportunities and enhance their image from customers' point of view (Kash & Darling, 1995).

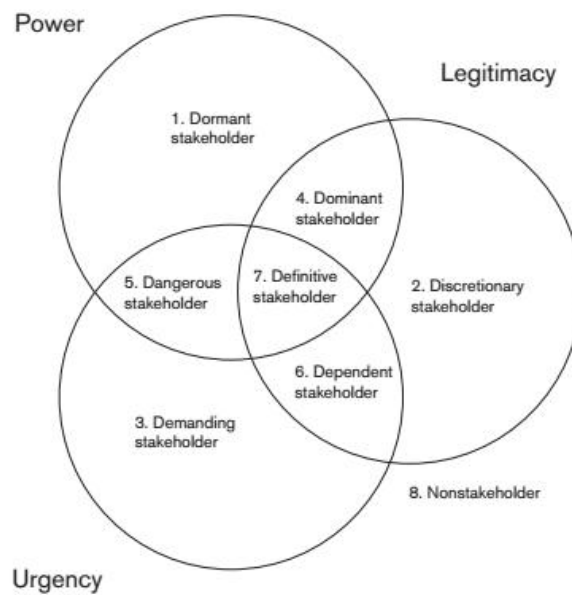
### **2.5.1. Stakeholders Management in Crisis**

When an organization faces crisis, its strongest supporters might develop opposing sentiments and stand against it while those who are against become ardent supporters (Tafoya, 2013).

Therefore, crisis managers need to tactically and strategically work on retaining supporters and addressing sentiments of adversaries.

From system theory standpoint, Richardson and Hinton (2015) argue that Public Relation should pursue an “open system” that ascertains a balanced flow of information between an organization and stakeholders that maintains a mutually beneficial relationship. Employees, customers, investors, government and the public are the major stakeholders for companies (Van Riel & Fombrun,2007). Richardson and Hinton (2015) state “while particular responses may vary, organizations that continue to communicate clearly, carefully, compassionately and accurately with stakeholders usually find those relationships endure during beyond the crisis”.

Organizations segment target groups based on the level of engagement and on issues they communicate. Power, legitimacy and urgency are factors that guide stakeholder segmentation (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, as cited in Van Riel & Fombrun,2007).



**Figure 6.** Stakeholder Identification; adopted from Mitchell, Agle & Wood (as cited in Van Riel & Fombrun,2007)

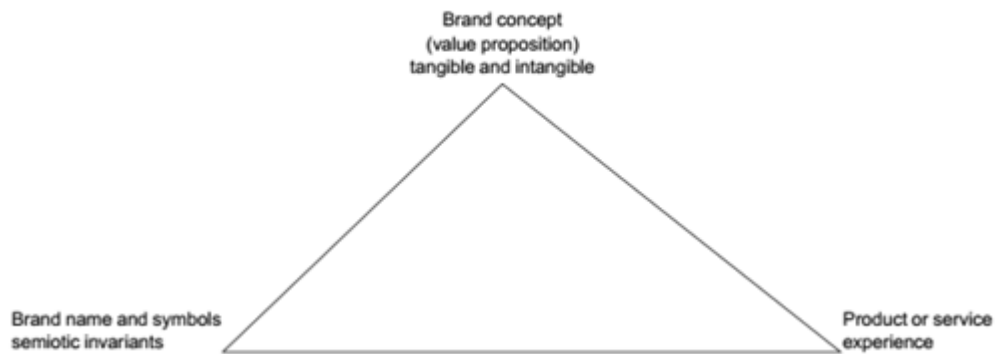
As cited above, the influence of stakeholders on an organization is a major factor that puts them top on the list in the segmentation. The relationship of an organization with stakeholders in relation to factors including norms and values is another aspect that helps an organization in prioritizing one of its stakeholder over the other. Finally, calls to action that originate from stakeholders with high importance and immediate action is a factor that helps in audience segmentation (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, as cited in Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

## **2.5.2. Brand**

Every organization wants to have a brand and that makes branding a strategic issue in all sectors: high-tech, low tech, commodities, utilities, components, services, business-to business (B2B), pharmaceutical laboratories, non-governmental organization (NGO's), and non-profit organization all see a use for branding (Kotler, 2008, p.2)

From a wide spectrum, scholars define brand with varying perspectives. The below are some of the definitions given.

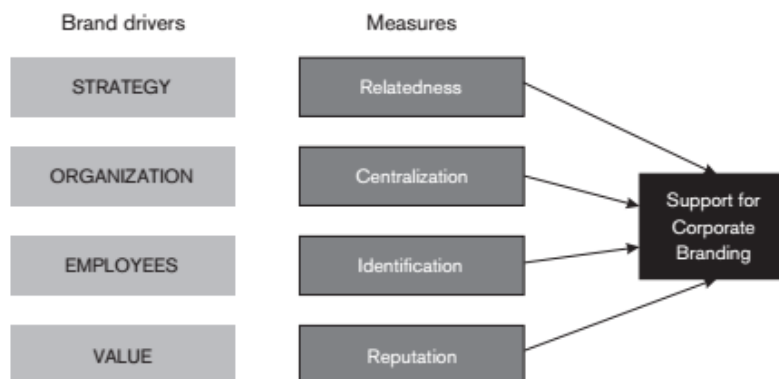
Kotler (2008) claims that all the goodwill that emanates from the positive experiences of clients or prospects with an organization, its products, channels, stores, communication and people basically define the essence of a brand. Brand (as cited in Heding, Knudsen & Bjerrre, 2008) is "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of them which is intended to identify the good or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Keller (2013) describes that a brand is associated with the past experiences of consumers with a product and its marketing programs, in addition to the source of a product which allows them to assign responsibility to a particular manufacturer or distributor.



**Figure 7:** The Brand System; Adopted from Kotler (2008)

A strong corporate brand creates trust between a company and its constituents and enhances its performance (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

Van Riel and Fombrun (2007, p.111) state four key factors that drive business unit managers to use corporate brand in their business unit communications. These factors are strategy, organization, employees and value.



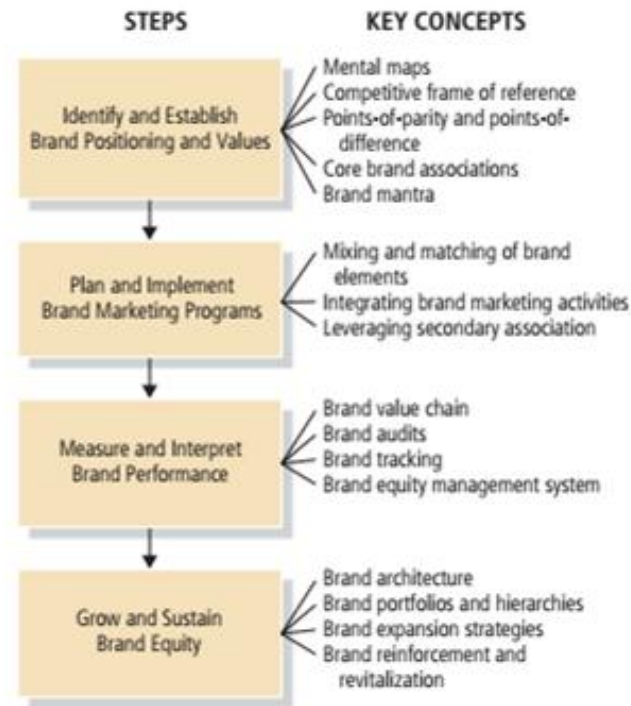
**Figure 8.** Drivers of Corporate Branding; Adopted from Van Riel& Fombrun (2007)

### 2.5.3. Corporate Brand Management

Keller (2013) states that never-ending changes in the marketing arena make brand management challenging. Shifts in consumer behaviors, competitive strategies, government regulation, technological advances and other areas profoundly affect the fortunes of a brand. Effective brand management, thus, requires positive strategies designed to at least maintain, if not actually enhance customer based brand equity.

Putting brand from marketing perspective, Kapferer (2008) claims that owing to the fierceness of competition and imitation, the focus of marketing has transformed from brand capital to consumer capital. Kapferer (2008) states that requirements, shared loyalty, and CRM are the buzz words in the brand management approach, all of which focus on building a lasting relationship through time and post-purchase activities, falling under the umbrella of relationship marketing.

Highlighting on the importance of brand and brand management Keller (2013) argues that in today's complex world more choices are available with less time to decision. Therefore, the ability of a brand in decision making, risk reduction as well as setting expectation is enormous. Therefore, "Strategic brand management involves the design and implementation of marketing program and activities to build, measure and manage brand equity", (Keller ,2013, p.58).



**Figure 9.** Strategic Brand Management Process;Adopted from Keller (2013)

Keller (2008) emphasizes that a strong brand management encompasses proactive strategies tailored to bring about customer-centric brand equity which encounters difficulty over time. Haywood (2005) argues that when customers, employees and investors question the trustworthiness of an organization, the brand of an organization goes down to bottom line of an organization. Brands with less ability to understand and promptly respond to crisis face daunting problems. On the contrary, organizations with the ability to demonstrate credibility and trustworthiness during crisis develop a robust brand equity and corporate image.

## 2.6. Crisis in the Airline Industry

According to Ray (1999, p.9) “Despite the industry’s efforts to reduce factors that lead to accidents, such crises are inevitable because of the complexity of modern technologies, human factors, and the highly interdependent nature of the industry”. Lambert (2019) argues that the

effects of a crisis can reach as far as negatively affecting company's bottom line, which are reputation and sales. Ray (1999) also supports the claim that an aircraft crash threatens the legitimacy, image and financial situations of an organization. If a plane crash involves a loss of life and multiple stakeholders including plane makers and equipment suppliers, its crisis becomes much more complex to manage (Ray (1999)).

Due to the complexity of aircraft accidents, travelers are highly likely to change their perception of the safety of airlines right in the wake of a crisis and hold them responsible for inability and irresponsibility, that in turn, makes crisis management a daunting challenge even for well-prepared airlines. The lightning speed of mass communication is a factor that tremendously contributes to the complexity and visibility of disasters in the airline industry (Ray, 1999). Lambert (2019) advises airlines to develop precautionary measures and adopt emergency response strategies in order to decrease ownership and responsibility of a crisis. Bailey and Bradbury (2018) affirms that "what was once a hypothetical reputational risk has become the new reality for the aviation industry", making crisis response even more challenging with passenger-generated contents facilitated by the ubiquitous communication technologies and social media.

### **2.6.1. Airline Accidents**

Constituting 290 airlines worldwide (82% of global air traffic), IATA (2018) has formulated standards that make an event an accident. Accordingly, a person needs to board an aircraft to fly on a scheduled or charter passenger or cargo service, an aircraft needs to be turbine-powered with a certificated maximum take-off weight of at least 5,700KG sustain a major structural damage exceeding \$1 million or 10% of the aircraft's hull reserve value. Similarly, ICAO (1951), annex 13, Aircraft Accident and Incident Investigation states that an aircraft accident is an occurrence associated with the operation of an aircraft in between boarding and disembarking which involves a fatal and serious injury, structural failure on the aircraft and missing aircraft. Experimental test flights, sabotage, hijacking, terrorism, or direct military action are not considered accidents.

IATA (2017) states that despite the inability of the aviation industry to match the safety performance registered in 2017 fiscal year, 2018 saw a decline in aviation accidents. The 55<sup>th</sup> in-depth edition of the report elaborates that 62 aircraft accidents and 523 fatalities were registered, while 4.3 billion travelers across the world population flew safely on 46.1 million flights in 2018. The below graph illustrates the safety performance.



**Figure 10:** Airline Safety Performance; Adopted from IATA (2018)

## 2.6.2. Types of Airline Accidents

Accidents are classified by the level of damage, extent of injuries and the cost of the damage on the aircraft (ICAO, 2017).

## **Damage**

**Destroyed:** The repair cost of an aircraft exceeds 50% or the aircraft is not repairable.

**Substantial:** damage related to structural strength, performance, or flight characteristics of an aircraft.

**Minor:** Minor incidents that neither destroy nor causes substantial damage.

## **Injury**

**Fatal:** An injury that causes death at the accident scene or a death within a month's time.

**Serious:** An accident that inflicts an injury with 2 to 7 days of hospitalization, the injured sustains bone fracture or injury to an internal organ or a burn covering more than 5 percent of the body.

**Minor:** An accident with 2 to 7 days of hospitalization.

**Major Accident:** is defined as an accident with any of the following three conditions met:

- Destroyed aircraft.
- Multiple fatalities.
- A fatality and an aircraft sustaining substantial damage.

**Fatal Accident:** An accident causing one or more fatalities to occupants.

**Substantial Damage:** An accident in which an aircraft sustains substantial damage.

**Serious Accident:** An accident with a single fatality without substantial damage or at least one serious injury and substantial aircraft damage.

**Minor Accident:** An accident in which the aircraft sustains minor damage.

**Aircraft incident:** Any occurrence other than accidents that affecting the safety of operations.

### **2.6.3. Crisis Communication in the Airline Industry**

According to Ray (1999, p.11), an airline accident brings the below major questions that an airline needs to answer through its communication.

- What issues or factors influence an airline's communication following a major crash?
- How do these issues and factors constrain a crisis organization's efforts in restoring its public image and ultimately resolving the crisis?
- Which communication strategies are the most effective?
- What variables influence the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of communication strategies? How can airlines prepare for managing their communication to the public following a crash?

In the aftermath of a crisis, stakeholders base their perception on the nature of the accident as to whether it arises internally or externally or triggered intentionally or unintentionally. Hence, addressing stakeholders is of paramount importance for crisis managers (Ray, 1999).

## **2.7. Theoretical Framework**

Crisis preparedness, alignment of crisis communication strategies with corporate strategy, stakeholder engagement and organizational learning are the key concepts that play a major role in the study. Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory and Discourse of Renewal are applied for this particular study because each theory emphasizes on an organization's reputation and stakeholders with different approaches as stated below. The Image Restoration Theory and SCCT go hand-in-hand and provide the researcher an opportunity to assess the crisis communication strategies the airline used to safeguard its reputation and image, while the Renewal Discourse provides an opportunity for the researcher to assess the post-crisis communication strategies of the airline from the lens of an optimism.

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

According to the SCCT, stakeholders consider two factors, namely crisis history and prior reputation before formulating their perception of a crisis (Coombs 2010). If an organization has a history and reputation linked with a crisis mismanagement, stakeholders are likely to develop negative perception of it and that eventually affects its reputation. When stakeholders refrain from supporting the action that an organization takes during a crisis, they are likely to resort to disseminating negative messages about an organization, which ultimately harms its reputation (Coombs 2010). Therefore, Situational Crisis Communication Theory will be used in the study, given the importance the theory puts on crisis history and prior reputation which are essential elements of crisis preparedness in the pre-crisis phase.

SCCT has three core elements: (1) the crisis situation, (2) crisis response strategies, and (3) an alignment of actual crisis and crisis response strategies (Coombs 2006). The theory states that the characteristics of a crisis situation determines the effectiveness of communication strategies. Therefore, crisis managers need to apply crisis responses and justify their actions for crisis communication in relation to the actual crisis they deal with (Heath and Coombs, 2006).

SCCT highlights on how stakeholders' perception of a crisis affects crisis responses and how the crisis responses in turn shape the reputation of an organization (Coombs 2007). This implies that the theory has a direct correlation with Attribution Theory, a theory which states that

stakeholders make attributions about the cause of a crisis and set crisis responsibility (Coombs 2007). According to Coombs (2010), the initial step of the theory determines crisis types and level of attributions of crisis responsibility and threats posed by a crisis. The three types include: victim (low crisis responsibility/threat), accident (minimal crisis responsibility/threat), and intentional (strong crisis responsibility/threat). Sympathy and anger are the most important emotions that an organization can apply in its post-crisis communication (Coombs and Holladay 2005).

Thus, it can be argued that stakeholders' attribution of a crisis determines the level of crisis responsibility of an organization and shape their future engagement with an organization. SCCT is relevant to the study, as it is stakeholder - centric theory that highlights on perception of stakeholders during crises, which is one of the essential elements of the study. According to Coombs (2007) SCCT presents a framework for understanding how to protect an organization's reputation. The theory identifies important aspects of the crisis situation and how they influence attributions of responsibility and the reputations held by stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Crisis response strategies are used to repair the image or reputation and reduce negative effects. SCCT lays out messaging strategies and responsibility attributes as a model for crisis communications.

Under the SCCT, the crisis response strategies are Denial, Diminishing, Rebuilding, and Reinforcing (Coombs 2010). Denial strategy proves that an organization has no responsibility for a crisis, whereas diminishing strategies accept that an organization is somewhat responsible but the responsibility is expected to be minimized (Coombs 2010). Rebuilding strategies seek to improve perceptions of the organization through compensation and/or apologies (Coombs 2010). Meanwhile, Reinforcing strategies put an organization in a positive light by praising others (ingratiation) or reminding people of past achievements (bolstering) (Coombs 2010).

### **Image Restoration Theory**

Image Restoration Discourse is one of the prominent paradigms in crisis communication comprising of ideal strategies for organizing and comprehending messages that are designed to manage a crisis. Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) build on the notion that the theory emphasizes on strategic messages that an organization applies to maintain its legitimacy. The

theory is grounded in the fundamental assumptions that provide the foundation for crisis communication. First, corporate communication is considered as a goal-oriented activity and maintaining a favorable reputation is a goal of communication that motivates an organization to take action when it is compromised.

Second, maintaining a positive reputation for the organization is one of the central goals of this communication (Coombs, 2010). Thus, the theory provides a practical framework to assess how effective the airline's crisis communication was in maintaining its corporate image.

Benoit (1997) recommends Image Restoration Strategies owing to three basic crisis aspects. The first element is preparation before the crisis. In the pre-crisis stage, an organization needs to identify and reduce risks that can develop into a crisis. This is synonymous with prevention stage (Coombs, 2010). During the prevention stage, an organization needs to take actions to avoid the reoccurrence of a crisis. This can be attained by avoiding risks completely or reducing the threat of a risk (Coombs, 2010). The second aspect is to identify the nature of the crisis. When a crisis occurs, it is critically important that an organization assesses the nature of a crisis and changes that occur as a result of the crisis to appropriately respond (Benoit, 1997). The third important aspect is the identification of the relevant audiences. An organization is required to identify its salient audiences and address them with tailored message (Benoit, 1997).

The Image Restoration Theory has five broad categories of a crisis response strategy that respond to threats of image in a crisis situation including, Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reduce Offensiveness, Corrective Action and Mortification.

When using Denial, an organization can either use simple denial by claiming that it did not perform the act, or try to shift the blame by stating that others are responsible. In Evasion of Responsibility, an organization argues it was provoked and responded to the act of another, argue defeasibility due to a lack of information or ability, claim the event was an accident, or that it had good intentions. An organization can also aim to reduce the offensiveness of an act through bolstering (highlighting on its good traits), minimization (the act is not as serious as it seems), differentiation (the act is not as offensive as other similar ones), transcendence (there are more important considerations like compensating the victim). When using Corrective Action as an

image repair strategy an organization implements to solve the problem or prevent a repeat of the crisis. Mortification occurs when an organization takes responsibility for the crisis and apologizes.

## **Discourse of Renewal**

While implementing Discourse of Renewal, an organization reframes a crisis by optimizing opportunities that arise following a crisis instead of focusing retrospectively on issues such as blame (Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow, 2007). Enacting a Discourse of Renewal requires leaders to take a prospective outlook that emphasizes on positive changes during post-crisis period (Ulmer et al., 2007). Natural disasters fit the renewal model because they often clear away physical impediments to renewal and create a physical space where renewal can occur. The destruction of infrastructure represents an opportunity for renewal, as an organization can rebuild facilities that embody the organization's response to the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2007).

The Discourse of Renewal has different aspects. The first aspect is that an organization communicates messages that carry core values and beliefs which are palatable for its stakeholders rather than developing responses to protect its corporate image and reputation (Ulmer et al., 2007).

The second aspect of Discourse of Renewal is that an organization motivates its salient stakeholders and highlights on the commitment to rebuild and re-establish itself to a level far greater than it was before its crisis (Seeger and Ulmer, 2002). The third aspect of the discourse emphasizes on optimism with seven opportunities that have the potential to emerge as a result of crisis, including the fact that heroes are born, problems are addressed, change is facilitated, new strategies emerge, people are changed, new competitive advantages appear and early crisis preparation are put in place (Myers and Holusha, 1986).

The fourth aspect is that leaders are critical in a post-crisis discourse and have the opportunity to reframe meaning because they are the ones stakeholders trust in the wake of a crisis (Seeger and Ulmer, 2005). Thus, an organization needs to develop messages that are tailored to reassure its stakeholders of the fruitful future of the organization and their stake in it, while supporting them to make sense out of the crisis.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Methodology**

This Chapter presents the description of the research process and provides information concerning the methods that were applied in conducting this study as well as justifications for the use of the methods. The Chapter also describes the various stages of the research, which includes the selection of participants, the data collection process and the process of data analysis. It also discusses the way validity and reliability were met in the study.

#### **3.1. Research Design**

According to Bertnand and Huges (2005) qualitative research design is a methodology which considers the understanding of the participants through an interpretive approach. The design focuses on the meaning and purpose of a case and studies the fillings, thoughts and motives that are related to the case. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research implements interpretative approach which dictates the study of research problems and establishes meaning that can be associated with social or human problems. Hence, this particular study adopted qualitative research design to provide an in-depth analysis of the crisis. From qualitative research designs, case study is preferred for this research.

According to Yin (2003) a case study is considered when the focus of a study is to answer “how” and “why” questions. The case study method was used in this study because it is well-suited in adequately answering the research questions. Case study design allows researchers to examine a phenomenon in-depth using various kinds of evidence obtained from interviews or analysis of documents and artifacts (Yin, 2003). Accordingly, a case study design is chosen for this study because the research questions which need to be answered after this particular study are questions of “What” and “How” of the crisis communication strategy of Ethiopian Airlines Group in managing its crisis after Flight 302 accident.

The case study approach is instrumental for researches conducted in the practice-based problems where the context of the action and the experience of the actors are paramount (Lee, 1989; Galliers, 1991). As Yin (1994) states case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. Therefore, researchers can explore problems with the case study approach by targeting specific problems (Creswell, 2013).

Walsham (1993) also argues that in the interpretive tradition, a case study approach is a vehicle for a study. Thus, implementing a case study for this particular research enables the researcher to study and understand the crisis communication strategy of Ethiopian Airlines Group in managing its crisis after Flight 302 accident as well as makes the conclusion more palatable and credible in relation to the context of the real life. Another argument for my choice of case study approach is the scope of the research. The study focuses only on the crisis communication strategies of the airline and leads to the use of a single-case study methodology. The researcher, therefore, used the case study design to analyze the crisis communication strategies of the airline and examine the extent to which the strategies contributed towards managing the crisis.

### **3.2. Population and Sampling Technique**

In this study purposive sampling was adopted to this particular study. The rationale for choosing this approach was that the researcher was seeking knowledge about the communication practitioners' opinion regarding the crisis communication strategies and execution of Ethiopian Airlines Group, which the participants would provide by virtue of their experience and involvement in the crisis. According to Patton (2002), purposive sampling is a technique that is widely used in the qualitative study for the identification and selection of information-rich cases. This involves the selection of individuals or groups that are knowledgeable about the subject under study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

In this study, the researcher selected 11 corporate communication practitioners and manager of the airline based on their involvement in the crisis in particular and in the corporate communication department of the airline in general. Of the 11 interviewees, the 5 interviewees are social media practitioners. 4 media relation experts, 1 corporate event expert and one manager of the airline.

### **3.3. Data Collection Tools**

#### **3.3.1. In-depth Interview**

The researcher conducted an in-depth one-to-one interview with 11 corporate communication practitioners and the manager of airline to gather data from the practitioners' point of view and eventually answer the research questions of the study. According to Lambert and Loisel (2007), interviews are instrumental data collection strategies in qualitative research that help to gather information about participants' experiences, views and beliefs concerning a specific research question or phenomenon of interest. Interviewing tends to have greater validity than other methods such as surveys or experiments (Babbie, 2007). With an interview method, meanings can be elaborated in-depth in order to reach consensus between the researcher and participants with regard to what the study seeks to measure, and that in turn enhances the internal validity of the study (Babbie, 2007).

In-depth interviews are a form of qualitative research that give the researcher an opportunity to explore a case in depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). One -to -one interviews are the most common data collection tools in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2002). Keeping this in mind, the researcher decided to collect an in-depth information from the corporate communication practitioners and manager of the airline to provide an n-depth study of the case.

##### **3.3.1.1. Interview Procedure**

The researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the 11 communication practitioners of the airline and the manager to collect data on the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis

communications strategies of the airline. Semi-structured interview is adopted for this study to elicit the interviewee's ideas and opinions on the crisis, as opposed to leading the interviewee toward preconceived choices. The researcher allotted 30 minute for each interview and gathered data through open-ended questions and also raised follow up questions. The interview was conducted face-to- face using voice recorder.

### **3.3.2. Document Analysis**

Bowen (2009, p.27) defines document analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents-both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” that uses of data “to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.” Document is ideal for a study in every case study research (Yin, 2009). Merriam (1988, p 118) points out, “documents of any type can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem.” Hence, the researcher collected official statements related to the Flight 302 crash from the airline's corporate Facebook page, Website and prominent international TV channels. Additionally, to better provide an in-depth and contextualized analysis of the study, the researcher reviewed the crisis communication strategy manual of the airline.

Altogether, 14 official statements from the Facebook page, 9 statements from Website and 7 exclusive interviews from 5 international TV stations namely CNN, BBC, CGTN, NBC and TRT. All statements selected for analysis are crisis responses of the airline from 10 March 2019 to 14 May, 2019(the time frame within which the airline communicated the public to address the crisis). The researcher selected the international TV stations from the airline's media list based on their interest in the crisis and coverage of the issue with in the tie when the airline made crisis responses.

### **3.4. Establishing Trustworthiness**

In order to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the researcher gave a serious consideration to the below four aspects.

#### **3.4.1. Credibility**

In order to ensure the believability and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher focused on the uniformity and richness of the data through the utilization of different sources required to achieve multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). The researcher reviewed and cross-checked data from interview transcripts, official statements from Corporate Facebook Page, Website, International TV stations and Corporate Crisis Communication Manual.

#### **3.4.2. Transferability**

While qualitative studies lack generalizability to other settings (Volpe, 2008), the researcher of this study thoroughly described the context of the research in relation to the prominent theories stated in Review of Related Literature Chapter. In order to make the findings transferable to similar settings and situations, the study provided a holistic and realistic picture of the case thereby enable readers to determine its relevance.

#### **3.4.3. Dependability**

To increase the consistency of the findings, the researcher provided an audit trail by comprehensively describing how the data was collected (Merriam,1998). As recommended by Creswell (2009), the researcher recorded the interviews and made the transcription within 24 hours to ensure that the memory of the interview was still fresh in the researcher's mind thereby enhance the accuracy of the transcription process. The researcher then printed the transcripts and proofread, checked the transcripts for spelling errors and repeatedly listened the recordings. Additionally, the researcher used communicative validation approach and gave the interviewees

an opportunity to review and fact-check the transcribed interviews before the analysis stage (Silverman, 2000). Double-coding approach was also employed to enhance consistency.

#### **3.4.4. Confirmability**

The researcher collected the data from an in-depth interview with 11 corporate communication practitioners of the airline, from corporate Facebook Page, Website and 5 International TV stations and constantly compared the collected data against the literatures in the analysis stage to avoid bias. Additionally, the researcher used audit trail and detailed the process of data collection, data analysis and interpretation to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

### **3.5. Analysis and Interpretation of Data**

To assess the crisis communication strategies employed by Ethiopian Airlines Group in managing its crisis after the Flight 302 accident, the researcher interpreted prominent crisis management theories and models (Askehave & Norlyk, 2006). The researcher analyzed the data with a qualitative content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis is a prevalent approach to the qualitative analysis of documents and includes searching-out themes from materials (Bryman, 2004). The goal of qualitative content analysis is to systematically describe data in relation to the research questions (Schreial, 2012). Qualitative content analysis method gives researchers three benefits. First, qualitative content analysis gives an opportunity to analyze data with identifiable procedures in relation to research questions. Second, it gives researchers to flexibly shape the coding framework and categorize data. Third, qualitative content analysis gives researchers an opportunity to minimize a chunk of data by paying attention to the research questions (Schreier, 2020).

The data analysis of the study occurred in two phases. First, the interview transcripts and corporate crisis responses of the airline from printed documents were repeatedly reviewed to identify the recurring themes (Merriam, 1998). The researcher emphasized on the phrases and quotes from the interviews and documents. The researcher then categorized the phrases and quotes, coded the data in relation to the research questions. Second, the researcher cross-checked

the coded data against the original data from the interview transcripts and documents. Finally, the researchers compiled the categorized data the conducted the analysis.

SCCT, Image Restoration and Renewal Theories were applied as a framework in the content analysis in order to assess the crisis communication strategies employed by the airline manage its crisis data 302 Accident.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results and Discussion**

This chapter elaborates the findings of the data collected from primary and secondary sources. The researcher divided the findings into two different research methods and research areas. The content analysis provides the general overview over crisis communication, while the in-depth interviews elucidate crisis preparedness, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication strategies, communication challenges in crisis and crisis lessons from the communication practitioners' perspective.

The researcher collected statements released on the airline's Website, Facebook page and collected media coverage from five international media namely CNN, BBC, CGTN, NBC and TRT. Altogether, 14 official statements from the corporate Facebook page, 9 statements from website, 7 television interviews from five international media and one-on-one in-depth interviews with 11 corporate communication practitioners and manager of the airline are gathered to comprehensively analyze the crisis. Additionally, to better provide an in-depth and contextualized analysis of the study, the researcher evaluated the crisis communication manual of the airline. All the contents gathered for analysis are the crisis responses and actions of the airline from 10 March 2019 to 14 May, 2019.

The analysis is structured according to the research questions and dominant crisis communication theories discussed in chapter two of the study.

#### **4.1. Crisis Preparedness**

The crisis preparedness assesses the crisis readiness of the airline before the Flight 302 accident, which answers research question one.

#### **4.1.1. Crisis History**

According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, crisis history determines the crisis responses (Coombs, 2006) and historical similarity of a crisis in an organization increases reputational damage. One of the interviewees stated: Ethiopian Airlines experienced ten minor incident and accidents right from its inception and “the company in general and corporate communications in particular” considers the industry’s vulnerability to a crisis and do everything based on our crisis communication strategy.” Most of the interviewees stated time sensitiveness, the relevance of stakeholder engagement and two-way communication as critical elements. The findings of the data show that the crisis history of the airline is one of the factors that contributed to the management of the crisis, which ensures the practicality of the claim that, “no organization is immune to crisis in the world.” (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

#### **4.1.1.2. Ethiopian Airlines 302**

On 10 March 2019, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 en-route to Kenya plunged into a field and killed all 157 people on board. The regular scheduled international passenger flight which took off at 08:38 local time from Bole International Airport and turned into a full tragedy 6 minutes after takeoff, with aviation analyst, Alex Macheras, dubbing the accident on TRT as “the most fatal crash in the space of less than six months” (TRT, 2019). CNN (2019), on the other hand, highlighted that more than 149 passengers and 8 crew members were on board the flight, “almost people from all over the globe on the extremely popular route”.

#### **4.1.2. Reputation of the Airlines before the Crisis**

Ethiopian Airlines Group operates the industry’s modern and youngest fleet and this fact is also reflected in the provision of trainings to pilots with modern simulators, the deployment of

experienced crew and rigorous maintenance of its passenger and cargo aircraft. In an exclusive interview with CNN, Tewolde GebreMariam, Group CEO of the airline stated that the airline circulated AD (Air Worthiness Directives), briefed the pilots on the flight control system and offered trainings on the 737 MAX 8 planes.

While addressing the public in the first press conference in the aftermath of the flight, the airline's CEO, Tewolde GebreMariam said, "The total flying time of the first Officer is 350 hours and the pilot in command was a senior pilot with commendable performance who has accumulated 8,100 hours". Richard Quest (2019) of CNN also mentioned right after the accident that "the airline itself is one of the leading airlines of the world and Tewolde GebreMariam who is the CEO of the airline has done a superb job".

As discussed in chapter two of the study, a company with a good prior reputation is backed by the benefit of a doubt from customers and use its reputational capital as a shield during its crisis (Anthonissen, 2008). Therefore, the alignment of organizational culture with corporate image helps an organization in managing its reputation (Cornelissen, 2014).

Accordingly, it can be argued that the reputation of the airline did not intensify the harm the crisis had on the airline.

#### **4.1.3. Adequacy of Crisis Management**

Crisis management entails the cautious development of strategies and proactive reactions which control a crisis from escalation and inflicting harm on the organization (Seeger& Sellnow, 2013). Adopted from Star Alliance crisis communication guidelines, the crisis communication manual of the airline (2017, section 17) clearly states the policies and procedures for the coordination of communication with in Ethiopia and with all stakeholders including the media, code share partners, the public in emergency situations. The crisis communication manual (2017, section 19) comprises of sample statements and action checklists that guide different parties of the airline. As most interviewees stated, the internal organizational culture and the difficulty of

getting accurate information regarding the Flight 302 accident, which at times affected their responsiveness in communicating with the public.

The majority of the interviewees also stated the lack of subsequent trainings on crisis management and communication as well as issue and risk assessment, which goes against the aligning of crisis management functions with corporate management system with ongoing risk and issue assessment, sound and tested processes and trainings (Sapriel, 2003). Whereas, in the preparation stage, as most interviewees responded, the airline created plans based on the crisis communication system and assigned the CEO as a spokesperson.

Regarding the process of information provision on Flight 302 accident, most of the interviewees stated that all relevant information on the accident and its effect and the measures taken and were not available immediately after the crisis, which best explains why the airline released its initial public information after the news of the accident was officially released by the prime minister's office. It can be argued that with the new ecology of communication and citizen journalism, an organization's promptness to real-time information delivery determines the way its crisis develops and perceived by its stakeholders (Fink, 2002).

## **4.2. Crisis Communication Strategies to Stakeholder Management**

The second research question asked if the communication strategy employed by the airline served in addressing stakeholders during the crisis time.

### **4.2.1. Initial Response to Flight 302 Accident**

**10 March, 2019, 11:00AM**

Ethiopian Airlines issued its first statement 2:16 minutes after the accident occurred. The initial statement confirms that, "Ethiopian Airlines regrets to confirm that its flight ET 302/10 March in schedule service from Addis Ababa to Nairobi was involved in an accident today around Bishoftu, Debre Zeit". The initial release sought to instruct information by officially disclosing the fact that the flight encountered the stated problem. The airline refrained from establishing the

cause of the accident stating that, “at this time search and rescue operations are in progress, we have no confirmed information about survivors or any possible causality”. The airline issued four statements on March 10 with all statements including airport emergency hotlines and public information call centers.

Basically, the airline employed mortification strategy and asked forgiveness to the accident by following up with rebuilding strategy: by deploying staff to the accident scene and assist the emergency services. Therefore, it can be argued that According to the SCCT and Image Restoration Theories, the airline implemented the recommended strategies in its initial response which is aligned with its reputation and the accident.

The second release of the airline issued on the same day, confirms the following:

The group CEO who is at the accident scene right now regrets to confirm that there are no survivors. He expresses his profound sympathy and condolences to the families and loved ones of passengers and crew who lost their lives in this tragic accident”. The release implies a full disclose by stating the fact on the severity of the accident that there are no survivors.

In the second statement, the airline used mortification strategy by stating an apology. Therefore, the response strategy employed can be perceived as an ideal strategy in relation to Benoit’s (1997) Image Restoration Theory. At a press conference held on the day, the Group CEO stated that “Today is the saddest and tragic day for all of us and our sincere sympathy to all of our passengers, to the families of our crew, friends and relatives.”

The press conference served as an opportunity to instruct information on the crisis and disclose facts related to the crisis, the victims and measures the way forward. It is also evident that the Group CEO’s utilized mortification strategy in its statements.

Ethiopian Airlines also employed bolstering strategy by emphasizing on the experience and performance of the captain and the first officer and the aircraft's latest maintenance checks," the captain in command, Yared Mulugeta, who is Ethiopian and half Kenyan, is a senior pilot who has been working for Ethiopian Airlines since July 2010 with a commendable flying experience and record. The first officer who is Ahmed Nur Mohamod Nur flew more than 200 hours."

The Group CEO stated that the airline has established an emergency center in Nairobi and at the premise of the airport enterprise in Ethiopian and in different countries of the world. This implies to the applicability of Offensiveness Reduction Strategy by announcing to the public that the airline does whatever possible to help victims' families.

In an exclusive interview with CGTN, the CEO also stated that, "we have more than 300 daily flights, it is a very safe airline and the operation is running very smoothly, this is isolated and unfortunate accident, we will continue to do that." This indicates that the airline used offensive reduction strategy by applying differentiation and touched briefly on a bolstering strategy by mentioning the safety record of the airline.

Ethiopian Airlines issued the complete list of passengers on board the flight.

The corporate releases issued on 10 March, 2019 sought to instruct information with more focus on expressing sympathy and condolences to the victim's families, friends and the general public and the efforts the airline was making to help victims' families in collaboration with its stakeholders. Thus, the crisis responses of the airline share communality in using the mortification strategy which was tailored to ask forgiveness and state an apology for the tragedy.

On 11 March, 2019, the airline issued a statement that it grounded its max 737 planes. It continues: "Following the Tragic accident of ET 302/10 March B-737-8 MAX (ET-AVJ), Ethiopian Airlines has decided to ground all B-737-8 MAX fleet effective yesterday March 10, 2019 until further notice."

The statement is an implicit expression of sympathy and concern for the lives lost which fits to mortification and corrective action strategies which maintains customers' trust. Later on the

same day, a statement of the airline announced the recovery of the Digital Flight Data Recorder (DFDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) of ET302. The statement indicates that the airline is instructing information to update the public on the progresses.

Five days after the accident, the airline released a statement informing the public that its employees and artists held a memorial ceremony in honor of the victims. This indicates that mortification strategy is applied in the response.

On March 21, another statement of the airline posted on website debunks the news report published by the New York Times under the title “Ethiopian Airlines Had a Max 8 Simulator, but Pilot on Doomed Flight Didn’t Receive Training.”

The statement confirms that,”the pilots are well briefed on the Emergency Airworthiness Directive issued by the FAA following the Lion Air accident. The content of the airworthiness directive has also been well incorporated in all pilot training manuals, operational procedures and working manuals.” As the statement indicates, the airline used offensiveness reduction strategy to repair its image by refuting the report with facts.

Furthermore, the statement urges “all concerned to refrain from reports what it referred, “uninformed, incorrect, irresponsible and misleading statements”, while the cause was under investigation. As the statement vividly implies, the airline applied offensiveness reduction strategy to keep its image intact.

Similarly, a day after its statement on the New York Times reports, the airline issued another statement which states, “all the allegations in the article are false defamations without any evidence”, and “it is meant to divert attention from the global grounding of the B-737 MAX airplanes”, the statement further states that ”Ethiopian airlines operates with one of the highest global standards of quality and safety performances certified by all National, Regional and International regulators.”. This statement indicates that the airline used bolstering strategy by highlighting on its safety record.

A statement issued by the CEO, under the title "Ethiopian Airlines is The New Spirit of Africa" opens the paragraph with sympathetic sentences and addresses the families of the passengers and the crew who lost their lives in the accident and mentions its long-standing partnership with the aircraft manufacturer, Boeing. It continues:

"Let me be clear: Ethiopian Airlines believes in Boeing. They have been a partner of ours for many years", and we were the second nation in the world (after Japan) to take delivery of the 787 Dreamliner. "This statement released by the CEO depicts the power of a leader in optimizing renewal strategy in crisis management. Mortification strategy is also reflected in the statement by showing sympathy and concern to the victims.

On April 4, 2019, the airline released the preliminary investigation report which confirms that, "we would like to appreciate the hard work of the investigation team", and it continues:

The preliminary report clearly showed that the Ethiopian Airlines pilots who were commanding Flight ET302/10 March have followed Boeing's recommended and FAA's approved emergency procedures to handle the most difficult emergency situation created on the airplane. Despite their hard work and full compliance with the emergency procedures, it was very unfortunate that they could not recover the airplane from the persistence of nose diving. As the investigation continues with more detailed analysis, as usual we will continue with our full cooperation with the investigation team.

Further in the statement, the CEO is quoted as saying, "All of us at Ethiopian Airlines are still going through deep mourning for the loss of our loved ones. Meanwhile, we are very proud of our pilots' compliances."

As the statement indicates the airline used bolstering strategy by acknowledging the efforts of the investigation team and stating the compliance of pilots. Offensives reduction strategy is applied by stating sympathy and concern.

In an interview with CNBC news on May 14, 2019, the CEO said, "we strongly believe that the entire flight control system needs to be reviewed "and he firmly stated that, "if we fly it, we will be the last one to fly it again". As stated in the statement, the airline is trying to restore its image by stating the fault from its accusers' side. Hence, it can be argued that evasion of responsibility is explicitly employed.

### **4.3. Crisis Communication Strategies to Reputation and Brand Management**

According to Coombs and Holladay (2007), during crisis times, companies have to respond promptly in order to maintain relationship with stakeholders and control the harms a crisis can inflict on reputation and legitimacy. Based on this notion, the below analysis looks at the crisis communication strategy of the airline employed by the airline in managing its stakeholders and safeguarding the reputation of the airline, which answers research question two and three of the study.

Power, legitimacy and urgency are factors that guide stakeholder segmentation (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, as cited in Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). In case of Ethiopian Airlines, the emotional trauma of the victims' families, the airline's communication geared towards addressing the general traveling public and the inevitably high level of media attention highlighted on the victim's families, the media and the general public as salient stakeholders which influenced the communication of the airline in the aftermath of the crisis.

Shortly after the news of the Flight 302 accident, the airline changed the profile of its website and social media pages with a dark look and less graphical pictures, which demonstrates how the magnitude of the accident hurt the airline community and its sympathy to the victim's families and the general public.

Almost in all of its corporate statements, Ethiopian Airlines communicated repeatedly that it felt sympathy and grief towards victims, which supports the claim that an organization with a clear, careful, compassionate and accurate communication with stakeholders build a robust and enduring relationship with stakeholders (Richardson & Hinton, 2015).

From the data collected from the in-depth interview, it is evident that the airline undertook various activities on its own and in collaboration with concerned government entities. Most of the interviewees mentioned that the airline established teams from different departments and dispatched them to the crash site to collect the belongings of the victims and body remains as well as provide support to the victims' families visiting the site. Additionally, the airline established temporary emergency centers in different parts of the world to give aid to the victim's families and arranged free air ticket and hotel accommodation for victims' families to and from Ethiopia while they traveled to visit the crash site.

The airline had also delegated employees to facilitate and memorials and demonstrate its concern to the families of the victim's. According to Wester (2009), stakeholders have the power to determine the responsibility of an organization to a crisis. In aftermath of the crisis, the airline communicated that the day to day operation of its business is going smoothly, a communication which consolidates its legitimacy.

Media are salient stakeholders for the airline in its crisis communication, as the media have the power to shape stakeholders' attitude (Coombs, 2007). According to Coombs (2007) the extent of a harm that a crisis poses on the reputation of an organization is determined heavily on crisis responsibility, crisis response and the level of the crisis itself.

The above claim makes it evident that the airline bears more responsibility to communicate with its stakeholders regarding Flight 302 accident. Hence, apology, sympathy and compensation are of paramount importance in the crisis communication. In case of Ethiopia Airlines, while an investigation still continues with detailed analysis, the preliminary investigation report released on its corporate website clearly states that the airline's pilots who commanded the flight followed all Boeng's recommended and FAA approved emergency procedures. Therefore, it can be argued

that the preliminary report categorizes the airline as a victim cluster, making its stakeholders perceive that the airline has a low responsibility to the accident.

Ethiopian Airlines released a total of 14 statements from 10 March, 2019 to 4 May, 2019 and made a number of exclusive interviews on major international news channels, which helped it pursue an open system that ascertains a balanced flow of information on a mutually beneficial manner (Richardson& Hinton, 2015).

#### **4.4. Organizational Learning After Crisis**

The post-crisis stage begins once the crisis and its effects have ended and an organization learns from the crisis in order to apply the knowledge acquired to future crisis preparation. Each interviewee explained that the crisis that the airline faced after the 302 Accident allowed the airline to prepare for future crisis. The majority of the interviewees highlighted on the knowledge they received on crisis preparedness, crisis response, stakeholder engagement and reputation management.

Regarding the pre-crisis stage, the stage characterized by the proactive steps taken as crisis preparation of an organization, the majority of the interviewees raised the issue of training on crisis communication and management and revealed that the airline lacked one of its critical elements for preparedness by overlooking the provision of trainings to corporate communication practitioners. The interviewees stressed on the need for a comprehensive training on crisis communication in order to prepare the airline for future crisis, which it inevitably faces somewhere down the line.

Concerning the crisis stage, a phase characterized by the crisis event and its effect until the crisis ends, the interviewees, all interviewees agreed that the response strategies employed during the crisis followed the crisis communication guideline of the airline adopted from Star Alliance based on the provision of factual, quick, open and transparent information to external stakeholders. Generally, they highlighted on the effectiveness of the crisis communication management employed by the airline.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that that the airline had a consistent approach to its crisis communication in the crisis cycle by ensuring that all the staff members and executives recruited to handle the crisis are on the same page with daily briefings and clear activity checklists, developing and releasing subsequent corporate statements, assigning the CEO as a spokesperson right from the beginning to the end and maintaining communication with stakeholders and managing their requests. However, the challenge, as most of the interviewees responded, was the inability to be in control of the situation right in the aftermath of the crisis, due to the severity of the accident and the lack of accurate information.

Generally, the findings revealed that the post-crisis evaluation of the crisis has created an opportunity for corporate communication practitioners to reconsider crisis communication and management as an integral aspect of corporate communication functions. The post-crisis phase has also become a venue for an organizational learning with the majority of lessons taken on the importance of crisis preparedness for crisis management.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

This chapter aims to review the problem of the research and concludes the findings with regard to the objectives of the study. Recommendation that address the research questions are included in the chapter. Suggestion for future research is also included at the end of the chapter.

#### **5.1. Summary of Major Findings**

Following the analysis undertaken by the researcher, the below findings were identified:

- During the pre-crisis phase, crisis history, prior reputation and adequacy of crisis management were seen as critical elements in ET Flight 302 crisis management.

The findings of the data reveal that the crisis history of the airline is one of the factors that contributed to the management of the crisis, which ensures the practicality of the claim that, “no organization is immune to crisis in the world.” (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

- The analysis also indicates that the airline’s reputation on safety standards helped cushion the impact of the crisis. However, the analysis also shows that the lack of subsequent trainings on crisis management and communication has in turn affected the time sensitiveness, the relevance of stakeholder engagement and two-way communication.

- Mortification and bolstering strategies are the dominant strategies applied in the crisis communication which were meant to show attention to the needs of the victims and family members who lost loved ones during the accident. The airline tried to maintain a good relationship and prevent the crisis from further escalation.
- The findings of the study also indicated that the airline's crisis communication and execution of its crisis communication strategies was tailored to express sympathy and compensate the victim's families. The airline tried to ensure that the company's reputation and brand stays strong and avoids irreversible damage.
- The data analysis indicates that the post-crisis evaluation of the crisis has created an opportunity for corporate communication practitioners to reconsider crisis communication and management as an integral aspect of corporate communication functions. Crisis preparedness, crisis response, stakeholder engagement and reputation management are important aspects in the organizational learning phase of the crisis.

## **5.2. Conclusion**

Crisis communication is an integral aspect of Public Relations which determines the failure or success of an organization. An organization can restore its image and keep its reputation intact with a stakeholder-centric crisis communication strategy which can be manifested in crisis preparedness, efficiency of communication and accountability, among others.

Specially, in the crisis-prone industry like the airline industry which is susceptible to public scrutiny and media interest, the implementation of a strategic and integrated crisis communication in the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis phases fosters relationships with stakeholders and provides a shield against crisis.

To examine how Ethiopian Airlines Group managed its crisis after Flight 302 accident with its communication strategies, the researcher analyzed its primary and secondary data and came to the conclusion that contrary to the new corporate communication management approach, communication practitioners of the airline have engagements to a greater extent in communication programs and activities and their contribution to the formulation of corporate strategies is nominal, which in turn affects the alignment of communication strategies with corporate strategy.

The other missing element witnessed after the data analysis is that there was a lack of regular and comprehensive trainings to the corporate communication professionals on crisis communication strategies, especially on how to communicate with external stakeholders and preserve the airline during a crisis.

During the first 24 hours after the accident, the airline followed similar steps in its communication and action, such as giving press conference on the accident and releasing subsequent statements. This is due to the fact that the airline has a crisis communication strategy manual available that spring into action when needed. However, immediately after the crisis on 10 March 2019, the initial response of the airline experienced delay which could have hampered the image of the airline in the face of the most critical time that it was under public scrutiny.

After analyzing all the primary and secondary data, the researcher came to the conclusion that despite the crisis communication mismanagement in the pre-crisis and initial stage of the crisis, the airline employed suggested crisis communication strategies based on the theoretical framework of the study which highlights on Situational Crisis Communication, Image Restoration and Renewal Theories, engaged with its external stakeholders in a clear, consistent and responsible manner and safeguarded its reputation and brand.

### **5.3. Recommendations**

- Corporate communications is a strategic tool by which an organization maintains its competitive advantage. Therefore, the airline needs to strategically position corporate communication in its management framework thereby safeguard its reputation through a strategic and integrated communication management.
- In order to create powerful brand ambassadors in troubled times, the airline needs to be in a proactive state of crisis preparedness by revisiting its crisis communication strategy and execution.
- It would significantly help the airline to digitize its communication strategies and advance real-time communication with stakeholders in the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis periods and manage the perception of stakeholders and the general public.
- Media strategy is a fundamental component of crisis communication strategy. Therefore, it would significantly help the airline to develop a comprehensive and up to date media strategy which is intertwined with its crisis communication strategies manual.
- Being in the age of stakeholder management, the airline needs to tactically and strategically segment its stakeholders based on the level of their engagement, manage their perception and build an enduring relationship.

- The airline needs to develop organizational learning strategies by evaluating the overall crisis communication management of the Flight 302 Accident during the crisis cycle and align the lessons with its organizational culture.

#### **5.4. Areas for Future Research**

The study explored and analyzed the Crisis Communications Strategy of Ethiopian Airlines Group; a Case of Flight 302 accident and confines itself to the strategies employed by the airline from the external stakeholders' perspective. However, the proneness of the industry to crisis situations coupled with the new ecology of communication necessitates the need to conduct state-of-the-art researches on crisis communication and management designed to sustain the indispensable contribution of the industry to socio-economic development.

An additional suggestion following this study is the need for supplementary researches on stakeholder-centric crisis communication and management in the information-driven economy which involves the internationalization of crisis communication and digitization.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Information**

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for master's degree in PR and Strategic Communication at the Addis Ababa University, I have to conduct a research under the title Crisis Communication Strategies of Ethiopian Airlines; a Case Study of Flight 302 Accident. The study aims at assessing the crisis communication strategies and execution of the airline in managing its crisis after Flight 302 accident. By taking part in the study and share your perspective, you will help me understand the crisis communication practice of the airline.

A maximum of 30 minutes is allotted for each interview and the interview will be recorder for transcription.

The major thematic areas of the research are crisis communication strategy, reputation management and stakeholder engagement during the crisis.

- How well did Ethiopian Airlines prepare for the crisis in terms of communication strategy?
- What communication strategies did Ethiopian Airlines employ to manage the stakeholder engagement during the crisis?

- How did Ethiopian Airlines optimize crisis communication strategy to maintain its reputation?
- What crisis communication lessons did the airline take from the crisis to maintain preparedness and turn crises into opportunities in the future?

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

### **Crisis Communication Strategies of Ethiopian Airlines; a Case Study of Flight 302 Accident**

#### **Pre-Crisis Period /Preparation**

1/Did Ethiopian Airlines have crisis communication strategy before the crisis?

2/Do corporate communications practitioners and the manager work with company executives in developing the overall corporate strategy?

#### **Strategy Implementation**

What communication strategies were used during the crisis stages?

#### **Media Relation**

What media were used in the management of the crisis?

#### **Crisis Communication and Management**

What communication challenges were there in managing the crisis?

How do you evaluate the crisis communication implemented by Ethiopian Airlines on Flight 302 Accident?

### **Stakeholder Engagement**

How did you engage with your external stakeholders?

### **Post-Crisis Period**

What are the communication takeaways from the crisis?

## **Appendix C: Sources**

### **1. Sources for Content Analysis**

#### **1.1 Standards and Recommended Practices**

Ethiopian Airlines Emergency Response Manual Section 17 (2017). Ethiopia.

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[https://www.emsa.europa.eu/retro/Docs/marine\\_casualties/annex\\_13.pdf](https://www.emsa.europa.eu/retro/Docs/marine_casualties/annex_13.pdf)

## **1.2 Social Media Posts**

### **Accident Bulletin No. 1**

**March 10, 2019 at 11:00am**

Accident to Ethiopian Airlines flight number ET 302

Ethiopian Airlines regrets to confirm that its flight ET 302/10 March in schedule service from Addis Ababa to Nairobi was involved in an accident today around Bishoftu (Debre Zeit). The aircraft B-737-800MAX with registration number ET- AVJ took off at 08:38 am local time from Addis Ababa, Bole International Airport and lost contact at 08:44am.

At this time search and rescue operations are in progress and we have no confirmed information about survivors or any possible casualties. Ethiopian Airlines staff will be sent to the accident scene and will do everything possible to assist the emergency services.

It is believed that there were 149 passengers and 8 crew onboard the flight but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest for the flight. Ethiopian Airlines is establishing a passenger information center and telephone number will be available shortly for family or friends of those who may have been on flight ET 302/10 March.

Ethiopian Airlines will release further information as soon as it is available. Updated information will also be on Ethiopian Airlines website at [www.ethiopianairlines.com](http://www.ethiopianairlines.com)

### **Below are phone numbers for information**

Airport emergency hotline

(00251)115 17 87 33

(00251)115 17 47 35

For all information necessary

(00251)11 5 17 89 45

(00251)11 5 17 89 87

(00251)11 5 17 82 31

(00251)11 5 17 85 58

Media Call Centre: 00 44 1623 786071

Public Information Call Centre: 00 603 8686 0111.

Updates its cover photo and made it black!



**Accident Bulletin no. 2**

**March 10, 2019 at 01:46 PM**

Ethiopian Airlines Group CEO deeply regrets the fatal accident involved on ET 302 /March 10 on a scheduled flight from Addis Ababa to Nairobi.

The group CEO who is at the accident scene right now regrets to confirm that there are no survivors.

He expresses his profound sympathy and condolences to the families and loved ones of passengers and crew who lost their lives in this tragic accident.



### **Accident Bulletin no. 3**

**Issued on March 10, 2019 at 05:02 PM**

#### **Ethiopian Airlines Group press conference on flight ET 302 accident**

In a press conference held at Ethiopian Airlines Headquarters this afternoon regarding Ethiopian Airlines plane that crashed today 10 March 2019 shortly after takeoff en route to Nairobi from Addis Ababa, Group CEO of Ethiopian Airlines who had traveled to the scene of the crash remarked, "It is too early to speculate the cause of the accident and further investigation will be carried out to find out the cause of the accident in collaboration with all stakeholders including the aircraft manufacturer Boeing, Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority and other international entities to maintain the international standard and information will be provided once the cause is identified. Ethiopian Airlines will provide all the necessary support to the families of the victims." A senior captain named Yared Getachew with a cumulative flight hour of more than 8000 and with a commendable performance was commanding the flight along with first officer Ahmed Nur Mohammad Nur who had a flight hour of 200.149 passengers and 8 crew members were on board the flight. The victims were of 35 Nationalities. The crashed B-737-800MAX airplane flew back to Addis from Johannesburg this morning to its yet another flight bound to Nairobi underwent a rigorous first check maintenance in February 04,2019. Ethiopian Airlines Group expresses its profound sorrow and deepest condolences to the families of the victims and their loved ones on the tragic plane accident.

Nationality	No of Passengers
Kenyan	32
Canadian	18
Ethiopian	9
China	8
Italian	8
USA	8
France	7
UK	7
Egypt	6
Germany	5
India	4
Slovakia	4
Austrian	3
Russia	3
Sweden	3
Spain	2
Israel	2
Morocco	2
Poland	2
Belgium	1
Djibouti	1
Indonesian	1
Ireland	1
Mozambique	1
Norway	1
Rwanda	1
Saudi	1
Sudan	1
Somalia	1
Serbia	1
Togo	1
Uganda	1
Yemeni	1
Nepal	1
Nigeria	1
UN Passport	1

**Accident Bulletin no. 4**

**Issued on March 10, 2019 at 06:20 PM**

**Accident to Ethiopian Airlines flight number ET 302**

Following the tragic accident on Ethiopian Airlines flight ET 302/10 March, which claimed the lives of 149 passengers and 8 crew on board, Ethiopian has teamed up with all stakeholders concerned to conduct forensic investigations and identify the identities of the victims. A committee comprising of Ethiopian Airlines, Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority, and Ethiopian Transport Authority has been set up to carry out the investigations. Once the identities of the deceased are identified, their bodies will be delivered to their families and loved ones. Ethiopian Airlines has already contacted the families of the victims to inform them of the tragic accident.

Investigation will be carried out to determine the cause of the accident, in collaboration with all stakeholders including the aircraft manufacturer Boeing, Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority and other international entities.

Ethiopian Airlines will release further information as soon as it is available, through the airline’s website and social media pages.

**Accident Bulletin no. 5**

**Issued on March 11, 2019 at 07:08 AM Local Time**

Following the Tragic accident of ET 302/10 March B-737-8 MAX (ET-AVJ), Ethiopian Airlines has decided to ground all B-737-8 MAX fleet effective yesterday March 10, 2019 until further notice.

Although we don’t yet know the cause of the accident, we had to decide to ground the particular fleet as extra safety precaution.



The image shows a social media post from Ethiopian Airlines. At the top left is the Ethiopian Airlines logo. To its right, the text reads "Ethiopian Airlines updated their cover photo." followed by "March 11" and a globe icon. Below this is a large black rectangular graphic with yellow and white text. The text is organized into two columns. The left column lists "AIRPORT EMERGENCY HOTLINE" with two phone numbers: (00251) 115 17 87 33 and (00251) 115 17 47 35. Below that is "KUALA LUMPUR" followed by "MEDIA CALL CENTRE: 00 44 1623 786071" and "PUBLIC INFORMATION CALL CENTRE: 00 603 8686 0111". The right column is titled "FOR ALL INFORMATION" and lists four phone numbers: (00251) 11 5 17 89 45, (00251) 11 5 17 89 87, (00251) 11 5 17 82 31, and (00251) 11 5 17 85 58. A white winged logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the black graphic.

**Accident Bulletin no. 6**

**Issued on March 11, 2019 at 01:40 PM Local Time**

The Digital Flight Data Recorder (DFDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) of ET302 have been Recovered.

Africa's biggest hub Addis Ababa Bole international airport is as busy as always availing our customers of the standard service. Ethiopian airline's GCEO Mr. Tewolde GebreMariam was at the terminals and has witnessed the smooth operations.

An exclusive interview of Ethiopian Airlines GCEO Mr. Tewolde GebreMariam onCNN. [#IFlyEthiopian](#)



An Ethiopian delegation led by Accident Investigation Bureau(AIB) has flown the Flight Data Recorder (FDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) to Paris, France for investigation.

**March 14,2019**

**FAA statement on the temporary grounding of Boeing B737 - 8 MAX fleet operated by U.S airlines or in a U.S. territory.**



**March 14, 2019**

From now onwards, information on any development about ET 302 will be posted on Ethiopian Airlines website and on social media sites. We request all media channels to refer to our website and social media pages for any request of information they may have.

**March 14,2019**

The Ethiopian delegation led by the Chief investigator of Accident Investigation Bureau has arrived in the French Safety Investigation (BEA) facilities and the investigation process has started in Paris.

**March 15 /2019**

Ethiopian Airlines employees and Artists held a memorial service today at Ethiopian headquarters paying tribute to colleagues and passengers who lost their lives in the tragic accident on ET 302.

### **March 17/2019**

“The total flying time of the First Officer is 350 hours. Moreover; the Pilot in command is a senior pilot who has accumulated 8,100 hours. According to ICAO regulations any CPL holder can act as F/O in multi-engine jet commercial flight up on successful completion of the full Type Rating training on the type of A/C. According to ICAO, it only requires a maximum of 200Hrs to hold CPL. Ethiopian airlines in its effort to enhance safety established a crew pairing policy where by a less experienced F/O flies only with highly experienced Capt and vice versa.”

### **March 18/2019**

Ethiopian Aviation Academy provides well-developed and on standard training prepared to make you the best fit in this competitive aviation industry. Availing basic and recurrent programs approved by the Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority using a combination of classroom and practical training with dedicated and competent instructors. [#Ethiopianavationacademy](#)

### **March 19/2019**

Ethiopian Cargo, gives time efficient services provided by top of the line facilities equipped by state-of-the-art security system, import export ware house, special storage areas with temperature-controlled rooms, one stop shop service designed to pace up your business process with unprecedented speed, transparency and reliability.

[#EthiopianCargo#Cargowithcare](#) [cargo.ethiopianairlines.com](http://cargo.ethiopianairlines.com)

## **1.3. Press Releases**

### **Accident Bulletin no. 6**

#### **Issued on March 11, 2019 at 01:40 PM Local Time**

The Digital Flight Data Recorder (DFDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) of ET302 have been recovered.

#### **Update on ET302 accident**

An Ethiopian delegation led by Accident Investigation Bureau (AIB) has flown the Flight Data Recorder (FDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) to Paris, France for investigation.

#### **Update on ET 302/10 March:-Clarification on the total Flying time of the First Officer**

“The total flying time of the First Officer is 350 hours. Moreover; the Pilot in command is a senior pilot who has accumulated 8,100 hours.

According to ICAO regulations any CPL holder can act as F/O in multi-engine jet commercial flight up on successful completion of the full Type Rating training on the type of A/C. According to ICAO, it only requires a maximum of 200Hrs to hold CPL. Ethiopian airlines in its effort to enhance safety established a crew pairing policy where by a less experienced F/O flies only with highly experienced Capt and vice versa.”

### **Ethiopian Airlines Refutes the Wrong Reporting.**

**Addis Ababa: 21 March 2019**

Ethiopian Airlines would like to refute the following wrong reporting of the New York Times titled “*Ethiopian Airlines Had a Max 8 Simulator, but Pilot on Doomed Flight Didn’t Receive Training*”

Ethiopian Airlines, one of the safest and most dependable airlines in the world, is pleased to confirm that Ethiopian pilots have completed the Boeing recommended and FAA approved differences training from the B-737 NG aircraft to the B-737 MAX aircraft before the phase in of the B-737-800 MAX fleet to the Ethiopian operation and before they start flying the B-737-800 MAX.

The pilots had also been made aware of, and well briefed on the Emergency Airworthiness Directive issued by the FAA following the Lion Air accident. The content of the airworthiness directive has also been well incorporated in all pilot training manuals, operational procedures and working manuals.

The B-737 MAX full flight simulators are not designed to simulate the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) problems.

Ethiopia Airlines urges all concerned to refrain from making uninformed, incorrect, irresponsible and misleading statements during the period of the accident investigation. International regulations require all stakeholders to wait patiently for the final result of the investigation.

Ethiopian Airlines Refutes the Baseless Allegations written in the Washington Post. Addis Ababa: 22 March 2019

Ethiopian Airlines strongly refutes all the baseless and factually incorrect allegations written in the Washington Post dated March 21, 2019.

All the allegations in the article are false defamations with out any evidence, collected from unknown and unreliable sources and meant to divert attention from the global grounding of the B-737 MAX airplanes.

Ethiopian airlines operates with one of the highest global standards of quality and safety performances certified by all National, Regional and International regulators like the Ethiopian Civil Aviation Authority, the FAA, EASA, IOSA and ICAO and other National regulatory authorities. Ethiopian is one of the leading global airlines with modern fleet, high standards of infrastructure, highly automated with the latest ICT (information and communication technology) and one of the most modern operating systems.

The airline has seven full flight simulators (Q-400, B-737NG, B-737 MAX, B-767, B-787, B-777 and A-350) to train its pilots and other airlines pilots. It has one of the largest and most modern Aviation Academy with training devices and technologies among the very few in the world. The Airline has invested more than half a Billion dollars in infrastructure only in the last 5 years which is not common in a typical airline.

Although the cause of the accident is yet to be known by the international investigation in progress, the entire world knows all B-737 MAX airplanes have been grounded since the tragic accident of ET 302/10 March. About 380 B-737 MAX airplanes are grounded all over the world including in the USA. All concerned regulators, Safety oversight authorities and other law enforcement agencies are conducting serious investigation on the design and certification of the B-737 MAX airplanes and we are waiting patiently for the result of these investigations.

This being the fact, the subject article is trying to divert the main focus of the world to unrelated and factually incorrect allegations.

We hereby demand the Washington Post to remove the article, apologize and correct the facts.

## **Honoring the Victims with Traditional Memorial Service**

**Addis Ababa: 22 March 2019**

Local residents of Gimbichu Woreda (district), where ET 302/10 March accident happened, held traditional memorial service on March 21, 2019 to honor those who lost their lives in the accident.

The memorial service, led by local religious fathers and community elders, marks the deep compassion and heart felt condolences of Ethiopians, sharing the grief of all humans.

Regarding the service, Ethiopian Group CEO, Mr Tewolde GebreMariam remarked, *“I am deeply touched by the commemoration the local residents observed in their own initiative. It is such a compassionate gesture which highlights the unique deep rooted love and affection of Ethiopians, and consoles all hearts grieving for the lives lost in the accident. I would like to thank all the local residents for their extraordinary compassion and solidarity with the families and loved ones of the deceased and the entire world.”*

## **Ethiopian Airlines is The New Spirit of Africa**

*By Tewolde GebreMariam Group CEO, Ethiopian Airlines*

It has been more than two weeks since the tragic crash of Ethiopian Airlines flight 302. The heartbreak for the families of the passengers and crew who perished will be lasting. This has forever changed their lives, and we at Ethiopian Airlines will feel the pain forever. I pray that we all continue to find strength in the weeks and months ahead.

The people of Ethiopia feel this very deeply, too. As a state-owned airline and the flagship carrier for our nation, we carry the torch for the Ethiopian brand around the world. In a nation that sometimes is saddled with negative stereotypes, accidents like this affect our sense of pride.

Yet this tragedy won't define us. We pledge to work with Boeing and our colleagues in all the airlines to make air travel even safer. As the largest aviation group on the continent of Africa, we represent The New Spirit of Africa and will continue to move forward. We are rated as a 4-star global airline with a high safety record and member of Star Alliance. That will not change.

### **Full Cooperation**

The investigation of the accident is well underway, and we will learn the truth. At this time, I do not want to speculate as to the cause. Many questions on the B-737 MAX airplane remain without answers, and I pledge full and transparent cooperation to discover what went wrong.

As it is well known in our global aviation industry, the differences training between the B-737 NG and the B-737 MAX recommended by Boeing and approved by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration called for computer-based training, but we went beyond that. After the Lion Air accident in October, our pilots who fly the Boeing 737 Max 8 were fully trained on the service bulletin issued by Boeing and the Emergency Airworthiness Directive issued by the USA FAA. Among the seven Full Flight Simulators that we own and operate, two of them are for B-737 NG and the B-837 MAX. We are the only airline in Africa among the very few in the world with the B-737 MAX full flight Simulator. Contrary to some media reports, our pilots who fly the new model were trained on all appropriate simulators.

The crews were well trained on this aircraft.

Immediately after the crash and owing to the similarity with the Lion Air Accident, we grounded our fleet of Max 8s. Within days, the plane had been grounded around the world. I fully support this. Until we have answers, putting one more life at risk is too much.

### **Belief in Boeing, U.S. Aviation**

Let me be clear: Ethiopian Airlines believes in Boeing. They have been a partner of ours for many years. More than two-thirds of our fleet is Boeing. We were the first African airline to fly the 767, 757, 777-200LR, and we were the second nation in the world (after Japan) to take delivery of the 787 Dreamliner. Less than a month ago, we took delivery of yet another new two 737 cargo planes (a different version from the one that crashed). The plane that crashed was less than five months old.

Despite the tragedy, Boeing and Ethiopian Airlines will continue to be linked well into the future. We also are proud of our association with U.S. aviation. The general public does not know that Ethiopian Airlines was founded in 1945 with help from Trans World Airlines

(TWA). In the early years, our pilots, flight crews, mechanics and managers were actually employees of TWA.

In the 1960s, after the handoff, TWA continued in an advisory capacity, and we've continued to use American jets, American jet engines and American technology. Our mechanics are Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) certified.

Our first direct passenger service to the U.S. began in June 1998, and today we fly direct to Africa from Washington, Newark, Chicago and Los Angeles. This summer, we will begin flying from Houston. Our cargo flights connect in Miami, Los Angeles and New York.

U.S. travel to Africa has increased more than 10 percent in the last year, second only to travel to Europe in term of the percentage increase -- traveling to Africa has increased more than traveling to Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, South America, Central America or the Caribbean. The future is bright, and Ethiopian Airlines will be here to meet the demand.

In less than a decade, Ethiopian Airlines has tripled the size of its fleet – we now have 113 Boeing, Airbus and Bombardier aircraft flying to 119 international destinations in five continents. We have one of the youngest fleet in the industry; our average fleet age is five years while industry average is 12 years. Moreover, we have tripled the passenger volume, now flying more than 11 million passengers annually.

Each year, our Aviation Academy trains more than 2,000 pilots, flight attendants, maintenance workers and other employees for Ethiopian Airlines and several other African airlines. We are the company others turn to for aviation expertise. In the last 5 years, we have invested more than half a Billion dollars in training and other infrastructure in our Addis Ababa base.

We will work with investigators in Ethiopia, in the U.S. and elsewhere to figure out what went wrong with flight 302.

We resolve to work with Boeing and others to use this tragedy to make the skies safer for the world.

## **Ethiopian Airlines refutes misleading reporting March 26 -2019**

### **Ethiopian Airlines refutes misleading reporting**

We, at Ethiopian strongly refutes recent reports which state that Ethiopian GCEO expected the preliminary release of a report into the March 10 crash of its Boeing 737-8 MAX "maybe this week or next week". Ethiopian GCEO did not say anything about the time the investigation report will be released.

We want to make clear to the world that we have no mandate to comment on the investigation and we can't make such incorrect statement.

We urge all concerned to refrain from making such uninformed, incorrect, irresponsible and misleading statements during the period of the accident investigation. International regulations require all stakeholders to wait patiently for the result of the investigation.

**Ethiopian Airlines Statement on the Preliminary Report of the Accident on ET 302  
Addis Ababa: 4 April 2019**

Ethiopian Airlines Aviation Group which is the largest and the most successful Aviation group in Africa, would like to acknowledge the preliminary report of the accident of ET302/10 March, 2019 and would like to appreciate the hard work of the investigation team.

The preliminary report clearly showed that the Ethiopian Airlines Pilots who were commanding Flight ET302/10 March have followed Boeing's recommended and FAA's approved emergency procedures to handle the most difficult emergency situation created on the airplane. Despite their hard work and full compliance with the emergency procedures, it was very unfortunate that they could not recover the airplane from the persistence of nose diving. As the investigation continues with more detailed analysis, as usual we will continue with our full cooperation with the investigation team.

Group CEO, Tewolde GebreMariam said, "All of us at Ethiopian Airlines are still going through deep mourning for the loss of our loved ones and we would like to express our deep sympathy and condolences for the families, relatives and friends of the victims. Meanwhile, we are very proud of our pilots' compliances to follow the emergency procedures and high level of professional performances in such extremely difficult situations. We are also very proud of our Global standard Pilot Training Center and the Ethiopian Aviation Academy which is one of the largest and most modern in the world equipped with state of the art and latest training technologies. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our valued customers, the travelling public, the media and global aviation professionals for the remarkably high level of vote of confidences and strong support that you have been giving us starting from the day of this tragic accident. We will double our efforts every single day to win your confidence and earn your business. Your safety will remain our top most priority and we will continue to work together with our partners around the world to make air travel safer and more comfortable. My highest appreciation also goes to my 16,000 colleagues at Ethiopian Airlines for their resilience, high standards of professionalism and their continued commitment for operational excellence and their award winning customer services which enabled us to continue our business without any operational disruption, flight delays nor flight cancellations."

## **n1.4 Videos**

ART, [http: www.you tube.com/watch?v=yhjp-4fee&app+desktop](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhjp-4fee&app+desktop)

BBC, [http:www.you tube.com/watch?v=5vxxdpx8&app=desktop](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vxxdpx8&app=desktop)

CNN, [http: www.you tube.com/watch?v=hmdvy3\\_fxyc&app+desktop](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmdvy3_fxyc&app+desktop)

CNN, [http: www.you tube.com/watch?v=ff44s948hjau&app+desktop](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff44s948hjau&app+desktop)

CNN, [http: // m.facebook.com/ watch/?v=1934828969979489&\\_rdr](http://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=1934828969979489&_rdr)

CGTN, [http: // m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid+570610040088903&id=565225544](http://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid+570610040088903&id=565225544)

CGTN, [http: www.you tube.com/watch?v=8t10ml1e810&app=desktop](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t10ml1e810&app=desktop)

## **1.5. Questions guiding the content analysis**

### **Topics addressed**

What topics were included within the corporate statements on Facebook, Website and TVs?

### **Response strategies**

What crisis response strategies were implemented in the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages?

Are all the crisis response strategies aligned with the goal of the airline to safeguard its reputation?