

A CASE STUDY OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION: STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES TO THE
EXPLOSION OF SURMALU MARKET IN 2022, YEREVAN, ARMENIA

by

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Abstract

This case study investigates the crisis communication dynamics during the Surmalu shopping center explosion in Yerevan, Armenia, with an aim to derive insights for enhancing future crisis management practices. The study aims to evaluate the coordination of crisis response efforts among the engaged stakeholders, examines the alignment of communication efforts with established crisis communication theories and protocols, and proposes systemic changes for improved crisis preparedness. Utilizing case study methodology and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, the findings reveal that coordination among the engaged entities faced significant crisis response challenges in messaging consistency and proactive response mechanisms which ultimately led to public confusion and mistrust. The study highlights the necessity for inter-departmental collaboration, unified messaging, and clear communication channels to ensure coherent and trustworthy information dissemination as well as the need for systemic changes, improved capacity-building, educational initiatives, and enhanced management and coordination mechanisms. Focusing on leadership development, cross-sector collaboration, and media regulation, the study advocates for a holistic approach to transform Armenia's crisis response landscape, ensuring better preparedness, swift action, and effective recovery in future emergencies.

Introduction

In today's world of unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, crises arise across various industries, social settings, and organizational frameworks and disturb much more than typical modes of operation. In such times, effective communication takes a central stage, holding the power to either ease the situation or even further exacerbate the impact of the crisis.

The dynamics of crisis communication extend beyond mere dissemination of information and encompasses a proactive and strategic approach to managing the flow of information and narratives. In contemporary management practices, crisis communication addresses the exigencies and complexities of unexpected events or disasters. This involves not only addressing immediate concerns and challenges but also laying the groundwork for long-term trust, resilience and recovery.

On August 14, 2022, the Surmalu shopping center, about two kilometers south of the center of the capital city of Yerevan, Armenia, became the epicenter of an unforeseen crisis when a massive explosion took place. The blast caused widespread destruction and fire within a storage area designated for fireworks and other pyrotechnic materials. As a result, the shopping center was partially destroyed, and the three-story warehouse building collapsed, leaving 63 people injured and 25 dead.

In the aftermath of the explosion, the gravity of the situation extended throughout the city of Yerevan and beyond and left a mark on the collective consciousness, being described as “the first time [in a long timeframe] that such an explosion, such a tragedy had happened in the capital city” (Jazeera, 2022). The impact of the event went beyond just the physical damage; it deeply affected

the emotional landscape of the community and created an atmosphere of shock and mistrust toward the state bodies, starting from the ones responsible for pre-crisis preventive safety inspection procedures to the ones leading the recovery after the crisis.

Thus, the incident triggered a complex crisis management scenario involving a number of stakeholders spanning governmental, civic, and media domains. Among the key stakeholders in the crisis were various state departments and ministries - the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Armenia, The Police of the Republic of Armenia, RA Urban Development, Technical Standards and Fire Safety Inspection Body, RA National Security Service - as well as local and international NGOs - the Armenian Red Cross Society and VOMA special training center - tasked with emergency response efforts and coordinating logistical support. Local authorities, entrusted with maintaining public safety and order, assumed a central role in arranging evacuation procedures and marshaling resources to mitigate the impact of the crisis.

Due to its large scale and impact on the community, the explosion prompted an urgent need for effective crisis communication to address the situation, manage public perception and coordinate response efforts. As it is one of the biggest economic centers in Yerevan with an impactful revenue in the region, the tragedy created gaps in many realms, including social, economic, and even political, that assembled questions with no answers.

The explosion that rocked the Surmalu Market stands as a foresight reminder of the importance of critically approaching the complex landscape of the crisis management scope and the need to address an effective crisis communication approach as it erects the face of foretell disasters. The profound impact affects not only the involved parties, including residents, businesses, and the community surrounding it, but also the governmental and responsible parties who are accountable

for taking care of the disaster. Therefore, conducting this case study is relevant and important in raising questions and appropriate answers for such crisis situations in Armenia, specifically in Armenia's context, which puts a blank floor with the identified gap in the crisis communication sphere in Armenia.

By analyzing the Surmalu case, a relevant gap will be identified, which aims to open room for learning from past events and analyze the explosion while gaining valuable insights that will considerably contribute to the dynamics of crisis situations. In addition, this would give significant scope for precise and accurate response mechanisms and address any communication challenges that determine what went wrong as planned and what did not since it will help to prevent similar tragedies. By identifying the shortcomings, the communication processes will improve information propagation and coordination among stakeholders and address the needs of affected individuals.

Through the case study, a notable void is aimed to be addressed in enhancing preparedness and resilience, promoting accountability and transparency, and empowering stakeholders in the context of a crisis. In essence, the study aims to promote effective emergency response through the implication of effective and inclusive strategies while having a consistent monitoring approach that would improve, develop, and ensure the implemented practices that would open a floor in actively participating in crisis communication practices, as well as crisis communication, plans leading to a more actively collaborative environment during those times of crisis in Armenia's emergency response department.

Nevertheless, the complexity of the crisis communication landscape is a boundless measure that is in constant need of improvement and monitoring. Therefore, the need to implement an effective

crisis communication plan is inevitable, distinctly in Armenia. With having successfully handled and not handled crisis response in Armenia, the Surmalu case is one that needs to be improved to foster trust and collaborative spirit among the public and governmental stakeholders. Its evaluation and reconsideration are important in having a constant, timely, and accurate spread of information since it helps in building public trust and commutative confidence, as well as for the government to have strong communication strategies that protect lives and livelihoods in creating a more prosperous, resilient, and cohesive society in Armenia.

The capstone project aims to not only address the challenges faced and the reality of occurrence but also to give a thorough analysis of the main objectives, such as stakeholder communication strategies, the evaluation of the communication responses, and the outcome of it all from which best practices and lessons can be reaped. The significance of it is pivotal since it opens the first door to addressing the changes that should be made as a first step of building the trust that has faded. Examining the communication approaches implemented during the crisis will identify the pros and cons faced while shedding light on the governmental agencies, various stakeholder involvement, and community organizations. The coordinated approach of such findings will tailor this capstone into different scopes and the valuable insights it needs to analyze the complexities raised.

However, after picking the diverse data comes the evaluation part, which somewhat responds to the questions raised. This entails aligning and providing timely, objective, and accurate insights to the public on the situation to manage and address public concerns and meet expectations. It is crucial to consider the effectiveness of the communication responses since it will foster trust and security among affected stakeholders and the related public. It will also determine the subsequent

effective communication response's move in handling future crisis efforts, in which it does not start to apply without identifying the precise lessons learned.

Namely, synthesizing, pinpointing, and documenting the insights gained is the first step in implementing the best practice, which this study aims to do. The contribution of the knowledge on crisis communication and its guidance involves preparedness and response that would not be possible without considering the actionable recommendations in Armenia and beyond that will highlight the successful and innovative strategy and handle the best national crisis with minimum losses on a local and internal scope. Therefore, addressing those capabilities is crucial in enhancing future emergencies while fairly identifying the lacking, which this case study aims to provide the best.

Thus, the Surmalu explosion of August 14, 2022, emphasizes the essence of effective crisis communication in mitigating the impact of unforeseen disasters. This capstone project aims to address gaps in crisis communication and response mechanisms revealed by the Surmalu case and provide valuable insights to inform future crisis management practices in Armenia and beyond. By analyzing stakeholder communication strategies, evaluating response effectiveness, and synthesizing key findings, the study seeks to offer actionable recommendations for enhancing preparedness, resilience, and accountability in the face of crisis.

Literature Review

1. Introduction: crises in the corporate

Within the corporate sector, a crisis is described as a situation that poses a threat to the organization, its stakeholders, and the broader industry landscape (Coombs, 2007; Coombs &

Holladay, 2002). Seeger et al. (2005) define organizational crises as specific and non-routine events or series of events originating within the organization that create substantial levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to its most important goals. Those have highly negative effects bearing high levels of risks, harm, and latent opportunities for organizational development (Seeger et al., 2005; Marsen, 2019). Millar & Heath, on their turn define organizational crises as “untimely but predictable events that have actual or potential consequences for stakeholders’ interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering the crisis” (2004, p. 64), thus highlighting the somewhat predictable nature of a crisis that can be prevented by implementation of strong risk management strategies until those turn into crises. Although potentially prevented, crises have become increasingly common in today's organizational and social environments, with high risks involving threats to system stability, challenges to core beliefs, and jeopardizing high-priority objectives such as reputation, legitimacy, and profitability - all widely recognized as valued resources defining the survival of an organizational entity (Winkleman, 1999). Whether triggered by external factors or by internal management decisions, crises hold profound significance, often catalyzing swift and profound transformations (Seeger et al., 2005; Coombs, 2006).

When addressing a crisis from a communication standpoint, it's crucial to consider the specific nature and context of the situation (Marsen, 2019). Crises can vary significantly based on factors such as the type of crisis, the level of responsibility attributed to the organization, the extent of damage incurred, the number of stakeholders affected, the industry involved, and the organization's existing reputation and history. For instance, a crisis stemming from a minor verbal slip by a representative of a nonprofit organization is unlikely to be as severe or enduring as a crisis

involving significant environmental damage or loss of life due to a corporation's negligence or failure to implement adequate safety measures. Yet, regardless of the scale of a crisis, an organization's response can play a pivotal role in mitigating and potentially restoring any damage to its reputation (Coombs, 2006). At these times, organizations are faced with a spectrum of choices regarding how they communicate with stakeholders, varying from disclaiming any accountability to acknowledging complete responsibility for the crisis (Winkleman, 1999).

In this context, the existing literature views crisis communication as a set of practices and processes implemented as a response to a crisis situation that disrupts normal operations and is aimed at promoting safety and maintaining organizational stability (Marsen, 2019). Within organizations, crisis communication is situated in the broader interdisciplinary domain of disaster response and emergency management. This encompasses various fields such as organizational communication, public relations, strategic communication, issue management, organizational rhetoric, and risk and crisis management. The communication dynamics occurring before, during, and after an organizational crisis offer a rich area for study, which can be approached using diverse methodologies and perspectives, each capable of illuminating specific facets of the crisis phenomenon (R. Spradley, 2017). Over the past decades, there has been a notable surge in crisis management research, particularly examining the actions and statements that extend to the application of crisis response strategies (Winkleman, 1999; Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Weick, 1988).

2. Dimensions of crisis communication: classifications and typologies

Within the framework of organizational communication and public relations, scholars have embarked on a quest to define the lines of what constitutes a "crisis." This seeks not merely to categorize crises but to pinpoint their essence with precision and clarity. To achieve this, various classifications and typologies have been proposed to serve as frameworks for examining and understanding crises in their multifaceted manifestations (Coombs, 2010; Snyder et al., 2006).

One such axis of classification revolves around the division of preventable versus unpreventable crises (Marsen, 2019). In the former category, lie scenarios where proactive measures, if implemented, could have averted the chain of events culminating in the crisis. These crises often emerge from human error, organizational oversight, or systemic weaknesses, exemplified vividly in cases such as explosions as a result of safety regulation violations or corporate scandals. Conversely, unpreventable crises defy proactive intervention and emerge abruptly from the unpredictable nature of external forces. Natural disasters, pandemics, and geopolitical upheavals stand as examples in this category and show the inherent unpredictability of certain crises.

Another dimension in crisis typology is the distinction between external and internal crises, delineated by the locus of their origin (Coombs, 2010). External crises stem from factors outside the organizational boundary, such as actions or circumstances beyond the organization's control. These may include hostile takeovers, regulatory interventions, or adverse market conditions, all causing disruptions with profound implications for the organization's reputation and viability. In contrast, internal crises emerge within the organizational ecosystem, coming from managerial missteps, employee misconduct, or structural deficiencies. These crises often pose existential threats not only to the organization's external image but also to its internal cohesion and operational integrity.

Further complexity emerges when crises are analyzed through the lens of intentionality in the classification of intentional versus unintentional crises. Intentional crises are characterized by malevolent intent or deliberate malfeasance caused to undermine organizational interests or inflict harm for strategic gain. Acts of sabotage, cyber-attacks, or industrial espionage exemplify this dark facet of crisis dynamics, highlighting the vulnerabilities inherent in today's interconnected and digitally reliant business landscape. On the other hand, unintentional crises stem from inadvertent actions, errors in judgment, or systemic failures devoid of nefarious intent. Industrial accidents, product recalls, or supply chain disruptions epitomize this category (Coombs, 1995; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015).

Another classification, as delineated by Coombs (2007), revolves around the attribution of responsibility and the existing reputation of the organization. This classification scheme includes the attribution of blame and conceptualizes crises in terms of distinct "clusters," each with its own communicative imperatives - victim cluster, accidental cluster, and preventable cluster. The victim cluster comprises cases where the organization can convincingly demonstrate its innocence and portray itself as a sufferer rather than a perpetrator of the crisis. In these instances, the organization emerges as an undeserving casualty of circumstances beyond its control and positions itself sympathetically in the eyes of the public. The second cluster, the accidental cluster, encompasses crises resulting from unforeseeable accidents or incidents characterized by low preventability or risk. Here, the emphasis lies on acknowledging the unfortunate nature of the event while assuring stakeholders of the organization's commitment to rectify any underlying vulnerabilities or deficiencies. The preventable cluster, on the other hand, encompasses crises precipitated by human error, negligence, or corruption, where the organization bears a significant degree of culpability. In such cases, public attribution of blame is heightened, necessitating a more proactive and

apologetic communication approach aimed at acknowledging fault, demonstrating accountability, and outlining concrete steps toward remediation and reform.

Expanding the scope of crisis typologies, Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) introduce another framework that classifies crises into four distinct yet interconnected categories. The first category, performance crises, encompasses instances where organizations fight failures in production, technical malfunctions, or errors in judgment. Whether stemming from internal missteps or external pressures, these crises punctuate the gap between organizational aspirations and operational realities and compel organizations to confront their shortcomings head-on. The second category, disaster crises, thrusts organizations into the distress of chaos and uncertainty as they contend with the aftermath of accidents or natural disasters. From industrial accidents to environmental catastrophes, these crises test the resilience and adaptability of organizations, often leaving indelible scars on both their physical infrastructure and reputation. In the realm of attack crises, organizations find themselves captured in a battle for reputation and credibility as the media or competitors launch concerted assaults aimed at staining their image. Characterized by slander, misinformation, or smear campaigns, these crises pose alarming challenges to organizational integrity and necessitate swift and strategic communication responses to mitigate reputational damage. Lastly, moral crises push organizations into ethical scrutiny, as their actions or products clash with prevailing social norms and values. Industries combating issues of public health, environmental sustainability, or corporate social responsibility often find themselves on a moral ground where missteps can have far-reaching consequences for both their bottom line and societal trust.

3. Theories and methodologies of crisis communication

The evolution of theories in crisis communication is deeply rooted in the empirical observation of patterns in organizational crises. Researchers, drawing from their extensive experience in collecting and analyzing multiple instances of crisis events, have forged abundant theories. The landscape of crisis communication research underwent a profound transformation during the 1990s, triggered by the combination of two major impulses: the rapidly increasing influence of digital media and the occurrence of significant global crises from the previous decades. The two factors combined prompted interest among researchers in crisis management and reputation repair (Marsen, 2019).

3.1. Image Restoration Theory (IRT)

Expanding upon the theoretical underpinnings of rhetorical apologia methodologies laid out by Burke (1970) and further developed by Hearit (1995), Benoit's highly influential Image Repair Theory (IRT) (1995, 1997) offers an all-encompassing framework for understanding the strategic responses adopted by organizations as a response to a crisis. This theoretical framework establishes five major strategies, each situated along a continuum reflecting varying degrees of acceptance of responsibility.

At one end of this continuum are Denial strategies, which seek to dissociate the organization entirely from the crisis. These strategies include tactics such as shifting blame onto external parties, engaging in scapegoating, denying the occurrence of the event, or downplaying its severity by asserting that it caused minimal harm. Denial strategies aim to deflect accountability and obfuscate the organization's involvement in the crisis. Moving along the continuum, Evasion of Responsibility strategies aim to minimize organizational guilt by attributing the crisis to factors beyond the organization's control. These strategies may involve portraying the event as an

unfortunate accident or emphasizing a lack of prior knowledge or judgment, thus reducing perceptions of organizational wrongdoing. In the middle of the continuum, reducing the effectiveness of event strategies is an approach that aims to mitigate the negative impact of the crisis. These strategies involve highlighting the organization's positive attributes, achievements, or contributions in an effort to divert attention away from the crisis itself and diminish the reputational fallout of the crisis. Corrective Action strategies, on the other hand, emphasize concrete measures aimed at resolving the underlying issues precipitating the crisis and preventing its recurrence. These strategies involve implementing procedural reforms, instituting safeguards, or adopting behavioral changes to address the root causes of the crisis and bolster organizational resilience. At the opposite end of the continuum from Denial strategies are Mortification strategies, which represent the highest level of acceptance of responsibility and accountability. Mortification strategies involve openly acknowledging the organization's role in the crisis through offering sincere apologies and actively seeking to make amends for any harm caused by embracing accountability and demonstrating a commitment to rectification and, therefore, rebuilding trust and credibility after the crisis.

3.2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Despite facing some criticisms regarding its applicability across diverse contexts, Image Repair Theory (IRT) is a cornerstone in the crisis communication research framework. One of its notable evolutions is the emergence of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) proposed by Coombs (2007), which represents a shift by redirecting focus from organizational strategies to public perceptions in the aftermath of a crisis.

SCCT reconfigures the IRT strategies into four distinct "postures": Denial, Diminishment, Rebuilding, and Bolstering (Coombs, 2014). Each posture reflects a particular approach according to the prevailing attribution of crisis responsibility and the corresponding organizational response. A significant portion of SCCT research is grounded in survey methodologies, thus often leveraging experimental data to gauge stakeholder responses to both real-world and hypothetical crisis scenarios. Scholars such as Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke (2010) and Ki and Nekmat (2014) have contributed to the field by employing empirical investigation methods to understand the intricacies of crisis communication and stakeholder perception within diverse organizational contexts.

3.3. Discourse of Renewal Theory (DRT)

In the Discourse of Renewal Theory (DRT), the focal point shifts from merely justifying and explaining an organization's crisis-related actions to a more forward-looking perspective on how it can reform its image for the future (Seeger et al., 2003; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). DRT assumes that effective crisis management needs a fundamental reconsideration of the organization's identity and social positioning. The notion that crisis presents an opportunity for organizational introspection and transformation is central to DRT. Researchers within this framework emphasize the organization's vision for the future and the imperative to enact substantive changes to recover its image and realign itself within its social and industrial environment. Unlike other theories, DRT is inherently optimistic and advocates for organizations to see opportunities in crises rather than merely mitigating damage. DRT primarily employs rhetorical and discursive methods of text analysis to analyze strategies for recovery, eliminate ineffective policies and practices and foster the emergence of new approaches conducive to a

renewed, forward-looking orientation. Historically, DRT cases often centered around natural disasters, accidents, or other unpreventable crises that did not irreparably stain the organization's reputation and provided a relatively smoother recovery process. However, more recent studies have pushed the boundaries of DRT by applying its principles to preventable or complex crises (Marsen, 2019).

3.4. Rhetorical arena theory

In response to the recognition that crises involve a multitude of stakeholders with diverse perspectives and interests, some theorists advocate for a research approach that embraces this multiplicity of voices, often referred to as "multivocality." Within this framework, the rhetorical arena theory appears where the metaphor of the "arena" is about various actors engaged in competition, debate, and negotiation under the scrutiny of the public eye (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2017). Rhetorical arena theory shifts the focus from organizational or media discourses in isolation to the interactions among stakeholders in crisis situations. It evolves around the perspectives of different stakeholders and the strategies they employ to advance their interests and address their concerns within the rhetorical arena of crisis communication.

Four key parameters are central to the arena: context, media, genre, and text. Context encompasses the nature of the crisis, the key events, and the stakeholders involved. Media refers to the communication channels utilized by stakeholders to disseminate their messages. Genre concerns the various document types produced during crisis communication, such as press releases and official statements. The text relates to the strategic choices made by stakeholders when crafting messages within specific genres.

3.5. Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM)

Lastly, Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM), proposed by Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2007, 2010), offers a lens through which crisis management processes can be understood and evaluated, particularly in light of the intense and emotionally charged nature of crises that can profoundly impact the well-being of individuals on a large scale. It is important to note that the expression of emotions, both by affected individuals and by the organization itself, plays an essential role in shaping the outcomes of crisis events.

ICM delves into two categories of coping strategies: cognitive and conative. Cognitive coping strategies are concerned with how affected stakeholders cognitively process and make sense of the crisis, while conative coping strategies involve the actions they take to address or ease the situation. The degree of organizational involvement in crisis management is assessed based on the allocation of resources and the level of effort required to manage the crisis effectively.

Furthermore, ICM recognizes that the extent of organizational involvement depends on the nature of the crisis. While nonpreventable external crises, such as natural disasters, typically necessitate high levels of organizational involvement due to the scale of the crisis and the exigency of resource allocation, nonpreventable internal crises, such as incidents of workplace violence, may require relatively lower levels of organizational involvement, particularly if the organization cannot reasonably be expected to prevent such events.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How effectively were the crisis response efforts coordinated among the diverse stakeholders at the site of the Surmalu explosion, and what factors influenced the efficacy or inefficiency of this coordination?

RQ 2: How did key stakeholders cooperate and coordinate their communication efforts in managing the immediate aftermath of the Surmalu explosion, and to what extent did these efforts align with established crisis communication theories, practices and protocols?

RQ 3: What systemic and procedural changes can be implemented to enhance crisis preparedness and crisis communication to prevent similar incidents and ineffective responses in the future, based on the lessons learned from the Surmalu explosion?

Methodology

1. Case study method

The methodology employed in this research is qualitative in nature, utilizing a multi-method approach to comprehensively analyze the crisis communication strategies surrounding the Surmalu explosion in Armenia's Surmalu shopping center.

This research employed a case study approach to analyze the crisis communication surrounding the explosion in the Surmalu Shopping Center. The choice of case study method is grounded in recognizing that crises, as are complex social phenomena, involve multiple stakeholders and perspectives, thus, the "reality" is determined by individuals and groups (Johnson et al., 2013).

Since the aim of the study is to explore these perspectives in depth rather than focus on demonstrating casualties and quantities, a case study approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the crisis dynamics (Veil & Husted, 2012). Scholars have identified that single case studies have been widely utilized in examining crises and extreme events, and despite the retrospective nature of such studies, they provide valuable insights into the complexities of crisis situations (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Buchanan, 2011). Scholars have also identified Case studies as a valuable method for exploring complex topics, especially in situations where literature is not yet well-established (An & Cheng, 2010), as is the case with the Surmalu incident. Moreover, case study research was deemed the most appropriate approach due to the complexity of the research problem, access to multiple data sources, including interviews, investigative reports, and other documentary evidence, and the core aim of developing a fuller understanding and assessment of crisis communication dynamics (Johnson et al., 2013).

Therefore, by employing a case study methodology, this research aims to delve deeply into the crisis communication strategies employed by various stakeholders in response to the Surmalu explosion, considering the diverse perspectives, dynamics, and complexities inherent in crisis situations.

2. Semi-structured interviews

Within the frames of the case study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders to provide insights into crisis response strategies, stakeholder perceptions, and communication dynamics from various perspectives.

2.1. Semi-structured interviews

The qualitative nature of this case study research necessitates a method that allows for rich, detailed exploration and assessment of the crisis communication and dynamics surrounding the explosion. As Oakley suggests, qualitative interviews serve as a framework where practices and standards are not just documented but also tested, questioned, and reaffirmed (1998). According to this, and keeping in mind the complex nature of the case in regard to multiple parties involved and, therefore, multiple perspectives held within the stakeholders, the choice of employing in-depth interviews as a research method was deliberate and well-suited for this study. Furthermore, as noted by London & Burgess (2002), structure is inherent in every research interview, and qualitative research interviews are classified as semi-structured, lightly structured, or in-depth. Yet semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Typically, they revolve around a predetermined set of open-ended questions, with additional inquiries arising from the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This approach allows for flexibility, depth, and rich data collection to understand the perspectives of the participants in a comfortable and conversational atmosphere. As DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree mention (2006), an effective duration of a semi-structured in-depth interview spans between 30 minutes and several hours. Therefore, all interviews conducted to gain insights into the Surmalu explosion case lasted for more than 1 hour and 30 minutes, reaching up to 2 hours and 30 minutes. In order to do effective data collection, recording the interview is considered an appropriate approach that simplifies concentrating on the content and verbal cues and facilitates the transcription process (Jamshed, 2014). Hence, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for accuracy and further analysis.

Thus, the method allowed for a thorough understanding of the experiences and insights of four key stakeholders, including representatives from the Armenian Red Cross Society, a store owner in the

shopping center, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a crisis communication expert, and a representative of the PR department at the Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB).

2.1.1. Selection criteria

2.1.1.1. Relevance of position/involvement in the crisis: Interviewees were selected based on their roles and positions directly related to the Surmalu explosion crisis and its subsequent communication management, including individuals with firsthand experience or expertise in crisis response, communication, and stakeholder engagement. In addition, direct involvement in the crisis was another decisive factor in choosing interviewees, including those who were on-site after the explosion, as well as those responsible for coordinating communication responses at various levels of governance and organizational hierarchy.

2.1.1.2. Stakeholder representation: To ensure a balanced representation of perspectives, one stakeholder was selected from each relevant criterion. For example, the Red Cross was chosen as a representative of organizations involved in on-site rescue operations. The Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB) was selected as a representative of state bodies, particularly those facing criticism during the crisis. Additionally, a shop owner who experienced material losses was interviewed to represent those affected by the crisis. It was decided not to interview individuals who experienced human losses due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential emotional impact on participants.

2.1.1.3. Accessibility: Due to time limitations and logistical constraints, some parties directly involved in the Surmalu explosion crisis, such as the National Security Service, were not easily accessible for interviews. Therefore, efforts were focused on selecting interviewees who were readily available and willing to participate. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that

despite the significance of including the management of Surmalu Market as a key stakeholder to be interviewed, their accessibility for interviews was constrained. Notably, their absence from the crisis management process or perceived lack of active engagement, as reported by stakeholders and individuals present on-site, precluded their inclusion in the interview cohort.

2.1.2. Ethical considerations

Interviewees were approached in accordance with ethical guidelines and principles, prioritizing respect for confidentiality. Measures were taken to ensure that interviewees understood the purpose of the research and the handling of sensitive information.

2.1.3. Interview objectives and questions asked

The interview process was guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to explore different dimensions of the explosion by gaining insights into stakeholders' roles, challenges faced, decision-making processes, communication strategies employed, and reflections on the effectiveness of crisis response efforts. Given the semi-structured approach, the interviewees were provided a platform to share their perspectives on stakeholder relationships, media interactions, public perceptions, and recommendations for future crisis communication planning and management. Considering the diverse backgrounds of the interviewees, distinct sets of questions were tailored to report the specific experiences and insights relevant to each stakeholder group.

2.1.3.1. Interview with a representative from the Armenian Red Cross Society

The objective of the interview was to gain insight into the on-spot management of the Surmalu explosion crisis. Key areas of inquiry included understanding the parties present at the

scene, coordinating their efforts, analyzing the organizational aspects of the crisis response, distributing responsibilities, collaborating with other stakeholders, and more.

Respectively, the following set of questions was asked, followed by additional inquiries:

(1) What parties or organizations were present at the scene of the explosion? (2) How were the efforts coordinated to manage the crisis on-site? (3) How were responsibilities distributed among different organizations or entities involved in the response efforts? (4) How would you evaluate the collaboration and coordination with other stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Emergency Services, the media, the police, and other relevant parties? (5) What was the nature of the relationship between different stakeholders involved in managing the crisis? (6) How was communication facilitated between various stakeholders during the crisis, and were there any challenges or successes in this regard?

2.1.3.2. Interview with a representative from the RA Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The objective of the interview was to gain valuable insights into the fundamental elements of effective crisis communication strategies, particularly in the context of the Surmalu Market explosion as a crisis communication expert/diplomat. The interview also aimed to identify common pitfalls or mistakes that organizations may encounter in crisis communication and strategies to mitigate them. It also aimed to gain first-hand insights about post-crisis communication strategies to rebuild trust and reputation for both the affected organization and relevant authorities.

The following set of questions was asked to the interviewee to reach the objectives and gain insights into the field: (1) What are the fundamental elements of an effective crisis communication

strategy in a situation like the Surmalu Market explosion? (2) In the context of the Surmalu explosion, what considerations should be taken into account when crafting messages to address the needs and concerns of different stakeholders, including the public, authorities, and affected communities? (3) From your experience, what are some common pitfalls or mistakes that organizations make in crisis communication, and how can these be avoided? (4) In terms of post-crisis communication, what strategies should be employed to rebuild trust and reputation, both for the affected organization and for the authorities involved? (5) What could've been done better to address the crisis of the Surmalu explosion?

2.1.3.3. Interview with a representative from the Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB)

The objective of the interview was to gain an understanding of the crisis communication strategies and challenges faced by a stakeholder organization that was prominently blamed or criticized in the aftermath of the Surmalu explosion. Specifically, the aim was to gain insights into the perception and assessment of UTFSIB's crisis communication efforts, the dynamics of stakeholder interactions, and strategies employed to mitigate reputational damage and address public concerns. The interview also aimed to explore lessons learned, areas for improvement, and recommendations for enhancing crisis communication in similar high-pressure scenarios.

To address the aim, the following set of questions were asked, followed by additional inquiries: Can you discuss the coordination efforts between government agencies and other stakeholders in delivering consistent messaging and updates? (1) Were there specific messaging priorities or

themes established to address public concerns and maintain calm during the crisis? (2) Were there any challenges or obstacles encountered in the communication process, and how were they mitigated? (3) What strategies were employed to address information needs and concerns among the public? (4) How did you handle rumors and misinformation circulating on media platforms and within the public during the crisis? (5) What aspects of the communication were particularly effective, and what areas could be improved upon? (6)

2.1.3.4. Interview with a shop owner at the Surmalu Market

The objective of the interview was to gain an understanding of the firsthand experiences, management perspectives, and post-event impacts related to the explosion crisis. The aim was to explore the shop owner's narrative about the events leading up to the explosion, their role and experiences during and after the crisis, the management of the event, compensation and renovation processes, changes in policies or regulations, ongoing discourse, and reflections on crisis response strategies.

The following set of questions were asked, together with follow-up inquiries, to gain insights on shop-owner perspectives: (1) Can you share your personal experience and narrative regarding the events leading up to and following the Surmalu explosion? (2) Who was responsible for managing the event, and from whom did you receive the most aid? (3) Were your losses compensated, and if so, by whom? (4) How was the process of renovating the building handled, and was there a designated contact person for reporting news or updates? (5) Have there been any changes in policies or regulations at the market following the explosion? (6) What has been the internal and

external discourse surrounding the cause of the explosion? (7) How have sales and working routines been affected, and have there been any reputational effects on your organization?

Research Findings

1. Semi-structured interviews

1.1. Interview with a representative from the Armenian Red Cross Society

1.1.1. The presence of ARCS in the crisis

The Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) representative played a huge role in the crisis response of the event. The Red Cross Disaster Response group included two leaders from first aid team, a leader from psychological first team, and their media team, which operated for disseminating information on their efforts put in rescue operations. Facing multiple hardships and challenges throughout the way from being present since day one and being a part of a team of disaster response professionals, the interviewee gave valuable insights into their personal experience, the strategies implemented by their organization, the challenges faced in providing assistance and their evaluation of stakeholder relationships, and their recommendations of how similar events can be managed for a better outcome.

1.1.2. Actions taken and challenges faced by ARCS in providing assistance

First of all, the actions taken by the Red Cross were strategic as its main aim was to provide first aid, psychological support, and coordination with other stakeholders. They stayed for seven days, from the first hours of the start of rescue operations till the very last dead body that they intended to find but failed to do so. The crisis occurred on a Sunday at 1 PM. The Red Cross team

arrived at 3 PM and stayed till the very end. The fire lasted for more than 30 hours, which opened the door for the team to face hardships. However, according to the representative, the challenges faced were many. Their main role was to occupy the leading actor's position by helping as much as possible with responding and helping affected people recover from emergency situations. However, they went above and beyond, occupying a wide cycle of saving lives, providing support to those affected, and overall ensuring the well-being and security of the whole region. However, they went beyond helping other organizations such as the Police of RA department, the Ministry of Emergency Situations of RA, and others involved with their main tasks.

1.1.3. Evaluation of stakeholder relationships

Relationships with stakeholders have been held individually and as a team, bearing in mind that the involved stakeholders were the Ministry of Emergency Situations of RA (MES), VOMA - an NGO that builds people who are capable of defending themselves in a war - the Armenian Red Cross Society itself, the Police of RA department, volunteers from citizens, shoppers, and the media. According to the interviewee, the media was disturbing in some cases. However, it was their responsibility to deliver and transcribe the situation as much as possible to the public. While being unprepared in terms of safety regulations, volunteers from citizens have helped immensely by coming from other regions and showing their willingness to help. An example provided by the Red Cross representative was mentioning a Russian couple offering their trained dog that spotted several bodies and sped up the identification process of the victims and possibly alive people who needed desperate help. Alongside the volunteers, were the shoppers, who showed disturbing and helping attitudes simultaneously depending on the individual and the case.

Continuing the relationship with the stakeholders according to the interviewee's lens, the MES was the leader of every stakeholder on the spot. MES also invited all stakeholders, mainly from the representations of the respective entities operating in Yerevan and other shifts from Vanadzor and Gyumri. It took care of the 120 people who were poisoned. The procedure of on spot crisis management went as such: MES spotted dead bodies and informed the Red Cross to take them out. While with Voma, the Red Cross collaborated with them well, sharing responsibilities and resources despite their brand missions and visions being complete opposites - humanitarian vs military.

The general public trusted the Red Cross team most due to their involvement and trustful approach towards every individual, case, and overall behavior during the crisis. On the other side, the Red Cross was distrustful towards some people, specifically the shoppers, based on their lies and irrational behavior during such times. An example of this is lying for their own good when they called the Red Cross to come and help in rescuing possible affected people because they heard some noises that might have the potential to go and save, while their purpose was to bring the Red Cross team so they could save their goods. Such behaviors have disturbed the Red Cross from trusting some shoppers and listening to their concern from time to time due to their inhuman acts.

Police were responsible for investigating the blast's cause and ensuring the region's safety. However, they needed to do their job properly to protect people from being damaged and in risky positions. For example, a big building panel was divided half-broken; under it, the Red Cross was searching for people. Others, driven by an interest in what the Red Cross is doing, would stand on that panel to see the work of the Red Cross. This was harmful because the panel could break on the Red Cross workers. But the police did nothing there. It was its job to inform people about the

potential harm and command them not to stand on the panel. They worked properly when the government officials visited the Spot. Only then did the police do whatever it was supposed to do.

Moving forward with Voma and other stakeholders, Voma did whatever it could to invest in human resources, first aid, water, and food and be present in any inconvenience that might be a helping hand. The Surmalu management team and its owner were not spotted or seen in the place by the Red Cross workers. Therefore, to quickly summarize what happened on Spot, according to the Red Cross Representative, First, MES spotted dead bodies, and then the Red Cross found the dead body under the ruins. Afterward, the Police investigator took a picture of the body or other necessary information for investigative reasons; after that, the Red Cross collected the body or its parts and passed it to the mortuary transporter. The Mortuary transporter transported the body to the 1st State Hospital, where the bodies were identified, and information was passed to the relatives where the Red Cross has also gone beyond helping in the body identification process.

Continuing with the examinee's evaluation, the relationships between stakeholders, including MES, Voma, the Police, volunteers, shop owners, and the media, were crucial in facilitating the crisis response; however, a concrete lack of management as a challenge has been experienced on the Spot. The participant has seen both positive and negative hardships as it went both ways in fulfilling and tackling the problems faced on the Spot. The positive aspects included all stakeholders collaborating and doing their best to solve the issues, without paying attention to their responsibility to do a certain act or not, which shows not only the collaborative effort but a team spirit that had only one shared mission, which is helping the affected people and shutting down the fire alongside taking the necessary steps to ensure safety and security as much as possible. However, many disturbing factors have affected all parties involved, which has created mistrust among the stakeholders. As much as all parties involved helped each other, at the same time, they

lacked effective communication, which, according to the interviewee, to some extent, is understandable due to the severe impact and pressure of the crisis. However, some partnerships and collaborations among stakeholders were more successful due to better understanding and a more communicative approach.

1.1.4. Personal experience

Regardless of all, the representative's personal experience has been satisfying, interesting, and impactful. Working tirelessly for a week and balancing their own life has been exhausting. However, as an individual responsible for being involved in the crisis response, the interviewee believes they were able to get out of that situation after a short period of time. However, during the process, it was challenging, yet to some extent traumatizing, since there have been days when it was difficult for the appointee to get out of bed, even with shivers and extreme fatigue, which came from the immense pressure of the event.

Moreover, due to the interviewees' divergent interest in helping people and being involved during crisis times, their willingness to continue staying involved in such crises is never going to lessen; on the contrary, it brought more encouragement to challenge the dots that were missing such as silence of the majority, and seeing a degree of aggression that is never justified according to the assignee during such times. These personal accounts have provided contexts and humanized the crisis response team-involved individuals, unveiling an unspoken background of what can happen behind the scenes during crisis emergencies. Above all, the interviewee considers that all parties reached their maximum potential, and the overall response with the existing capabilities

were effective because they could save many lives since, without their work, there might have been more than 300 victims.

1.1.5. Lessons learned and recommendations

According to the interviewee, the crisis has definitely left room for improvement. The interviewee highlighted the importance of precise collaboration and clear coordination among the stakeholders, in which the lack of ground comes from education and training efforts in general and within the scope of emergency response. In addition, the interviewee has also highlighted the importance of paying attention to cultural factors that shape organizations' and individuals' behavior since they can have a massive impact on the overall outcome. Cultural factors include judgment instead of action, curiosity about what is happening instead of helping, watching the fire instead of getting away from it, criticizing the involved parties rather than taking action to save whatever is happening, and many more. Therefore, massive work should be done on the mentality as it played a huge role and could have improved and saved the situation in many aspects, starting with words of affirmation and ending with being a landing hand to anyone in need.

There have been cases such as prioritizing saving goods over putting efforts into saving and finding people under the rebels, which show the lack of understanding and approach individuals should take during times of crisis. These personal examples are mentioned only to humanize the context and emphasize the importance of empathy and resilience behavior humans should acquire during times of crisis. Overall, effective crisis management protocols should be highly revised and touched upon. Regulations such as management of organizations on the spot, a better approach to the minute of silence, and clear distribution of the involved parties and their responsibilities result

in a clear, urgent, and effective crisis management strategy that can be implemented to have a more identified future emergency preparedness and response efforts.

1.2. Interview with a representative from the RA Ministry of Foreign Affairs

1.2.1. Role in crisis communications management

As a crisis communications specialist and representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the interviewee provided insights due to being well aware of the situation. The interviewee had a rich and diverse background in the field, which allows them to share their critical and objective thoughts on the Surmalu explosion case. With the very first word, the assignee conveyed the lack of messaging, coordination among the stakeholders, and even contradiction in their message delivery. Therefore, the interviewee has seen a lack of advocacy for clear messaging, coordination mechanisms, and proactive communication strategies.

1.2.2. Evaluation of media response and public perception

The participant mostly positively evaluated the media response and public perception while highlighting the parts needed for improvement. The interviewee highlighted the inclusion of human-interest stories such as rescue, cooperation, and danger in media convergence since they are relevant to the story. The quick mobilization of spokespeople, relevant ministries, and officials has put a response to the public's chaos. Distinct faces from each organization were assigned for the role; Urban, Technical and Fire Safety Inspection Body of RA, Public Relations and Information Center SNCO (IPRC), and Yerevan Municipality, yet they did not coordinate their messaging strategies, which offered a distinct crisis among professionals and then the public, respectively. Although the management of the Surmalu Market is a direct stakeholder to be taken

into account when assigning crisis communication roles, faces and messagings, assigning representatives from the market's side was not pertinent since neither the people on the crisis spot nor the ones engaged in the communications and media sector did not spot Surmalu's management presence on the scene. As the interviewee highlighted, the only response to the crisis from the market's end was an untimely (three days after the explosion) post on their Facebook account the message of which was to extend condolences to the families of the victims (Appendix B). The MoFA representative emphasized that the people in charge of the center should have been present and approachable to the media to manage their reputation and regulate any inconvenience, which, according to the interviewee, was missing.

However, it raised questions equally due to the different messages of each person. Therefore, the participant has highlighted the importance of operating procedures within the organizations and beyond since misinformation during the first couple of days of the explosion got the best out of everyone rather than bringing and fostering trust as an official message by government officials to the public. The Prime Minister was the first person to announce that the explosion was not a terror attack when no one even initiated that discourse, and he specifically eventually ended up with commencing it. Therefore, a contradicting point went with tht regard, bringing chaos to the public and showing a clear misunderstanding and misdirection from the media and officials.

1.2.3. Challenges in maintaining consistent messaging

Based on the discussed difficulties and challenges among departments and stakeholders regarding message coordination, the situation exacerbated when a blame-game started between state stakeholders and increased the tension throughout in the discourse. As a result of the blame

game, no one took the lead to correct whatever had happened. The situation trended into coverage of victims instead of bearing the responsibility for their actions, which has also challenged the distinction between reliable and unreliable information. One example is Yerevan's council, which delivered its message without prior coordination. The best job in this regard was done by the Ministry of Emergency's spokesperson, who now is the municipality's spokesperson and eventually took the lead in coordinating. Still, ideally, he should not have been the person to do it since it was outside of his responsibility scope. However, Due to the blame game, big confusion arises from the public not only in terms of the messages but the organization's responsibilities as well, which put all the stakeholders under a very low reputation, expectation, and mistrust from the public towards them for current and further crisis events.

1.2.4. Collaboration with stakeholders

Since the interviewee highlighted the importance of collaboration and the lack of it among governmental agencies, media outlets, and public sectors in crisis communication efforts, the blame game that occurred among involved bodies played the main part. The lack of clear responsibility distribution, proactive communication, and approach disturbed some of the main functions of each individual's role during the crisis. For instance, according to the interviewee, the fire department body even confessed that it was their mistake with their contribution and coordination in the damaged buildings. Therefore, clear roles and responsibilities for stakeholders on a professional and legal level were missed, which the assignee addressed and advised to avoid future crises.

1.2.5. Recommendations for enhancing crisis communication efforts

Based on the interviewee's experience and observation, they provided several recommendations for enhancing the crisis communication efforts. The efforts included precise messaging and explicit coordination and communication mechanisms that should be done explicitly on a manual matter in such cases. In a more linear space, the interviewee suggested a messaging pool where each representative should have a defined message to deliver to gain the public's trust on the spot and beyond, even after the event. In addition, the assignee even suggested organizing projects and training regarding such cases to regain the people's trust within and beyond the Surmalu case; since the official governmental messaging is not trustworthy among the Armenian public, colossal space is given for misinformation. Everyone's voice is heard, and there's a high risk for misinformation flow since everyone speaks what appeals to them most and their organization. On top of that, the state would have mentioned to the public if they failed in a certain task rather than swallowing it since it can regain the trust and reaction of the public towards it.

Other recommendations the assignee has highlighted are strategic and crucial in crisis response management. Points included having initial messaging faster and a call to action quicker and more sufficient. The Ministry of Health and the deputy of emergencies have contributed massively to the call to action, which pleased the media and shifted their attention toward those bodies. However, there needs to be more; therefore, a more collaborative and strategic approach is required. In addition, the assignment mentioned the importance and the crucial fact of including more human stories on social networks to bond the public with the reality they missed, which helps them put the situation in a more accurate and precise framework.

However, some crucial steps that, as a crisis communication specialist, the assignee has seen a disaster for not practicing is the response of the fire department, which should have been faster with more efforts in their social media monitoring efforts. The reason is that Armenia has no

standard operating procedure in communications in Armenia's policies. Therefore, the problem was not as serious on the Surmalu side as on the government. Moreover, the government should have communicated following up on the event if the responsible bodies were fired or new training was initiated to avoid possible catastrophes. Same with admitting their guilt, if there is any. A viable comparison the interviewee has made is with the COVID-19 case and the 2020 War in Artsakh as best practice cases in Armenia. The COVID-19 case has been relatively regulated in terms of transparently communicating the daily updates of the crisis by the Ministry of Health. What refers to the 2020 War case, the Prime Minister, directly took responsibility for the crisis and recognized his guilt with direct messaging. Afterwards, in 2021, an IRI survey showed that the citizens were satisfied with the re-election of the Prime Minister, which, as the interviewee assessed was primarily due to his recognition of guilt. After confessing and bearing the responsibility, the prime minister enjoyed more praise than blame. The interviewee's mentions are crucial in assessing and understanding the points from different but the same points of view.

1.3. Interview with a representative from the Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB)

1.3.1. UTFSIB as a key stakeholder of the explosion event

In the aftermath of the Surmalu Market Explosion, the Urban, Technical and Fire Safety Inspection Body (UTFSIB) of the Republic of Armenia emerged as a key stakeholder due to its direct involvement in ensuring compliance with safety and legislative regulations referring to urban development, technical and fire safety, transport, energy, local and national mapping activities, and land use. The inspection body, acting on behalf of the Republic of Armenia as

mandated by law, assumes a supervisory role over these domains and is empowered to impose sanctions for non-compliance.

The UTFSIB's responsibilities in the context of the Surmalu Market Explosion were twofold. Firstly, as the regulatory body tasked with overseeing fire safety regulations, the UTFSIB bore responsibility for ensuring that the Surmalu Market adhered to all requisite safety measures to prevent such a catastrophic event as the explosion. Secondly, in the event of an explosion, the UTFSIB was expected to play a key role in crisis communication, disseminate accurate information, coordinate with other stakeholders, and provide guidance to the public to mitigate panic, facilitate an effective response, and save its reputation as a body carrying a portion of responsibility for the explosion.

1.3.2. Crisis communication challenges of UTFSIB in the aftermath of the explosion

When it comes to traditional crisis management frameworks, such as those observed in similar explosion incidents, as the interviewee mentioned, UTFSIB typically convenes meetings with relevant stakeholders to formulate coordinated response strategies and disseminate official information to the public. However, the Surmalu explosion case deviated from this norm, as the scale, immediacy, and emotional background of the event resulted in rapid information flow through social media channels before official statements could be issued. This dissemination of unverified information on social media platforms fundamentally affected the landscape of crisis communication and created challenges for authorities in managing public perceptions and addressing misinformation effectively.

The most impactful trigger for this phenomenon became the case of a municipality member posting on social media about a checkup conducted by the inspection body at Surmalu market almost a

year and a half before the explosion date, during which the department found multiple violations of safety regulations. This post, due to its origins in an authoritative source within the municipal government, contributed to the public perception that safety regulations were being identified but not rigorously enforced at the market by the inspection body. The emotional intensity surrounding the event further complicated response efforts, as the public was in the quest for accountability and in a search for culpable entities to assign blame. Consequently, public scrutiny and criticism were directed towards the inspection body, with accusations of negligence and corruption.

1.3.3. Response to criticism and blame directed at UTFSIB

In light of the emotional wave, the UTFSIB faced a challenging decision regarding whether to address public speculation surrounding the checkup conducted before the incident. Despite the inherent complexities and risks associated with addressing sensitive issues in the context of heightened emotional volatility, the UTFSIB opted to issue an announcement providing clarification on the checkup conducted prior to the explosion to demonstrate transparency, accountability, and proactive engagement with the public. According to the decision, UTFSIB issued an explanatory post on their Facebook account where the main public discourse and assignment of blame was taking place (Appendix A). Through this explanatory post, the inspection body tried to provide an overview of the legal framework governing follow-up visits and sanctioning procedures in response to safety violations at the Surmalu Market.

Central to the post was the revelation of a checkup conducted by the UTFSIB approximately a year and a half prior to the explosion, during which more than ten fire safety violations were documented at the Surmalu Market. The post explained the diverse nature of these violations,

ranging in severity and complexity, and highlighted the corresponding variations in the timeframes for corrective measures depending on the severity and complexity of the violation. For instance, while the installation of fire extinguishers could feasibly be accomplished within a week, initiations such as the construction of a water pool in the market area would necessitate a more protracted timeline, potentially extending to months. The announcement highlighted that according to prevailing legislation, the UTFSIB is precluded from conducting subsequent inspections until the prescribed deadlines for rectifying identified violations have elapsed. Thus, the inspection body tried to ensure the public understood that the subsequent visits after the record of more than ten fire safety violations in the market were limited by the law, and the blame for their corruption should prove groundless.

Furthermore, the announcement addressed another legal impediment to follow-up visits and sanctions based on a prior fire incident at Surmalu, around a year before the explosion, precipitated by the wrong montage of electrical wires. Because of the small scale of the incident, the public discourse did not evolve much around the fire in the market at the time, particularly because it emerged during the night and was extinguished promptly by morning. After the incident, as a response, the fire department initiated a criminal case. The post explained that the existing legal provisions preclude the issue of additional criminal charges against the same entity based on identical allegations until the resolution of the ongoing case, thus showing that UTFSIB did not have the legal ground to impose sanctions to prevent the Surmalu Market Explosion since the criminal case of the last fire was not settled yet.

However, despite the efforts by UTFSIB to clarify their actions and legal constraints through the explanatory post on their Facebook account, the interview revealed that the post ultimately backfired, exacerbated public criticism and invited further blame onto the inspection body. This

unintended consequence was compounded by the dissemination of a particularly inflammatory rumor on social media, perpetuated by a user with a sizable following. The rumor alleged the discovery of 4 tons of Trinitrotoluene (TNT) in the Surmalu Market area during the explosion, inciting a fresh wave of condemnation and scrutiny directed at the UTFSIB, especially given the fact that the inspection body was already on the public blame spotlight.

1.3.4. Coordination with other agencies and stakeholders

Following the escalation of public scrutiny and the proliferation of rumors surrounding the Surmalu Market Explosion, the crisis took a dramatic turn, resulting in an inter-departmental blame game characterized by an avoidance of the implicated entities to admit accountability, trying to preserve institutional reputations. The National Security Service, Emergency Services, Police, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, and Yerevan Municipality, each bearing varying degrees of responsibility and oversight within their respective domains, were found to shield themselves from public censure.

Within the context of high tensions and inter-departmental blame, the interviewee referred to a lack of collaboration and constructive engagement within the media landscape. Contrary to expectations of collective action and concerted efforts to assuage public anxiety as well as foster understanding, media entities were reported to have pursued divergent agendas, thus exacerbating rather than mitigating the crisis.

Moreover, despite purported pre-planned agreements to facilitating informed discourse and clarification of the situation, the breakdown of collaboration among television media outlets

appeared as a media dysfunction. As the interviewee noted, instead of adhering to agreed-upon guidelines for mitigating the complexities of the crisis, television media reportedly deviated from scripted inquiries, resorting to leading and accusatory lines of questioning. Combined, these exacerbated tensions and hindered efforts to restore public confidence.

In addition, the interviewee highlighted another deficiency in crisis communication management referring to the media operations: the absence of regulatory supervision and centralized coordination of media involvement during the rescue operations on the spot of the explosion. In the urgency of rescue efforts, there were no clear guidelines or regulations governing media access to the disaster site, nor were there protocols dictating permissible interview subjects and dissemination of operational updates. The absence of an assigned authority responsible for handling communication efforts with media representatives further exacerbated the communication disorder.

1.3.5. Lessons learned and recommendations

The interviewee provided valuable recommendations for enhancing crisis communication strategies and mitigating the risks of misinformation, panic, and reputational damage in crises such as the Surmalu Market Explosion.

First and foremost, the interviewee advocated for a unified approach to crisis communication that would involve all engaged state stakeholders such as the National Security Service of RA, The Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the RA, The Ministry of Emergency Services of RA, the RA police, The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of RA,

Yerevan municipality, and others. The proposed strategy encompassed the setting of a collaborative forum, such as a roundtable discussion, to collectively analyze the communication landscape and develop a cohesive messaging framework. The recommended plan involved a systematic process where stakeholders would collate and synthesize information from their respective domains, which they would accumulate in the drafting of a unified press release. This is especially valuable given that the fundamental right to freedom of expression of the media must be respected; therefore, no censorship or restriction of content can be imposed on the media. On the other hand, considering this and today's diverse media landscape, where some outlets may prioritize sensationalism and dramatic content for increased engagement, it becomes important to draft a unified press release within the framework of inter-departmental solidarity before misinformation and panic expansion through the platforms. This release would serve as the authoritative voice of all involved parties and as a concerted effort to present the situation in an accurate and balanced way devoid of inflammatory rhetoric or blame attribution.

Crucially, the appointment of a designated spokesperson, drawn from relevant departments, is another essential factor stressed by the interviewee, which would ensure clarity and coherence in communication efforts and foster public trust.

Furthermore, the interviewee emphasized the importance of leveraging field experts in crisis communication steps. Despite the acknowledged significance of this aspect, the UTFSIB representative noted that field experts were lacking in communication regarding the Surmalu explosion crisis.

Importantly, the interviewee brought examples of two cases of successful crisis communication through inter-departmental collaboration in Armenia, contrasting them with the challenges

encountered in the aftermath of the Surmalu Market Explosion. Specifically, the interviewee referenced the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and the 44-Day Nagorno Karabagh (Artsakh) War in 2020 as exemplary cases of effective inter-departmental collaboration and cohesive communication strategies.

In both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Artsakh War, state bodies demonstrated a commendable degree of inter-departmental solidarity, with responsible state bodies coming together to form unified informational centers that served as focal points for coordinating communication efforts and disseminating accurate and timely information to the public. Moreover, government briefings were convened to discuss the nuances of communication strategies, including the formulation of messaging and the drafting of press releases, in alignment with the interests of all stakeholders involved. Moreover, "voices" of communication were assigned, represented by press secretaries from relevant ministries. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health assumed this role, while during the Nagorno Karabagh War, it was the Ministry of Defense.

The interviewee's reference to these cases shows that the lessons learned and best practices gleaned from experiences prior to the Surmalu explosion could be leveraged in the aftermath of the explosion to ensure efficient crisis communication. This is an important indicator that Armenia's institutional framework has the potential for effective crisis management when concerted efforts are made to make use of collective expertise and resources.

1.4. Interview with a shop owner at the Surmalu Market

1.4.1. Experience during the crisis event

In reference to the circumstances around the explosion, the shop owner explained the customer visiting tendencies and patterns within the market in general and on the day of the explosion. On the explosion day, despite being a Sunday, traditionally associated with heightened commercial activity in many contexts, Surmalu had a lower attendance compared to typical market days. This, as the interviewee mentioned, is attributed to the market dynamics with the competitive Arinj Mall, which has significant consumer traffic during weekends. The clothing sector of the Arinj Mall is operating only on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, which directs attention away from Surmalu on those days. Consequently, for Surmalu, Sundays do not constitute peak operational days, especially within the clothing sector, and moreover, the last Sunday of each month is an off day for the market. These factors explain the relatively low customer traffic on the day of the explosion.

1.4.2. Stakeholder communication and accountability

The absence of a clear communication channel, as well as the lack of accountability among stakeholders or the absence of an assigned accountable entity, appeared as a significant challenge after the explosion. Despite the magnitude of the incident, no entity, whether market management, state agencies, or other associated bodies, assumed responsibility for disseminating information to the affected shop owners. The interviewee highlighted a void in communication efforts, where the shop owners were left almost uninformed about the cause of the explosion, post-explosion measures, and updates regarding the crisis. Instead, inquiries from their side received mostly vague and unsatisfactory responses from associated entities, which, in turn, created uncertainty and disconnection within the community. The absence of an official and coherent response further led

to the emergence of speculative hypotheses among shop owners regarding the cause of the explosion and the underlying circumstances.

In the absence of concrete official information, various hypotheses emerged and circulated within the shoppers' community. One suppression was around the alleged presence of individuals producing lighters or matches within the market who did not observe the safety protocols, which, in turn, caused gas accumulation in the area, ultimately leading to the explosion. Another hypothesis assumed the presence of a fireworks storage facility, where non-compliance with safety regulations could have led to the explosion. Additionally, a rumor emerged suggesting that a local businessman was alleging intentional arson to facilitate the construction of a new building on the market site.

Moreover, the breakdown in communication extended to interactions between government representatives and shop owners and, thus, further exacerbated the communication mismanagement in the aftermath of the explosion. The interviewee mentioned that certain state representatives made unjustified promises of assistance to affected shop owners despite lacking the requisite authority or resources to fulfill such commitments. The fact that a low-ranking state representative made promises they couldn't possibly fulfill speaks of a lack of proper supervision within the governmental communication framework.

Similar to the course of management of the crisis, after the crisis was physically managed and rescue operations were over, no mechanism was established to disseminate information to the shop owners regarding the market's operational status or post-crisis course of action. In the absence of proactive communication from market management and relevant authorities, shop owners were left to navigate independently, with each individual responsible for seeking updates and

clarifications for themselves. Some shop owners only managed to informally establish direct communication with the market accountant to obtain information.

On a positive note, the shop owner recognized the transparency exhibited in the management of the crisis on-site and the dissemination of updates through media channels. According to the interviewee, media outlets and other stakeholders involved in communication were transparent when it came to disseminating information regarding the number of victims and injured people, as well as the efforts taking place on-site.

1.4.3. The current situation: compensation challenges and regulatory limitations

The interviewee revealed profound challenges regarding compensation for affected shop owners, which were complicated by regulatory limitations and administrative constraints.

The shop owner mentioned that after the explosion, reconstruction efforts were made to establish new stores within the exploded market area. In the newly constructed market site, updated safety regulations have been introduced, particularly regarding fire prevention measures. Although specific regulatory measures have been taken there, such as the setup of fire extinguishers or alarms, the interviewee voiced skepticism regarding the functionality of those in the stores.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that these new store areas were constructed by shop owners themselves, without direct oversight or involvement from governmental or market management personnel. The latter only took the responsibility of providing the physical blank area on which the shop owners built their own shopping booths and stores (it is important to mention that the interviewed shop owner did not suffer direct structural damage or fire-related losses; however, the

interviewee detailed significant financial losses; these were associated with and incurred due to smoke damage, which made considerable volumes of their clothing products unsellable).

Crucially, the interviewee mentioned that shop owners directly affected by the explosion reported a lack of compensation or financial aid from governmental entities, market directorates, or non-governmental organizations. However, the lack of provision of aid was somewhat understandable for the interviewee, who cited a significant legal obstacle to compensation efforts.

A critical challenge to compensation efforts stems from the inability to quantify losses incurred by affected shop owners, primarily due to the prevalence of non-declared products within the market. The interviewee reported a practice of importing and selling products without adhering to legal requirements or declaring them, facilitated by systemic corruption and lax regulatory enforcement. Although recent government reforms have sought to impose stricter regulations mandating product declaration, the non-declared goods of previous years still remain in the market. The coexistence of both declared, and non-declared products in the market further complicates quantification efforts since while newer declared products can be measured in amount, they still cannot be differentiated from the older non-declared ones. This scenario makes monetization of real loss and consequent compensation measurements legally impossible.

Although the interviewee defines this situation as unacceptable in a market operating near the center of the capital city, and in general, in a democratic country of the modern century, overcoming the situation is economically costly for Armenia. The findings suggest that Surmalu carries an important role as a wholesale market and serves as a critical node within the national supply chain, supporting the operations of hundreds and thousands of producers across various industries. The market's closure would precipitate far-reaching consequences for the national

economy and exacerbate market disruptions by potentially catalyzing the closure of similar markets operating under analogous regulatory deficiencies.

The interviewee also reported that despite incurring losses due to fire and smoke damage making clothing products unsellable, no significant impact was caused on customer retention or the reputational standing of the market. This resilience can be attributed to the distinct market dynamics prevailing in the Surmalu market, where each shop owner maintains a loyal customer base due to long-standing agreements with businessmen who purchase wholesale products in large quantities. As such, customer loyalty exceeds individual shop reputations, with economic considerations outweighing concerns about organizational reputation in customer decision-making processes. Unlike conventional retail environments where organizational reputation plays an essential role in consumer decision-making, the market's unique operational dynamics prioritize economic viability and economic efficiency. Shop owners rely on mutually beneficial relationships with customers to sustain their businesses and livelihoods, thereby mitigating the potential impact of reputational damage on sales and operational continuity.

1.4.4. Evaluation of crisis management

The shop owner's evaluation of the crisis management efforts of the market explosion showed the diverse perceptions and experiences among affected stakeholders. The interviewee mentioned that within the shop owner community, perceptions of crisis management efficacy varied significantly depending on the shop owners' backgrounds, experiences, and comparative benchmarks against international standards they have witnessed before. In particular, shop owners who had knowledge of crisis governance practices in well-developed countries expressed

dissatisfaction with the crisis management efforts in both rescue operations and communication strategies when juxtaposing the local crisis response against international practices and revealing deficiencies in resource allocation, coordination mechanisms, and communication protocols. Conversely, shop owners from less educated and less experienced backgrounds expressed contentment with the crisis management efforts regarding rescue operations and on-site coordination.

The interviewee's own assessment of the management of the Surmalu crisis was based on acknowledging the country's resource constraints. Despite acknowledging the comparatively effective management of the Surmalu market explosion given Armenia's limited resources, the interviewee highlighted the importance of equipping the country with necessary mechanisms for crisis management, particularly in light of its susceptibility to seismic events and similar crises given the imperfect legal frames and lack of imposed safety regulation mechanisms.

Moreover, the interviewee highlighted an indirectly imposed moral burden from the lack of management mechanisms, particularly evident in the absence of well-equipped and well-trained emergency response services. The shop owner mentioned: "Unlike in well-developed countries where citizens trust in the competence of emergency services and thus refrain from intervening in rescue operations, in the case of Armenia and similar countries, citizens have a sense of responsibility to assist emergency services in crisis situations knowing that they might lack resources and need their help." This moral dilemma posed a profound challenge for shop owners, who could not decide whether to put effort into saving their property and products gained through hard work of many years and safeguarding their livelihoods for the upcoming years or to allocate their time and effort in aiding the rescue operations. "We felt a huge moral burden to decide whether to save our past efforts and future livelihood or human lives," - mentioned the interviewee.

Discussion of Research Findings

1. Analysis of crisis communication through theoretical framework

Drawing upon theoretical frameworks, the following analysis of findings aims to explore the Surmalu market explosion in Armenia through the lens of crisis communication classifications and typologies of crisis. By employing a theoretically grounded approach, the analysis seeks to explain the crisis event and derive actionable insights to enhance future crisis management practices. Through an examination of the event in the framework of crisis communication theories, this analysis also aims to explore how discourse on effective crisis communication strategies can be applied in the real-world context of the Surmalu explosion.

1.1. Preventable versus unpreventable crisis dichotomy

In examining the Surmalu market explosion through the lens of the preventable versus unpreventable crisis dichotomy, it is evident that the explosion at the Surmalu market presents a typical example of a preventable crisis, as it could have been averted through the implementation of proactive measures, particularly adherence to fire safety regulations on the market's end and imposing of safety regulation mechanisms on the government's end. Speaking of systematic issues, those played an important role not only in the prevention of the market's explosion but also in its management and recovery processes. The absence of legislative frameworks for imposing and enforcing safety regulations underscores a systemic deficiency that caused the crisis event. This deficiency is evident in the legal limitations faced by regulatory bodies such as the UTFSIB in launching cases or imposing sanctions against organizations found culpable for safety violations.

The inability to hold accountable organizations charged with similar infractions due to legal constraints shows the systemic obstacles to preventive action. When it comes to the aftermath of the explosion, the inadequacies of existing legal mechanisms in facilitating recovery efforts were evident, particularly in compensating affected shop owners. A critical challenge to compensation endeavors arises from the inability to quantify the losses incurred by Surmalu shop owners, exacerbated by systemic corruption and lax regulatory enforcement. The prevalence of non-declared products within the market further complicates efforts to assess and compensate for losses. Thus, the root cause of the explosion can be traced back to organizational oversight, systematic issues and negligence in ensuring compliance with safety protocols. Had proper safety measures been in place and diligently enforced with the support of a proper systematic base, the chain of events leading to the explosion could have been prevented.

1.2. Internal versus external, intentional versus unintentional crisis dichotomies

The Surmalu market explosion can be categorized as an internal crisis within the framework of crisis typology, delineated by the locus of its origin. The Surmalu explosion emerged within the organizational context of the market itself as a direct consequence of managerial oversight or negligence in ensuring compliance with safety regulations.

On the other hand, the Surmalu market explosion has the classification of unintentional crises within the framework of crisis typology, distinguishing between intentional and unintentional crises based on the presence or absence of malevolent intent.

The crisis at the Surmalu market resulted from a series of unintended factors, including lax enforcement of safety regulations, managerial oversight, and structural deficiencies. There is no evidence to suggest malevolent intent behind the explosion, so it can be stated that the crisis was not initiated to undermine organizational interests or inflict harm for strategic gain. Instead, the incident emerged as a consequence of systemic weaknesses and organizational shortcomings that reflect the inherent risks associated with managing hazardous materials and ensuring compliance with safety protocols.

1.3. Attribution of responsibility classification

The explosion at the Surmalu market can be analyzed within the framework of Coombs' classification based on attribution of responsibility and organizational reputation. Specifically, the event aligns with the preventable cluster of crises, which are characterized by human error or corruption and where the organization bears a significant degree of culpability. On the other, the Surmalu market could also be positioned within the victim cluster to some extent, as it suffered significant physical damage and loss of life as a result of the explosion. However, given the preventable nature of the crisis and the organizational culpability involved, the victim narrative may not be as convincingly portrayed compared to cases where organizations are truly innocent bystanders.

On the other hand, key governmental bodies exhibited a collective tendency towards denial strategies to distance themselves from culpability and responsibility. These entities, rather than openly acknowledging any institutional shortcomings or regulatory oversights that may have contributed to the crisis, chose instead to deflect accountability and circumvent their involvement.

Such a strategy perpetuated a narrative of a lack of institutional unity and contributed to the emergence of public distrust.

What refers to the response of Surmalu Market management serves the evasion of responsibility strategy that is characterized by an attempt to minimize institutional culpability and regulatory oversights. The delayed and superficial nature of their response through a social media platform expressing condolences to the victims' families, devoid of any substantive acknowledgment of the market's own role or operational deficiencies, is a typical example of evasion of responsibility strategy. Aiming to mitigate the reputational damage and driven by the responsibility to talk about the crisis, the market tried to deflect attention away from its regulatory lapses and institutional failures and, therefore, minimize the potential for public scrutiny and accountability.

Referring to the UTFSIB's response to the explosion, the strategy was characterized by a combination of reducing the effectiveness of the event and evasion of responsibility strategies. Seeking to mitigate the negative outcomes of the crisis and to impede their ability to conduct follow-up visits to the market, the body concurrently employed strategies aimed at evading direct accountability by explaining the legal constraints and regulatory limitations. Meanwhile, the UTFSIB's response on social media platforms was aiming to minimize perceptions of institutional culpability by framing the situation as beyond their control, reducing public attribution of responsibility and mitigating reputational damage caused.

2. Analysis of crisis management and communication through practical framework

Continuing with the Analysis of this case study, the following section will explore the findings of the interview with its key stakeholders, including the representatives from the Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the shop owner, and Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB), through a thematic analysis of the aspects of the crisis communication strategies imposed, alongside highlighting their common ground perspectives, as well as their different layers, while connecting the dots of different representative's opinion to assess the situation better.

2.1. Insights from on-spot and off-spot experiences

The thematic analysis will aim and connect the dots as mentioned before, bearing in mind that the Red Cross representative, and the shop owner have provided their experience and views being on spot during the crisis. In contrast, the Technical and Fire Safety Inspection Body of Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB) representative and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative have expressed their views being off-spot while being aware of what is occurring on spot. This difference is important to touch upon and bear in mind while exploring the thematic analysis since it will lead the scope of the discussion.

2.2. Gaps between public and the government

To start with the bigger picture, concrete communication efforts still need to be included, according to all four interviewees. Regular and primary communication means have needed to be improved among the public and government separately and together ultimately. Therefore, the main mechanism of communication strategy needs to be improved in assessing the situation from a crisis communication standpoint.

2.3. Stakeholder engagement and coordination

One of the central themes in the crisis response was the extensive stakeholder engagement, views, perspectives, and overall means of collaboration among each other through the participants' experience. All interviews mentioned the scope of collaboration among organizations while having similar views on management and collaboration standpoints. The Red Cross Representative, alongside the shop owners being on the spot, has expressed their views on the lack of clear coordination of roles and responsibilities and the lack of a team approach. The representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOF), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the shop owner, and Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia (UTFSIB) lack clear coordination of roles, responsibilities, and overall lacking the team approach on their side as well. Therefore, a concrete management system has been lacking in inter-governmental efforts, as well as, on the spot of crisis which puts a ground point of lacking internal and external communication management efforts.

2.4. Cultural considerations in crisis management

It is no secret that the “factors of culture and cultural identity are often neglected”(Crisis Intervention Institute, 2012) during times of crisis, which also has played a big role in the management aspect of the explosion. As found from the Red Cross representative’s analysis, alongside the shop owner’s perspective, both have highlighted such issues captured on spot and off spot of managing the crisis, which comes from the central theme of “culture in crisis” (Crisis Intervention Institute, 2012) which reflect the local cuisine of handling and treating citizens and governmental officials among each other. Even people from the same community, The Red Cross representatives have blamed and emphasized the role of the shoppers and volunteers from the

public in the way that they treated the Red Cross Representatives or other responsible bodies on the spot, refusing to receive guidance or help from them such as wearing safety measures and following their guidelines while communicating with them only to benefit for their own good. For instance, some shop owners were rescuing their goods rather than being a helping hand, which has been unethical due to the Red Cross Representative. While the shopper touched upon the same scope, as a person was involved during the crisis, they emphasized the understanding part of some shoppers putting themselves first rather than helping others. However, the shop owner also emphasized the lack of a proper cultural approach to safety measures and violations due to not understanding its importance and side effects. Therefore, both on-spot parties have experienced and witnessed the inappropriate behavior of the citizens due to not having the proper background in dealing with crisis response cases.

2.5. Cultural dynamics in external crisis communication

Continuing on the cultural aspect, it has been lightly touched upon within the external governmental bodies of the (MOF) and (UTFSIB) representatives during their reflection on the Surmalu Explosion communications effort. Moreover, both have mentioned having challenges in regulating the crisis due to minor issues such as difficulty communicating among other stakeholders and understanding each party's behavior, alongside seeing the general procedures due to the country's overall regular conduct that is challenging to follow and implement. Therefore, both interviewees have also agreed on the influence of the cultural aspect on external communication strategies.

2.6. Addressing legal frameworks in crisis communication

Last but not least, the legal aspects, including infrastructure and policy issues, have been addressed equally by all assignees. Due to the chaotic crisis management, there needs to be an effective crisis communication plan for fast crisis response. The lack of legal support has affected each scope differently in the aftermath and during the crisis. For instance, the shop owner mentioned the importance of having a policy declaring the products so they can recover the lost goods. However, the (MOF) and (UTFSIB) representatives equally as generously shared their concerns about concrete policy issues such as solidarity among inter-governmental bodies, clearly assigned spokespersons from each stakeholder, and many others. Therefore, a legal procedure needs to be improved regarding infrastructure and policy, which would have led to and managed the crisis with a better outcome.

Recommendations: Strategies for Effective Crisis Management and Recovery

Based on what this research paper has examined, found, and analyzed, it is crucial to have the recommendations part that will complete the presented factual information, alongside bringing the fruits of a not-so-positive scene into a future positive one. However, the following sections will explore, implement, suggest, and also further discuss the possible ways of further enhancing the crisis communication scope in Armenia with the purpose of preventing and minimizing such crises and events in the future of the Armenian landscape.

As the sections require deep analysis, research, and investigation, the paper mainly focused on connecting the valuable interviewee's recommendations to this paper's recommendations so that combined a sample and new approach can be voiced to move forward and root the suggested into

the Armenian crisis response system to better manage such crisis in the future. However, the three main directions that this section aims to explore are enhancing and overlooking the aspects of education, management, and coordination as scopes and areas to improve, revise, and touch upon as the keys and direction to solve the issues mentioned throughout the case study.

1. Improvement strategies

To better understand the aspect of education and to what extent it can help, it should be revised through the crisis communication concept itself. Crisis communication is a plan that, as an educational institution, should address and follow up on the fallout from an emergency crisis. With an educational crisis plan, its main component in Armenia, being in a trustworthy position to follow, Armenia should revise and better improve its internal and beyond aspects that better enhance the communication among the public and the government in this case study and among the parties involved in general.

2. Focused analysis and proposed solutions

As the education aspect is broad, this paper aims to divide it down into small sections exploring which specific scopes it aims to address, pinpoint, and analyze. While having discovered many challenges and issues within the crisis, the following gaps are identified to fill and pay close attention to. This includes an enhancement of crisis communication plans through the aspect of education and putting emphasis and concrete plans on the following areas while forming concrete plans: leading mechanisms of education and awareness of the public during such crisis, and not only among themselves and to their surrounding, capacity building, cultural sensitivity, ethical considerations, and civil defense.

2.1. Education and capacity building in crisis management

Starting with the crucial aspect of expanding education and beyond is the capacity-building approach that meets expectations of establishing a well and better-informed society.” Capacity Building is an approach of people-centered development” (Eade, 1997). “Investment in capacity-building can enable poor people to respond to crisis more effectively in both the short and long term” (Eade, 1997) as well as “strengthen local government capacity in particular of operational programs where high risk of by-passing or undermining local authorities becomes more channeled” (Eade, 1997). Therefore, this approach would help build a clearer understanding of crisis management protocols and better effective communication strategies. As well as it will enhance the cultural factors of behavior and better preparedness for response to crisis. Therefore, capacity building is essential to enhance the training and education efforts in terms of building a fair capacity of stakeholders mainly involved in the crisis communication horizons.

2.2. The crucial role of public education in crisis response

Education awareness of the public during such crises is crucial and a determining factor in supporting or disturbing the crisis. As the Red Cross Representative mentioned in its interview, the public’s curiosity to know what is happening has been dangerous and disturbing to the organization's crucial steps of ensuring the safety and calming down the explosion. Even with the essential safety measures, the public has been refusing and in denial of accepting the important safety measures of appropriate shoes, gloves, hats, and masks due to the explosion’s possible affection of chemical molecules that has the probability to poison a living being.

2.3. Cultural sensitivity in crisis management

Alongside capacity building, ethical considerations, public awakening, and many other vital points mentioned above, cultural sensitivity also plays a huge role in a stakeholder's and an individual's behavior, each on their own terms. An individual's behavior depends on the influence that cultural nuances carry and the effect of the crisis itself. It occupies the main concept of ethical Imperatives in Crisis: Examining Responsibility and Accountability in Armenia, "the values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world." (Cultural Competence in Crisis Intervention, 2012). However, the same criteria should not be applied from the stakeholder's perspective since, as professionals in the field, they are responsible for managing the crisis rather than being affected by it, as mentioned during the analysis part of the UTFSIB representative. As much as the emotional pressure has gotten the best of everyone involved, stakeholders should be trained to have a more culturally sensitive and appropriate communication strategy that fosters trust among diverse government bodies and the public itself.

2.4. Ethical imperatives in crisis

On the other side of the coin is the ethical behavior of all citizens of Armenia before, during, and after such events and beyond. With the ethical factor an essential value in everyone's day-to-day lives, the paper finds there has been a major lack of it since the stakeholder representatives have shown lack of ethical consideration towards their responsibilities as well as the public's behavior towards the government during their not professional positions that has further allowed the public to cross their human lines and show a good deal of blame to the officials. However, it is understandable that, in such a crisis, humans act based on their emotions;

nevertheless, it should never be an excuse for dishonesty, disrespect, and inappropriate approach to anyone. Therefore, the rooted ground comes at fault in which it should be addressed and improvised not only on a public level but on a national level since it forms the ground of every aspect and industry from which it builds its base and further expands it to its specific scope.

2.5. Post-crisis evaluation for continuous improvement and preparedness

Post-crisis evaluation and learning are crucial for continuous improvement (Waqqr, 2023). It is also essential to follow consistently and improve with the world's changing environment. After the crisis, I was responsible for debriefing and follow-up measures. (UIC, 2017) Just as the UTFSIB representative mentioned, the follow-up training that they have done shows a big step towards enhancing their efforts within their organization and beyond. As the training is still in progress as of May 2024, the fruits of it will show later in the months, and future unfortunate crisis events just in case it occurs. Therefore, “conducting a post-mortem. Figuring out the gaps in the plan that slowed down the recovery or maybe fell short of returning to a normal level of operation and output (Grossman, 2023)” is crucial for the further assessment since crises evolve during time, and its approach should be revised as well.

2.6. Strengthening civil defense for effective crisis management

Last, civil defense includes all the above mentioned under one umbrella: offering complete guidance and preparation to respond to emergencies and disasters, primarily focusing on the population and the infrastructure. A solid civil defense system must be improved to effectively manage the crisis since it minimizes the losses and develops emergency response plans by establishing networks and conducting exercises that provide emergency services and support.

“Benefits of civil defense operations include enabling collaboration on all governmental aspects, ensuring multiple operations in the system, and minimizing human danger and property damage” (Crisis Prevention Institute, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen and develop a concrete plan for leveling up the capabilities of civil defense plans from national governments to local communities, including the aspects mentioned above and the receiving country’s approach. Investing and conducting training programs, resources, and infrastructure to build a proactive community leads to a responsive civil defense scope and a resilient base for future management.

2.7. The importance of media regulations and its change with management and education efforts

With the ever-evolving digital world, the role and aspects of the media do not go vague and do not have a place to go unnoticed or overstated. On the contrary, it is on the edge and center of regulating almost all industries in the world, with its main mission of providing value, information, and connection among everyone and everything. While the three main aspects of the recommendations that aim to explore, the management, education, and even the coordination part, aim to come in one cube regarding their media knowledge, response, regulation, management, coordination, etc.

The exciting spread of misinformation, poorly coordinated efforts, and lack of communication among the stakeholders put a big emphasis on enhancing the educational aspect of using the Media in Armenia while also focusing on the managing part of it. Inaccurate information can cause more harm and make your target audience panic in a crisis (Thompson, 2024).”Large-scale crises can provoke fear, confusion and panic. Without timely, effective mass communication during crises,

people may turn to unreliable or incomplete information” (VCU, 2021). It is “important to Let audiences know you are in control” (Davenport, n.d.) and to be “responsibly transparent” (Davenport, n.d.) Therefore, “Emergency and crisis managers must provide factual information about a crisis as soon as possible” (VCU, 2021) in which Surmalu’s management lacked and provided their standing after three days of the explosion. Regarding the governmental bodies, the blame game and communication coordination among them which mentioned during the interviews findings, has put this research paper on a prioritizing position of implementing effective management strategies while having the right education mindset to approach the media aspect

When a crisis happens having a plan in place can make all the difference. (Banyan, 2024). According to the Red Banyan article on crisis communication response, the following criteria are crucial to navigate the crisis. One of the main missing components experienced during this crisis, was having a trustworthy communications team on spot and beyond, potential response samples in advance, the optimal and good use of social media in which this paper have seen the lack of it through exploring and seeing the governmental posts in the blame game parts, and as well as having the humanized factor of remain compassionate and understanding as the emotional background can be pivotal role.

3. Management

With having covered the educational aspect, the complementary part of is the management and coordination strategies, and even the main aspect for establishing and having education. However, it can be contradictory to which can exist without the other, however, they are interconnected, intertwined, and interlinked. At the same time, interdependent. Therefore, it is crucial to tailor and

address the management and coordination needed efforts that should be done and followed to have a better crisis communication approach in the future.

3.1. Internal Communication as the first step of building the foundation and its role in crisis management

For this research project to address and highlight its recommendations for better crisis communications efforts, it is important to start with having the right Internal Communications Tool that Supports Crisis Communications (Grossman, 2023). Emergency communication needs to start with internal communications.(Herman, n.d.) Internal communications at its most basic is the messaging shared among the members of an organization. (Herman, n.d.). An important feature was missing during the Surmalu Explosion, which was situational awareness. Due to the chaotic scene, lack of concrete information has been experienced to immediately address the crisis. Therefore, Situational awareness is the first step in an informed response (Fraser, n.d.). It gives a basic structure of team cohesion within one organization, having an aligned and unified objective to follow which results with better problem-solving and quick identification of issues. For this reason, the first step for the managerial team to take is the internal communication groundwork for successful execution of strategy and initiative.

3.2. Establishing Successful Coordination Mechanisms as First Step

The lack of concrete and unified messaging coordination was central during this paper, therefore, the root to solve the issue starts from the very governmental bodies to the last and closely coordinated bodies. Firstly, a centralized coordination body should be created, can be defined as a crisis management committee, composed of the key involved aspects in the sphere, such as:

emergency services, law enforcement and its policies, and identification of the relevant stakeholders. Afterwards, defining the clear roles, responsibilities, and communication protocols for each member. From the analysis above, the research highlights the lack of concrete messaging. Therefore, each stakeholder should understand their crisis response approach to any case opposed to ensure seamless coordination. Afterwards, consistent meetings, exercise, and training can be done to update the stakeholders and responsible bodies on any enhanced protocol while practicing their collaboration skills in information sharing. Therefore, coordination mechanism is crucial to touch upon in Armenia's system since it fairly failed during Surmalu's Crisis Response as a quick crisis response case compared with slow crisis response cases in Armenia such COVID-19 and the War 2020.

3.3. Implication of fast crisis response mechanisms

A successful coordination approach has been done as mentioned during the COVID-19 and the War in 2020. As the UTFSIB representative has mentioned, the effective inter-departmental collaboration and cohesive communication strategies implemented, represented and demonstrated solidarity for their communication and management efforts. Therefore, Armenia's crisis and emergency response bodies should also have an effective crisis response strategy for fast crisis cases as much as it has for slow crisis responses. To say the least, Without a documented plan, how would you handle a crisis? (Prohibition, 2022).

3.4. Investing in leadership and capacity building

To continue with the fast crisis response efforts, and for it to be implemented, Armenia should directly invest in its leadership, professional development opportunities of the minor and

essential bodies with capacity building efforts. Through establishing a dedicated training academy of crisis management and emergency response, it will offer professional stimulation practices where complex crisis scenarios would be solved and professionally directed. This also contributes to the fact of fostering a culture of continuous improvement and within crisis response efforts that actively continuous learning, innovation, and improvement of every major incident or crisis to be exercised with the best crisis response practices.

4. Call to action based on the recommendations

This call to Action aims to structure the recommendations mentioned above while emphasizing and putting in order the steps that need to be taken as soon as possible for better crisis communications response mechanisms.

4.1. Deliver a national summit, conference, or crisis management and coordination stimulations after every crisis case that combine all important and involved stakeholders under one academia to assess and discuss the faced challenges during the crisis and on the spot to pinpoint the gaps, find the solutions, and put a call to actions to resolving them.

4.2. Conduct consistent funding and resources to crisis and emergency response bodies that put them in the best shape of performance metrics and progress with each occurring crisis event.

4.3. Conduct follow-up and training and establish a monitoring and evaluating framework to assess the effectiveness of management and coordination within the scope of the crisis while re-visiting the rules and regulations of the official reports and capacity-building efforts.

4.4. Maintain, create, and advance the community of emergency and crisis response department and foster it with a culture of collaboration, trust, and transparency among its internal communication departments and officials, with their respective external communication involved stakeholders who all together work under the same framework of equal distribution of responsibilities, teamwork, shared responsibility, and mental preparedness of collective efforts.

4.5. With As previously mentioned, there should be enhanced cross-sector collaboration that engages governmental bodies with non-governmental organizations. Civil defense efforts should be made since it plays a huge role in protecting civilian populations and their infrastructure, while their collaboration with governmental sectors. This helps massively in facilitating the multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination of task forces and focus groups on specific aspects of crisis management such as sheltering, logistics, psychological support, spot communication, and understanding, which promote and elevate the decision-making process in any case with marginalized and diverse needs with adequate address efforts.

4.6. The Republic of Armenia should prioritize investing and taking care of its governmental bodies and Ministry spokespeople specifically, to have a close relationship in delivering their unified message, enhance their intergovernmental communication strategies, conduct practices, solicit feedback and consistent training on how to effectively manage their crisis response standing as an official Governmental body.

4.7. Alongside the training programs of crisis management protocols, communication strategies for all stakeholders involved in crisis response, emergency responders, media personnel, and community leaders, collaboration with educational institutions stands at the forefront of professional associations and putting the base of not only being educated of crisis cases,

communication, and management scopes, as well as, develop standardized criteria that equip them with the latest knowledge of how to effectively navigate crisis situations as a professional and as a regular citizen.

4.8. Alongside educational institutions, on a long-term basis, a collaborative effort should be made on the cultural sensitivity aspect, as it stands as a representative of the existing norms, beliefs, and practices. With the many examples mentioned of cultural aspects that stand as a primary reason for the success or failure of a case, there should be a different approach that, with its change, a positive reflection can be made on the strategies and overall outlook of crisis response efforts. The Action can start from community leaders, cultural organizations, and minor groups who co-create effective and relevant messaging directions to local populations and even educational platforms in making the change and propagate the empathy, respect, and decent approach to any inclusive or day-to-day case, practice, problem, etc.

4.9. Other than official educational systems, launch targeted public awareness campaigns that educate the citizens on the basis of crisis response procedures, safety measures, and the importance of ethical behavior during emergency situations. Partnering with local communities, religious institutions, and even local businesses, engaging the public in small proactive disaster preparedness activities on a daily basis that bring individuals on an informed ground of emergency cases.

Therefore, the paper suggests with the previously mentioned steps on how to improve the stakeholder relationships that come mainly from improving, revising, and assessing the aspects of management, education, and coordination among all parties involved starting from governmental bodies, till regular citizens.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this case study was to analyze the crisis communication dynamics within the frames of the Surmalu shopping center explosion in Yerevan, Armenia, and to derive insights for improving future crisis management practices. The study was guided by three key research questions: first, it sought to evaluate how effectively the crisis response efforts were coordinated among the diverse stakeholders at the site of the explosion and identify the factors that influenced success or failure of this coordination; secondly, it examined the cooperation and coordination of communication efforts among key stakeholders in managing the immediate aftermath of the crisis, assessing how these efforts aligned with established crisis communication theories, practices, and protocols; lastly, the research aimed to propose systemic and procedural changes that can enhance crisis preparedness and communication to prevent similar incidents and ineffective responses in the future by drawing on the lessons learned from the Surmalu explosion.

Adopting the research methods of case study and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders of the crisis, the research findings revealed several key principles in the crisis communication and management efforts during the Surmalu shopping center explosion. The coordination among stakeholders, including the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES), National Security Service, Urban, Technical, and Fire Safety Inspection Body, the Yerevan Municipality, Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS), VOMA NGO and various volunteer groups, was a blend of strategic actions and significant challenges. Communication and coordination efforts, though with a shared mission to assist those affected, were characterised by inconsistent messaging and a lack of clear coordination, leading to confusion and mistrust among the public and stakeholders. The research

findings imply that effective crisis communication requires inter-departmental collaboration and a unified approach to messaging to avoid confusion and mitigate public panic. Clear channels of communication and designated spokespersons are essential to ensure coherence and trustworthiness in disseminating information. The absence of accountability and communication channels among stakeholders can exacerbate post-crisis challenges.

In addition, the findings urge for the need for systemic changes and improved capacity-building to better manage future crises, featuring the necessity of enhancing educational initiatives, strengthening management and coordination mechanisms, as well as fostering cultural sensitivity and ethical behavior. By focusing on capacity building, public education, and post-crisis evaluation, Armenia can establish a more resilient and responsive crisis communication framework. Investing in leadership development, improving internal communication, and promoting cross-sector collaboration are essential for creating a strong crisis response system. On the other hand, the role of media regulation and the importance of dissemination of accurate information cannot be overstated. This holistic approach will ensure the transformation of the current crisis response landscape by enforcing better preparedness, swift action, and effective recovery in the face of emergencies.

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Appendix A

UTFSIB's response to the blame attributed to the organization and rumors spread as a post on their Facebook page

“Clarification: regarding the inspection carried out by the inspection body of the RA Central Inspection Authority at the "Yerevan Canning Factory" CJSC company (Surmalu fair), regarding the recorded violation.

- The Urban Planning, Technical and Fire Safety Inspection Body of the Republic of Armenia informs on the occasion of the explosion that took place at the "Yerevan Canning Factory" CJSC Company (Surmalu Fair) that based on the instructions of the Head of the RA CTHA Inspection Body Gegham Shakhbazyan, the Fire and Technical Safety Specialists of the Yerevan Territorial Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2021 from March 9 to 16 inclusive, they conducted an inspection in the trade and public catering facilities operating in the mentioned company regarding compliance with the requirements of technical and fire safety legislation.
- As a result of the inspection, the specialists of the Ministry of Internal Affairs found out that on 18.06.2015 by the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Armenia more than ten different types of violations of the requirements of approved fire safety rules.
- In particular, the following violations were found:
 - The stalls and pavilions are not located at least 8 m away from the buildings;
 - Construction elements are not impregnated with fire protection solution;
 - The doors of the rooms (space) with the simultaneous presence of more than 15 people are not opened to the outside;

- Overhead power transmission lines are laid over roofs with fire-hazardous elements;
 - No anti-smoke protection system was installed in rooms (spaces) without natural lighting with an area exceeding 55 square meters;
 - At least 1 hydrant and fire hydrant were missing in the area of objects intended for external fire fighting;
 - Buildings are not equipped with fire hydrants equipped with an internal anti-fire water network so that each point is sprayed with a jet of water 1x2.5 l/s;
 - The rooms (spaces) of the two-story shopping hall exceeding 3500 square meters are not equipped with an automatic fire extinguishing system;
 - Independent fire extinguishing system was not equipped in the building of the trade organization with 3 or more floors regardless of the surface area;
 - Trade and public catering facilities were not equipped with automatic fire alarm systems;
 - Automatic fire fighting systems are not found in the device;
 - In "A", "B", "V" class buildings, fire extinguishers were not installed at a distance of no more than 30 meters from possible fire sources.
- The inspection body issued orders to the management of the company to eliminate the violations found in the building of the "Yerevan Canning Factory" CJSC company.
 - In relation to the latter, a measure of administrative responsibility was also applied by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, according to the features of Article 187, Part 1 of the RA Code on Administrative Offenses.”

Appendix B

Surmalu Market's response to the explosion crisis as a post on their Facebook page

“‘Yerevan Canning Factory’ CJSC (Surmalu Shopping Center) management and all staff express their deepest condolences to the relatives of our compatriots who died as a result of the explosion that took place on the territory of Surmalu Shopping Center on 14.08.2022, sharing this tremendous loss and unbearable grief.

With pain, we have to admit that a real tragedy happened, to which not a single conscious citizen remained indifferent. All of us are going through difficult days and we are obliged to overcome this grief by being kind to each other, to support and do everything possible to at least comfort the relatives of the innocent victims and the injured compatriots. Heavenly peace to all the victims, and we wish the injured a speedy recovery.

Peace, patience and strength to us all.”