

“One Size (Does Not) Fit All” The Importance of Cultural Values and Multilingual Realities in International Crisis Communication

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Abstract: As crises become increasingly global, effective crisis communication must account for diverse cultural values and multilingual realities. This paper examines how these factors influence the effectiveness, reach, and understanding of international crisis communication strategies. Findings highlight that dominant theories like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Restoration Theory often neglect cultural nuances, resulting in communication failures across different societies. Moreover, the lack of multilingual communication exacerbates vulnerabilities among minority-language speakers during crises. On the other side, the paper argues for the integration of cultural awareness and multilingual strategies into crisis communication practices to enhance audience engagement and response. Recommendations include culturally tailored messaging, long-term cultural training for crisis responders, and the use of multilingual media strategies supported by translation technologies.

Keywords — Crisis, Communication, Culture, Multilingualism, Vulnerability.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, crises transcend national borders and affect diverse cultural and linguistic communities. Yet much of the existing crisis communication scholarship remains rooted in standardized frameworks that inadequately address these complexities, overlooking the profound impact that cultural values and multilingual realities exert on communication effectiveness. This paper critically engages with these gaps by exploring how cultural and linguistic factors shape the reach, understanding, and outcomes of international crisis communication efforts. Following an overview of the limitations of current theoretical approaches, the discussion is structured around two key dimensions: the influence of cultural values on audience behavior and the challenges posed by multilingual environments in crisis contexts. Through a thematic literature review, the paper synthesizes emerging insights and identifies pathways toward more inclusive and context-sensitive communication strategies. Additionally, it offers a critical examination of why existing models fall short, how culture and language shape crisis outcomes, and what inclusive strategies can address these gaps. Finally, it presents both a conceptual framework and practical insights to help researchers and practitioners strengthen international crisis communication in an increasingly complex world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis communication research has traditionally relied on models such as the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Image Restoration Theory. However, scholars like Coombs and Laufer [1] and Dhanesh and Sriramesh [2]

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have criticized these frameworks for insufficiently addressing the complexities of international crises, where cultural and linguistic diversity significantly influence communication effectiveness. Several studies highlight that cultural values shape audience expectations, emotional responses, and interpretations during crises, suggesting that standardized communication strategies often fail across different cultural contexts [3, 4].

In parallel, multilingual realities present additional challenges. Research by Federici [5] and Uekusa [6] demonstrates that language barriers can exacerbate vulnerability during crises, particularly for minority-language speakers. An example of this is the COVID-19 pandemic, which further confirmed the critical role of effective translation, exposing cases like Indonesia, where un-adapted terminology led to public misunderstanding and increased vulnerability among minority-language speakers, as key information and concepts (e.g. “lockdown”) were communicated in English, a language unknown for many in Indonesia, especially those living in rural areas [7]. Regarding this experience, Uekusa [6] argued that the Multilingualism Theory should be applied when developing effective crisis communication messages, as it helps practitioners to deal with the difficulties of communicating in a multilingual environment. Additionally, Abukhalaf and von Medig [8] further emphasize the psycholinguistic challenges in emergency communication, arguing that differences in linguistic interpretation can result in life-threatening misunderstandings. As a result, scholars increasingly advocate for “glocalized” communication strategies and the systematic integration of multilingual practices to ensure more inclusive and effective crisis responses [9, 10].

METHODS OR PROCEDURES

This study employed a qualitative literature review methodology to explore how cultural values, and multilingual realities influence the effectiveness of international crisis communication strategies. The primary source for data collection was the Web of Science (WoS) database, complemented by the snowball sampling method to identify additional relevant studies. The search strategy was based on the use of specific keywords and topic strings, including “crisis communication,” “risk communication,” “emergency communication,” “disaster communication,” and “international,” with additional refinements using the key terms “culture,” “multilingualism,” and “globalization.” Due to the high number of initial results, keywords were also searched separately to ensure a focused selection.

In total, 570 initial records were identified, from which 12 peer-reviewed articles were selected based on their relevance to the research. An additional four studies were included through snowball sampling, resulting in a final dataset of 16 articles. The data extraction process focused on two main thematic categories: (A) Cultural Values and (B) Multilingual Realities and Translation Practices. A broad heuristic categorization approach was applied, reflecting the limited and fragmented nature of existing research in this field. This methodology ensures that findings are based on accessible, peer-reviewed academic sources and can be replicated by future researchers interested in expanding the discussion on international crisis communication.

RESULTS

The literature review revealed two central dimensions that significantly influence the effectiveness of international crisis communication: cultural values and multilingual realities. The analysis of the sixteen selected peer-reviewed articles shows that cultural factors are often overlooked in dominant crisis communication models, leading to ineffective messaging when addressing diverse audiences. Several studies emphasize that standardized communication strategies fail to account for differences in societal norms, risk perceptions, and emotional responses, ultimately weakening crisis responses across cultural contexts. Regarding multilingual realities, the findings highlight a widespread lack of linguistic inclusivity in crisis communication efforts. Language barriers were shown to exacerbate vulnerabilities among minority-language speakers, limiting their access to critical information during emergencies. Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates a growing consensus: crisis communication strategies must integrate cultural sensitivity and multilingual practices to enhance reach, understanding, and public trust. These findings provide a foundation for further discussion on how international crisis communication frameworks should evolve to address the increasingly complex realities of global crises.

The following table serves as a summary of the main findings from each category, common to most of the authors.

Cultural values	Multilingual reality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of culture in crisis communication is not effectively recognized. • The predominant theories in crisis communication (SCCT theory and Image Restoration theory) should be restructured to include culture when communicating about a crisis. • It is very unlikely that standardized communication messages will work for every public when a crisis is international. • Practitioners are not prepared to handle communications about international crises since they do not receive training on how to behave when faced with cultural diversity. • Apologetic messages can be useful if the cultural vector is included when thinking about a message and its purpose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an extended need for multilingual crisis communication practices. • Language barriers in crisis communication might create life-threatening situations for those who do not speak the dominant language. • Language barriers are vulnerability inducers during crises. • Crises affect minority-language speakers in general.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review strongly reinforce the argument that effective international crisis communication cannot rely on standardized models that neglect cultural and linguistic realities. Cultural values profoundly shape community behavior during crises, influencing how messages are received, trusted, and acted upon. As several scholars argue, the predominant frameworks, notably SCCT and the Image Restoration Theory, fail to incorporate these dimensions, risking ineffective or even counterproductive responses in global crises. In my view, there is a pressing need to critically rework these theories or complement them with models that account for cultural diversity, such as globalization approaches or identity-based frameworks.

Similarly, the persistent disregard for multilingual realities increases the vulnerability of already marginalized populations. It is striking that even in high-impact global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, multilingual communication was often inadequate. I believe this demonstrates a systemic underestimation of language as a critical vector of risk. Moving forward, crisis communication should not treat translation as an afterthought but embed it as a core part of preparedness and response strategies. While the literature points to promising directions, such as cultural briefings for response teams and the use of human and machine translation tools, current practice still lags significantly behind. I believe that without political will and institutional commitment to multilingual and culturally sensitive communication, these insights will remain underutilized.

CONCLUSION

This paper has studied how the consideration of the cultural values and the multilingual reality of a region affect the effectiveness and reach of international crisis communication messages. The results from this study conclude that, firstly, it is important to include both factors when tailoring crisis communication messages, as they will help practitioners to get a more effective response from their audience. Secondly, cultural values shape communities and their behaviors, meaning that, considering the already existing and still ongoing globalization processes, it is expected that companies, the public authorities, and the media communicate and respond to crisis events by adapting to cultural differences. Thirdly, the existence of language barriers and the lack of translators when communicating during a crisis makes the population that suffers from them more vulnerable to its effects. Therefore, building genuine capacity in these areas is not optional but essential if crisis communication is to become truly global and equitable. Besides these findings, it is important to remark that there are still some gaps to fill in the international crisis communication field and that this paper serves as an initial point for future researchers interested in investigating these matters. One of the possible gaps is the potential restructuring of Coomb's SCC Theory and Benoit's Image Restoration Theory for them to include cultural values in their explanations.

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