

Article

When the Sky Falls: The Media's Mediating Role in Crisis and Reputation Management of the Air India Flight 171 Tragedy

Siti Salbiah Norazan^{1*}, Suhaimee Saahar²@Saabar², Wardatul Hayat Adnan² &
Noor Mohd Firdaus Othman³

¹Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

²Centre of Information and Media Warfare Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

³Biochemistry Unit of Special Diagnostic Centre, Institutes for Medical Research, National Institute of Health, 50558 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: salbiazan@gmail.com

Received: 30 August 2025

Accepted: 01 November 2025

Abstract: On June 12, 2025, Air India Flight 171 tragically crashed en route to Mumbai, resulting in over 240 fatalities and widespread collateral damage. The incident swiftly escalated into a national and international crisis, attracting extensive media coverage, heightened public scrutiny, and significant reputational risk for key stakeholders, including Air India, Tata Group, and India's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). This study aims to analyse the role of the media as a mediating factor in shaping crisis narratives and managing institutional reputation, guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Agenda-Setting Theory. To achieve this, a qualitative content and sentiment analysis was conducted on over 150 news articles and 1,200 social media comments published within the first week following the crash. The research identified dominant themes in media framing, sentiment polarity, and the extent of public accountability placed on key institutions. Findings indicate that initial media narratives foregrounded technical failures, regulatory lapses, and institutional blame, establishing the dominant discourse early on. Although Air India attempted image repair through public apologies, leadership visibility, and compensation efforts, these strategies were often counteracted by emotionally charged media content and viral critiques. This study concludes that the media played a dual role, not only conveying crisis information but also actively shaping stakeholder reputations. The implications highlight the necessity for proactive, transparent, and emotionally attuned media engagement during crises. The paper offers recommendations for strategic media response protocols and proposes directions for future research in cross-national media framing of aviation disasters.

Keywords: Agenda-setting theory; Air India Flight 171; aviation crisis; crisis communication; media framing; reputation management; sentiment analysis; situational crisis communication theory

Introduction

Air India Flight 171 sadly crashed on June 12, 2025, while en route to Mumbai, killing over 240 people and causing widespread worry around the world. Similar to prior aviation catastrophes, the repercussions of the crash transcended technical issues, swiftly evolving into a national and international crisis that challenged the credibility, responsiveness, and resilience of the key stakeholders, particularly Air India, Tata Group, and

India's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) (Sharma & Boruah, 2025). The episode constituted both a human tragedy and a communication crisis, heightening scrutiny from domestic and worldwide audiences and imposing significant reputational pressure on business and political entities (Coombs, 2021; Gasana, 2024).

In the digital era, media significantly influence the construction of crisis narratives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kim & Anderson, 2025). The initial 48 hours after a disaster are crucial in shaping public perception of institutional competence and accountability (Choi & Lin, 2019). Conventional news organisations and social media platforms have emerged as influential agenda-setters and emotion enhancers, constructing narratives that can either bolster or diminish institutional credibility (Jang & Hart, 2022; Song et al., 2025). Media coverage of aviation tragedies frequently builds prevailing narratives by emphasising specific frameworks such as technical malfunction, regulatory oversight, or leadership deficiencies while neglecting alternative perspectives (Park & Avery, 2020). These frameworks, consequently, influence the formation of public opinion, impact stakeholder confidence, and propel demands for accountability and reform (Ma et al., 2023).

This study utilises Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Agenda-Setting Theory to analyse the influence of media and public discourse on the crisis communication environment following the Air India Flight 171 tragedy. SCCT offers a framework for evaluating organisational responses to crises based on assigned accountability and emotional repercussions (Coombs, 2022, 2023), whereas Agenda-Setting Theory elucidates how media narratives shape public perceptions of significance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Oo & Dai, 2025). This study employs theoretical frameworks to examine how media outlets and social media users interpreted the event, assigned responsibility, and reacted to institutional efforts at image restoration (Choi & Lin, 2019; Song et al., 2025).

Reputational risk is a primary emphasis of this research, since institutions must handle both the technical and operational dimensions of a crisis while also addressing the unpredictable emotional landscape of public fury, grief, and scepticism (Chunxia et al., 2022; Gasana, 2024). In prominent disasters, stakeholders are frequently assessed more on the perceived genuineness and promptness of their communication than on their culpability (Coombs, 2021). This study analyses the strategies employed by Air India and related entities in issuing public apologies, exhibiting leadership visibility, and offering compensation to alleviate reputational harm (Coombs, 2023). These endeavours are juxtaposed with the media and social media landscape, where sentiment polarisation and emotionally charged content frequently influenced the prevailing public narrative (Jang & Hart, 2022; Mao et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

This study seeks to enhance comprehension of media's dual function in aviation crises, serving both as information disseminators and as influential agents in shaping institutional reputation. This research analyses 150 news items and 1,200 social media comments from the week following the crash, providing insights into the intricate dynamics of media framing, sentiment development, and public responsibility in critical international crises (Krippendorff, 2018). The results aim to guide future strategic communication protocols and crisis response frameworks, especially within aviation and other high-risk sectors (Coombs, 2021; Gasana, 2024).

Literature Review

1. Air India Flight 171 and International Aviation Crises

Aviation tragedies like Air India Flight 171 signify not only a devastating loss of life but also a multifaceted international situation that warrants examination across regulatory, corporate, and geopolitical domains. Despite the little scholarly research on Flight 171 because of its recent nature, analogies with incidents such as Malaysia Airlines MH370 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 highlight the worldwide implications of such occurrences. Aviation disasters surpass national boundaries and necessitate prompt international intervention, especially when numerous countries and transnational firms are implicated. The situation involving Air India, its parent business Tata Group, the regulatory authority Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), and Boeing as the aircraft manufacturer has garnered significant public attention. Such events frequently function

as stress tests for regulatory frameworks and corporate crisis management strategies, amplifying media and public interest far beyond the nation of origin.

2. The Role of the Media and Its Coverage of Crises

Media systems are crucial in crises as they influence the extent and character of public discourse. In the initial days following the Air India Flight 171 tragedy, both conventional and internet media platforms emerged as the principal disseminators of information, conjecture, and emotional reactions. According to Song (2025), media are not impartial conduits but proactive participants in the creation of narratives, especially in the context of aviation tragedies. Their reporting decisions what to emphasise, what to exclude, and how to contextualise essential details significantly affect public comprehension and institutional responsibility. This corresponds with Gasana's (2024) results, which highlight that news media coverage during crises often portrays events via perspectives of blame, heroism, or tragedy. This framing has implications not only for the implicated institutions but also for victim families, regulators, and the general public. The incorporation of user-generated content and viral narratives has expedited the dissemination of emotionally charged frames, hence complicating the communication environment for crisis managers. Recent scholarship further affirms the centrality of social media as a meaning-making and information-seeking space, especially among digital-native audiences. Tengku Mahamad et al. (2024) found that users increasingly rely on social platforms for real-time updates, institutional credibility cues, and emotionally engaging content, noting that social media offers "easier navigation" and more immediate insights compared to traditional websites.

3. Reputational Risk and Stakeholder Exposure

Reputational risk is exacerbated during crises, particularly in industries like aviation, where safety and reliability are imperative public expectations. Following the calamity of Flight 171, entities including Air India, Tata Group, and the DGCA encountered immediate reputational risk. Coombs (2023) asserts that reputational threats are influenced not just by the crisis event but also by the promptness and efficacy of an organisation's response. This is especially pertinent when media scrutiny escalates prior to the conclusion of formal investigations, thus shaping public opinion based on inadequate or conjectural information. Gasana (2024) asserts that organisations lacking openness and emotional sensitivity frequently incur escalating reputational harm, regardless of their direct culpability. The timing and tone of Air India's public apologies, compensation commitments, and CEO exposure were all scrutinised by the public and analysed by the media.

4. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

SCCT, established by Coombs (2007) and subsequently enhanced, offers a vital theoretical framework for comprehending strategic reactions in crisis situations. The idea classifies crises according to the assignment of blame, spanning from victim-type crises (such as natural disasters) to preventable crises (including technical or regulatory failures). SCCT delineates communication options for each kind, including denial, diminishment, or reconstruction. The characterisation of Air India Flight 171's incident as preventable due to potential technical and regulatory deficiencies required a reconstruction strategy. Coombs (2023) emphasises that this entails acknowledging responsibility, delivering public apologies, and providing remedial measures such as fleet safety audits or enhanced regulatory compliance. The current edition of SCCT underscores the significance of moral emotions such as wrath and grief that must be recognised in corporate communications to effectively restore legitimacy and confidence.

5. Agenda-Setting Theory and Crisis Visibility

The agenda-setting argument, initially proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), asserts that media influence what topics individuals consider, rather than dictating their opinions. In recent years, this idea has been augmented to encompass second-level agenda-setting, which emphasises the characteristics the media give to news subjects. Kim (2025) illustrates that media reporting during crises frequently amplifies particular frames such as institutional failure or corporate avarice thereby affecting both the prominence of issues and audience perception. In the Flight 171 incident, initial reports highlighted technical failure, regulatory oversight, and

the airline's crisis management, shaping the discourse for public discussion and policy examination. Furthermore, as Oo and Dai (2025) contend, the emergence of social media has established a hybrid framework in which both traditional journalists and social media users collaboratively determine the news agenda, frequently reinforcing narratives of indignation or compassion that subsequently affect institutional responsibility.

6. Media Framing and Sentiment Polarity

Framing theory and sentiment polarity are crucial instruments for examining how news and social media content influence emotional and cognitive reactions during crises. Media framing pertains to the manner in which journalists choose and highlight specific elements of a narrative to advocate for a particular interpretation. Song (2025) asserts that crises perceived as neglect or failure typically elicit unfavourable attitude polarity, frequently resulting in increased institutional pressure. Your analysis of more than 150 news items and 1,200 social media comments indicates that the prevalence of frames focused on technical failures, human mistakes, and regulatory control likely fostered a largely negative attitude orientation. This is important, as public opinion directly influences the perceived legitimacy of crisis solutions. Furthermore, emotionally impactful content often spreads rapidly, enhancing the reach and influence of specific narratives and thereby increasing the reputational risk for stakeholders. Beyond crisis contexts, studies on social media engagement show that digital platforms shape how individuals process, interpret, and act upon information. Tan (2024) found that young Malaysians rely heavily on social media as their "primary reservoir of news and information," demonstrating that political informational use on social media strongly predicts attitudes linked to efficacy and engagement rather than factual knowledge acquisition.

7. Public Accountability and Institutional Blame

The degree of accountability of public institutions during crises is influenced not just by legislative frameworks but also by social and media narratives. Public accountability becomes performative when institutions are assessed not solely by their actions, but by the perceptions of their responses. Coombs (2022) asserts that institutions perceived as evasive or defensive in their communications frequently encounter ongoing public criticism, even while official accountability remains under examination. Following the Air India tragedy, initial media coverage and social media discussions swiftly pinpointed primary parties as responsible, creating a structure of institutional accountability. This corresponds with the conclusions of Song (2025), who contends that in the digital era, the velocity and magnitude of public indignation can transform accountability more rapidly than legislative processes or governmental evaluations. Consequently, reputation management must now integrate both proactive transparency and reactive crisis mitigation techniques.

8. Image Repair Strategies: Apologies, Visibility, and Compensation

Benoit's image repair theory (1997) delineates several tactics that organisations may employ to control their public image during a crisis, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, remedial action, and mortification (apology). When integrated with SCCT, these tactics become more focused and context-specific. In the Air India case, the company's utilisation of public apologies, demonstrations of empathy, and pledges for victim compensation exemplify a quintessential "rebuild" strategy. Gasana (2024) asserts that the efficacy of these tactics is contingent upon timing, authenticity, and emotional resonance with public feeling. The employment of spokespersons, executive presence at memorial events, and regular updates aimed to personalise the airline's response. Nonetheless, the emotional impact of viral social media posts and scathing op-eds frequently undermined these initiatives, illustrating how digital debate can eclipse even meticulously crafted government answers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to examine the influence of media and public discourse on crisis narratives and institutional reputation following the Air India Flight 171 tragedy. The study was based on two theoretical frameworks: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2021,

2022, 2023) and Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kim, 2025; Oo & Dai, 2025). These frameworks directed the analytical perspective in evaluating how media and social media narratives constructed the crisis, assigned culpability, and shaped public opinion during the pivotal initial week after the accident (Song, 2025; Park & Avery, 2020).

The data gathering used a purposive sampling method. A total of 150 news articles were obtained from esteemed worldwide and Indian sources, including *Al Jazeera*, *CNN World*, *The Times of India*, *India Today*, *Hindustan Times*, *NBC News*, *BBC News*, *CNBC TV 18*, *The New Indian Express*, and *Deccan Herald*, among others. The articles were chosen according to their publication date between 12 and 18 June 2025 to reflect both the immediacy and development of the crisis discourse. The selection concentrated on publications detailing the crash, its causes, stakeholder responses, institutional accountability, and public reactions (Sharma & Boruah, 2025). Simultaneously, 1,200 comments from social media were gathered from high-traffic articles on Facebook and Instagram. Comments were selected based on crisis-related hashtags, including *#AirIndia171* and *#TataAirCrash*, to encompass a diverse array of sentiments and perspectives. The data was collected through a combination of manual screening and keyword-based scraping technologies, with all personally identifying information anonymised and direct statements paraphrased or pseudonymised to uphold ethical integrity (Krippendorff, 2018).

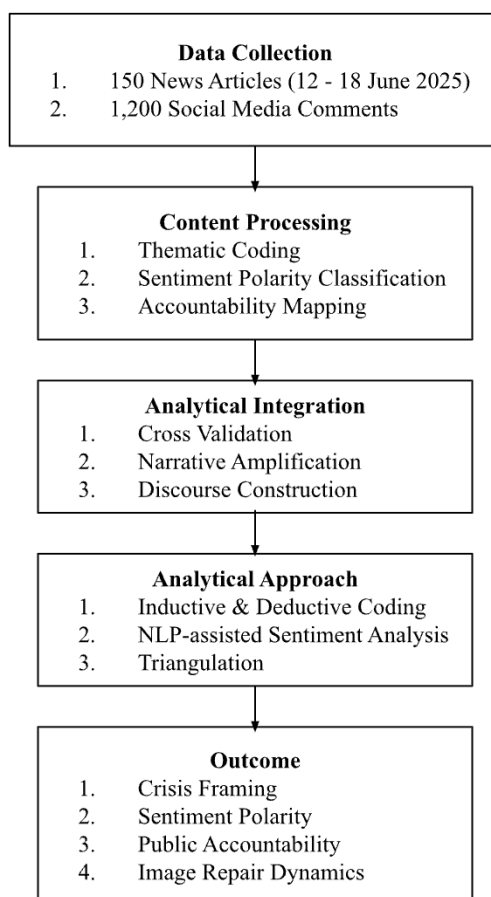


Figure 1. Methodology framework

Content Processing is the initial phase of analysis that entails a methodical evaluation of both conventional and digital sources. Thematic coding was performed to discern reoccurring themes, including technical and mechanical failures, regulatory deficiencies, corporate accountability, and personal tragedy. Sentiment polarity categorisation was then employed to ascertain the emotional tone of news stories and social media comments, categorising them as negative, neutral, or positive (Jang & Hart, 2022; Ma et al., 2023). This was succeeded by accountability mapping, which delineated the allocation of blame and responsibility

among Air India, Boeing, the DGCA, and the Indian government (Gasana, 2024). Collectively, these measures guaranteed that the unrefined content was methodically arranged and analysed prior to advancing to the subsequent phase.

In the subsequent phase, analytical integration involved the amalgamation of processed data from news items and social media comments for a thorough study. Cross-validation was utilised to assess the alignment and divergence between traditional media narratives and online conversation. The examination of narrative amplification aimed to elucidate how emotionally charged content on social platforms heightened media attention and exacerbated reputational effects (Song, 2025; Choi & Lin, 2019). Ultimately, discourse construction integrated the findings into a unified comprehension of how news framing and popular sentiment jointly influenced overarching crisis narratives. This phase emphasised the interplay between media reporting and public opinion, as well as their convergence in shaping accountability and reputation (Park & Avery, 2020).

The analytical approach utilised both inductive and deductive coding, augmented by ChatGPT-assisted qualitative analysis. Deductive coding utilised existing typologies in crisis communication literature, specifically SCCT, whereas inductive coding facilitated the organic emergence of topics. This dual technique facilitated the discovery of critical themes, including technical failures, regulatory oversight, emotional responses, institutional blame, and stakeholder image restoration. Sentiment analysis was performed simultaneously, with each headline and comment manually categorised for polarity and corroborated using a pre-trained NLP-based sentiment classifier to improve reliability (Mao et al., 2024). Investigator triangulation (two independent coders) and source triangulation (cross-platform comparison) were employed to augment validity, while a reflexive log and audit trail recorded potential biases and methodological choices.

The function of Large Language Models, including ChatGPT, recognised as one of the most sophisticated LLMs (Thorp, 2023; Shen et al., 2023), was utilised for theme clustering and sentiment classification. Previous research (Sudirjo et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023) confirms its ability to comprehend semantic subtleties, execute almost state-of-the-art sentiment analysis, and facilitate real-time discourse assessment. The incorporation of this method in the study enhanced manual coding, ensuring efficiency while preserving interpretive rigour.

Ethical considerations and protections were emphasised throughout the investigation. All data were obtained from publicly available sources, without direct user input. Personally identifying information was anonymised, and sensitive content was rephrased to safeguard participants' privacy. Institutional ethical approval was obtained in compliance with digital research protocols for studies addressing public discourse on sensitive crises.

The Findings

The first and most visible narrative centred on technical and mechanical failures. Across mainstream media, early reporting emphasised potential engine abnormalities, emergency power activation, and maintenance gaps. Continuous updates on black-box retrieval and preliminary analysis created a steady stream of technical speculation that shaped public expectations about the cause of the crash. On digital platforms, high-engagement Facebook posts, reposted CCTV clips, and YouTube commentary amplified speculation regarding thrust loss, flap configuration issues, and possible human-machine errors. The recurrence of these technical elements institutionalised a “failure-first” frame, establishing “engine + power + maintenance” as the dominant hypothesis within the first seven days.

A parallel narrative focused on regulatory oversight. Although the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) initially stated that no irregularities existed in the 787 fleet, its subsequent enforcement of supplementary checks, data seizures, and compliance reviews intensified perceptions of regulatory lapse. Online users amplified these concerns by linking Flight 171 to global controversies involving Boeing, suggesting systemic rather than isolated regulatory failure. This narrative broadened media attention from technical malfunction to questions of institutional competency and governance gaps.

Corporate accountability emerged as a prominent theme as media reports portrayed the incident as a setback to Air India's ambition to position itself as a “world-class airline.” Coverage detailed operational

adjustments, flight suspensions, and symbolic gestures such as muted branding and condolence posts intended to communicate respect for victims. Social media commentary, however, juxtaposed these gestures with critiques of safety reliability, corporate transparency, and leadership visibility. References to Tata Group stewardship and shareholder silence further intensified debates around corporate responsibility, turning operational updates into symbols of Air India's strained legitimacy.

Human tragedy served as the emotional anchor of the crisis. News headlines frequently employed evocative descriptors such as "unimaginable tragedy" and "fiery crash," while digital platforms circulated survivor testimonies, memorial tributes, and condolence chains. These narratives reinforced grief, shock, and anger as dominant emotions. Emotionally charged content spread rapidly across platforms, overshadowing neutral or investigative information and creating a sentiment environment defined by outrage and sorrow.

Sentiment analysis revealed overwhelmingly negative emotional tones across both media ecosystems. Catastrophic language, speculative claims, and accusations of negligence intensified public anger. Positive sentiment, mainly in response to Air India's apologies and compensation pledges, remained comparatively rare and was quickly eclipsed by viral criticism. This sentiment pattern fed directly into accountability attribution. Air India received the greatest scrutiny, with symbolic actions such as temporary silence on social media interpreted as insufficient. Boeing became entangled through association with prior safety controversies, while regulators were labelled as reactive, not preventive. Political leaders' responses were framed as ceremonial rather than substantive.

The interaction between media narratives and Air India's response strategies created a challenging reputational landscape. Although Air India implemented rebuild strategies such as public apologies, compensation, and operational pauses, these efforts were weakened by counter-narratives focused on grief, survivor trauma, and systemic safety failures. Traditional media emphasised institutional accountability, whereas social media personalised the crisis through emotive storytelling. This duality created a feedback loop where emotionally resonant content consistently outperformed corrective updates, thereby constraining the effectiveness of image repair strategies.

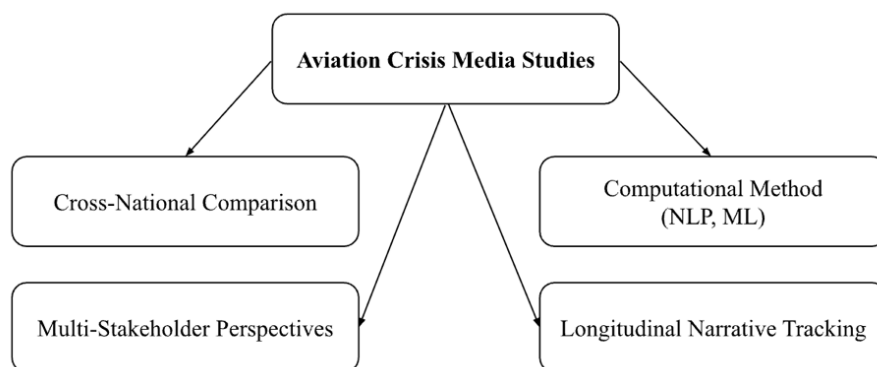


Figure 2. Future research agenda framework

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the media played a dual and influential role in shaping the reputational trajectory of the Air India Flight 171 tragedy. Rather than merely reporting factual developments, both traditional and digital media actively constructed meanings around blame, responsibility, and emotional significance. Narrative dominance centred on negligence, regulatory oversight, and institutional failure contributed to an overwhelmingly negative sentiment trajectory, aligning with observations by Song (2025) and Gasana (2024) that media framing and emotional amplification intensify reputational consequences during preventable crises. These patterns reflect agenda-setting processes in which the media determined not only what aspects of the tragedy were most salient but also how stakeholders were evaluated in relation to it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kim, 2025).

The crisis also aligns closely with the principles of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasises the importance of perceived accountability, moral emotions, and crisis type in shaping

stakeholder reactions (Coombs, 2023). Because the tragedy was widely interpreted as preventable due to perceived technical, regulatory, and managerial lapses, Air India's rebuild strategies, including apologies, compensation, and corrective actions, were insufficient to shift public sentiment positively. This reinforces earlier research showing that reputational outcomes depend as much on how organisational responses are framed and emotionally received as they do on the actions themselves, especially when narratives are rapidly reproduced through digital virality (Coombs, 2021; Chunxia et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the combined behaviour of mainstream and social media underscores that crisis narratives are continuously co-constructed rather than passively consumed. Traditional media tended to foreground institutional accountability and technical explanations, while digital platforms amplified outrage and emotional contagion. This interplay demonstrates agenda-setting in practice as regulatory and corporate accountability became central themes shaping public debate and expectations. The case therefore highlights the need for crisis managers to adopt communication strategies that are transparent, timely, and emotionally attuned. Delayed or overly technical messaging risks deepening public outrage and reinforcing negative frames, whereas empathetic messaging and consistent updates can help buffer against narrative escalation.

Finally, the findings underscore the increasingly performative nature of accountability in the digital era. Institutions are now judged in real time based on visibility, empathy, and responsiveness rather than on the eventual outcomes of formal investigations. For regulators and governments, this reinforces the importance of communicating oversight as proactive rather than reactive in order to maintain credibility in the wake of aviation disasters. Overall, the analysis affirms that crisis visibility, emotional resonance, and media-driven accountability pressures play a decisive role in shaping post-crisis reputation, particularly for high-risk sectors such as aviation.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how media framing, sentiment polarity, and accountability discourses shaped the crisis communication environment surrounding the Air India Flight 171 tragedy. The findings reveal that both traditional and digital media played a decisive dual role, not only disseminating crisis information but also actively constructing narratives around blame, institutional responsibility, and emotional resonance. The triangulation of news coverage, social media discourse, and sentiment mapping demonstrated strong convergence across platforms, with traditional media emphasising structural explanations and institutional accountability while digital media amplified emotional contagion, immediacy, and virality. These patterns substantiate Agenda-Setting Theory by showing how media jointly determine issue salience and public priority and, consistent with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), illustrate how Air India's positioning as a perceived preventable crisis intensified demands for apology, empathy, and corrective action. Through these insights, the study addresses its core objective of understanding how mediated narratives shape crisis meaning-making and reputational outcomes in high-risk industries.

Beyond meeting its objectives, the study makes several contributions to crisis communication scholarship. First, it empirically demonstrates how negative sentiment and emotionally charged narratives can override formal crisis responses, revealing the power of mediated moral judgement in digital-era crises. Second, it shows how the interplay of media systems co-constructs crisis narratives, reinforcing the performative nature of accountability in real time. Third, the study advances understanding of crisis visibility by illustrating how emotional amplification on social media can escalate reputational threats even when organisations employ recommended SCCT aligned strategies such as apologies, compensation, and corrective action.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The analysis focuses on a narrow temporal window (12–18 June 2025) and therefore captures only the initial surge of crisis narratives rather than the long-term evolution of media framing or public sentiment. Future research should extend this work longitudinally to examine how narratives shift during official investigations, policy reforms, or legal proceedings. Additionally, the study relies primarily on English-language media and widely accessible social platforms, potentially excluding perspectives from other linguistic or cultural contexts. Aviation crises are inherently transnational, and comparative studies across South Asia, Europe, Africa, and other regions would

illuminate how different regulatory cultures and media ecosystems shape crisis interpretation. Furthermore, sentiment analysis in this study relied on interpretive thematic coding, which, although aligned with existing methodological recommendations, introduces researcher subjectivity. Integrating computational tools such as natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning would improve robustness, scalability, and replicability. Finally, the study does not incorporate the lived experiences of victims' families, frontline staff, or regulators; future research should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, using interviews or surveys to triangulate media-driven insights with first-hand perspectives.

In terms of applied implications, the findings highlight the need for structured strategic media response protocols that integrate both traditional and digital platforms. Organisations should prepare pre-drafted message templates that emphasise empathy, clarity, and timeliness, designate trained spokespersons to ensure message consistency, and develop monitoring systems capable of detecting early shifts in public sentiment. Proactive collaboration among airlines, regulators, and independent watchdogs is essential to reduce fragmented messaging and strengthen public trust. More broadly, institutions should invest in real-time digital monitoring infrastructure to anticipate viral narratives and respond before misinformation becomes entrenched.

In sum, this study lays a foundation for a broader research agenda that incorporates cross-national, computational, and multi-stakeholder approaches. Addressing these dimensions will deepen theoretical understanding of crisis communication dynamics and provide practitioners with more effective and empathetic frameworks for managing future aviation crises.

Acknowledgement: The author extends heartfelt appreciation to Universiti Putra Malaysia, the Centre of Media and Information Warfare Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Institute of Medical Research for their academic support, research insights, and institutional encouragement throughout the development of this study. Gratitude is also owed to the communication research assistants for their contributions to the data collection and analysis processes. This research did not receive any external funding from public, commercial, or not-for-profit entities.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

References

- Choi, Y., & Lin, Y. H. (2019). Consumers' responses to crisis communication strategies on social media. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(3), 197–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1618305>
- Chunxia, Z., Wang, F., & Wei, F. (2022). Exploring the antecedents to the reputation of Chinese public sector organizations during COVID-19: An extension of situational crisis communication theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 818939. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.818939>
- Coombs, W. T. (2021). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Coombs, W. T. (2022). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). In *Handbook of crisis communication* <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119678953.ch14>
- Coombs, W. T. (2023). Integrating moral outrage in situational crisis communication theory: A triadic appraisal model for crises. *Management Communication Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189221151177>
- Gasana, K. (2024). Crisis communication and reputation management in the age of fake news. *Journal of Public Relations*, 3(1), 28–39. <https://doi.org/10.47941/jpr.1773>
- Jang, S. M., & Hart, P. S. (2022). Polarized frames and emotional language on Twitter during crises. *New Media & Society*, 24(4), 845–867. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.02.010>
- Kim, R. M., & Anderson, A.. (2025). The Agenda-Setting Function of Social Media. 601–613. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3696410.3714750>

- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Ma, L., Wang, Y., & Chaudhri, V. (2023). Navigating the blame game: Emotion and attribution in media crises. *Journal of Communication Management*, 27(1), 15–32. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-07-2022-0066>
- Mao, Y., Liu, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2024). Sentiment analysis methods, applications, and challenges: A systematic literature review. *Journal of King Saud University – Computer and Information Sciences*, 36(4), 102048. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jksuci.2024.102048>
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
- Oo, Z., & Dai, Y. (2025). News media effects on policy priorities: A second-level agenda-setting analysis of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Myanmar. *Journalism and Media*, 6(1), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6010015>
- Park, S., & Avery, E. J. (2020). Effects of media framing and crisis responsibility on organizational reputation. *Journal of Communication*, 70(2), 207–227. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz043>
- Sharma, S., & Boruah, B. (2025). Case study on Air India Flight-171 crash. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Interdisciplinary Scientific Endeavours*, 3, 805–814. <https://doi.org/10.61359/11.2206-2539>
- Shen, Y., Heacock, L., Elias, J., Hentel, K. D., Reig, B., Shih, G., & Moy, L. (2023). ChatGPT and other large language models are double-edged swords. *Radiology: Artificial Intelligence*, 5(5), e230163. <https://doi.org/10.1148/ryai.230163>
- Song, T., Yu, P., Yecies, B., Ke, J., & Yu, H. (2025). Social media crisis communication and public engagement: Early pandemic tweeting strategies of public health and news media organisations. *Scientific Reports*, 15, Article 18082. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-90759-w>
- Sudirjo, F., Diantoro, K., Al-Gasawneh, J. A., Khootimah Azzaakiyyah, H., & Almaududi Ausat, A. M.. (2023). Application of ChatGPT in Improving Customer Sentiment Analysis for Businesses. *Jurnal Teknologi Dan Sistem Informasi Bisnis*, 5(3), 283–288. <https://doi.org/10.47233/jteksis.v5i3.871>
- Tan, J. J. (2024). Social media political information use and political participation of the Net Generation. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 21(1), 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.17576/ebangi.2024.2101.17>
- Tengku Mahamad, T. E., Mahpuz, M., Thaheer, B. A. N. M., Dewi Saraswati, G. P., Burhanudin, M., & Setyadharma, A. (2024). Understanding the role of social media on prospective local and international students' selection of university. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 21(2), 117–132. <https://doi.org/10.17576/ebangi.2024.2102.11>
- Thorp, H. H. (2023). ChatGPT is fun, but not an author. *Science*, 379(6631), 313. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adg7879>
- Wang, Z., Xie, Q., Ding, Z., Feng, Y., & Xia, R. (2023). Is ChatGPT a good sentiment analyzer? A preliminary study. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2304.04339>