Assessing the effectiveness of social media in crisis communication: A case study of Mopani Copper Mine, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The increasing adoption of social media in Zambia presents new opportunities and challenges for organisational crisis communication, particularly within high-risk sectors such as mining. This study assessed the effectiveness of social media in crisis communication at Mopani Copper Mines. The theoretical underpinning of the study was the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework. The research was guided by a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The target population for this study comprises key stakeholders who are directly involved in Mopani Copper Mine's crisis communication efforts. This includes senior management, members of the corporate communication team, and other employees with direct experience in crisis response and management. The study employed systematic random sampling to select participants for the quantitative component. A total of 53 respondents participated in the quantitative survey, while 11 key informants took part in semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo. The findings reveal that Facebook is the primary social media platform used during crisis situations, with 66% of respondents identifying it as the main channel. LinkedIn was identified by 28.3% of respondents, while minimal usage was reported for Twitter (1.9%) and WhatsApp (3.8%). Descriptive statistical analysis further showed a moderate to high perceived effectiveness of social media in crisis communication, with a mean score of 3.82 indicating that respondents generally agreed that social media enhances timely information dissemination. A mean score of 3.75 suggested that social media contributes to improved stakeholder engagement during crises, while a mean of 3.68 reflected agreement that it helps in mitigating reputational damage. However, barriers such as limited digital skills, delayed internal approval processes, and concerns about misinformation were identified. Qualitative findings supported the quantitative results by revealing that while social media is increasingly integrated into crisis communication strategies, its use remains partly reactive rather than fully strategic. Participants emphasised the importance of speed, transparency, and message consistency in maintaining stakeholder trust during crises. The study concludes that social media plays a significant but not yet fully optimised role in crisis communication at Mopani Copper Mines. It recommends the development of structured digital crisis communication frameworks, capacity building in digital communication skills, and clearer internal approval protocols to enhance responsiveness. The findings contribute context-specific evidence to the limited literature on social media use in crisis communication within Zambia's mining sector.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Effectiveness, Mopani Copper Mine, Social Media, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication has emerged as an important tool in modern organisational management, serving as the lifeline between an entity and its stakeholders during times of uncertainty and upheaval (Matías & Cardoso, 2023). It encompasses the strategies, protocols, and messages deployed by organisations to address emergencies, mitigate damage, and maintain public trust. In an era where information travels at unprecedented speeds, effective crisis communication can mean the difference between an organisation's survival and its downfall (Banyongen, 2023). Social media has altered how crisis communication is handled (Stephens & Robertson, 2022). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn have created direct channels between organisations and their audiences, enabling real-time information dissemination and engagement (Cartwright et al., 2021). Social media's role in crisis communication has become increasingly pivotal, allowing for rapid message distribution, stakeholder interaction, and the potential to shape narratives proactively. However, this immediacy has increased the demands for responsive and strategic crisis communication (Civelek et al., 2016).

The importance of crisis communication has grown in sectors like mining sector which are inherently exposed to various crises due to the complex geological, environmental, economic, and social nature of the industry (Ayaaba et al., 2024). These crises threaten the stability and profitability of mining companies and have consequences for local communities and the broader economy. In Zambia, the mining industry has increasingly been plagued by crises such

as land degradation, water pollution, labour disputes, worker strikes, and safety incidents. Labour disputes, worker strikes, and safety incidents are common, often arising from poor working conditions, wage disagreements, or inadequate health and safety measures (Sakala, 2020). These accidents and crises erode public trust in mining companies. Failure to address these crises has resulted in reputational damage, legal penalties, and even the revocation of mining licenses (Chisalu, 2025).

Therefore, effective crisis management and crisis communication strategies have become a necessity for the mining sector (Rushkovskyi & Rasshyvalov, 2023). This requires integrating risk assessment techniques, and transparent communication with stakeholders to build trust and long-term stability in the industry (Barton, 2023). Failure to communicate transparently and effectively during a crisis can worsen the situation, leading to misinformation, public outrage, and regulatory intervention. Therefore, social media has increasingly become a key tool for crisis communication in the mining sector as it allows companies to provide real-time updates, clarify misinformation, and engage directly with the public. However, social media can also amplify crises if not managed properly. A delayed or poorly designed response can make tensions worse and damage a company's credibility. As a result, mining firms must develop comprehensive social media policies and crisis response teams to monitor and manage digital interactions effectively.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Zambia, as in many developing countries, the adoption of social media has been rapid and widespread. There were 7.29 million individuals using the internet in Zambia at the end of 2025, with online penetration at 33.0 percent. In terms of social media penetration, Zambia is home to 4.30 million social media users, equating to 18.6 percent of the total population and 70 percent of internet users and this figure is growing, especially among the youth (Kemp, 2023). This shift presents opportunities for companies to communicate with stakeholders during the time of crisis (Hudson et al., 2016). Social media platforms have begun to play an increasingly visible role in information dissemination, particularly among urban youth and economically active populations. Facebook alone reaches over 4.1 million Zambians and remains the largest platform by user base, while platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn are gradually gaining traction among professionals and influencers (StatCounter, 2026).

In Zambia, the mining sector is not immune to crises, ranging from environmental concerns and safety incidents to labour disputes and market fluctuations. Recent years have seen several high-profile incidents that have tested the crisis communication capabilities of mining companies operating in the country (AP, 2023). Mopani Copper Mines (MCM) has not been immune to such high-profile crises. In January 2026, a tragic blasting accident at Mopani's South Ore Body (SOB) shaft claimed the lives of two miners, immediately halting operations and sparking national concern (Mupeta, 2026). This followed earlier fatal accidents in 2022 at the Smelter Concentrate Shed, alongside compounding financial and operational crises stemming from a $436 million loss in 2023 following the departure of Glencore (Mopani Copper Mines Plc, 2024; Muchiya, 2022).

Such crises highlight the need for effective communication strategies that can quickly reach diverse stakeholders and the broader public. In the Zambian mining context, the extent to which social media is incorporated into official crisis communication practices remains unclear. Mulenga (2021) investigated reputation risk management at Mopani Copper Mine, finding that the organisation historically struggled with analysing risk types and shaping effective stakeholder dialogue during operational crises. While Mulenga's (2021) research provides a picture of Mopani's general corporate communication vulnerabilities, it focused broadly on overall reputational frameworks without specifically evaluating the use of social media as a crisis communication tool. Therefore, this study builds on Mulenga's (2021) work by advancing the focus into the digital age and empirically assessing the specific effectiveness, barriers, and enablers of social media platforms in managing crises at Mopani. This gap is particularly significant given the frequency and socio-economic impact of mining-related crises in Zambia and the rise of social media as communication tool.

1.2 Research Objectives

i. To assess the extent to which Mopani Copper Mines uses social media for crisis communication.
ii. To evaluate the effectiveness of social media-based crisis communication during mining-related crises at Mopani Copper Mine.
iii. To identify the barriers of social media, use for crisis communication at Mopani Copper Mine.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, offers a systematic approach to understanding how organisations should communicate during crises to protect their reputational assets. SCCT posits that the effectiveness of crisis response strategies depends on the type of crisis, the

organisation's crisis history, and prior relational reputation (Coombs, 2007). In the context of this study, SCCT will guide the analysis of Mopani Copper Mines' crisis response strategies on social media platforms. It will help evaluate how well the company's communication aligns with the crisis type and how this alignment influences stakeholder perceptions. Furthermore, SCCT will provide a framework for assessing how Mopani's prior reputation and crisis history in the Zambian mining sector affect the effectiveness of its social media crisis communication efforts.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Social Media Use in Crisis Communication within Zambia's Mining Industry Remain Scarce

A study by Chisalu (2025) assessed risk communication in the Maamba mining area of Zambia. This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining structured surveys and focus group discussions with residents of communities surrounding the Maamba Collieries. The primary objective was to investigate the perceived risks associated with coal mining activities, such as water pollution, land degradation, and health hazards. The study found a significant gap between the information provided by the company and the community's understanding, with many residents feeling inadequately informed and expressing a strong preference for more direct and accessible communication channels. While this study is invaluable for understanding stakeholder concerns and the demand for transparent communication, it does not analyze the company's use of social media as a tool during a crisis. It focuses on general risk communication rather than the specific, high-pressure context of a crisis event, leaving a gap in understanding how digital platforms could be leveraged to address these very concerns when a crisis erupts.

Another study was conducted by Mulenga (2021) assessed reputation management and risk mitigation at Mopani Copper Mine. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with mid-level managers and document analysis to explore the sources of reputational risk for Mopani and the strategies used to mitigate them. The research identified past incidents, such as the 2020 proposal to place operations under care and maintenance, as significant reputational threats. It noted that communication failures during these events contributed to public concern and government intervention. While this study provides a crucial backdrop by identifying Mopani's history of communication challenges, it predates the company's formal launch of social media channels in 2022 and therefore does not provide an empirical analysis of social media use during a crisis. Its focus is on reputational risks in general, not on the specific digital tools used to manage them in real-time.

2.2.2 Effectiveness of Social Media-Based Crisis Communication during Mining-Related Crises

A growing body of research highlights that social media can significantly enhance crisis communication effectiveness when used appropriately. Systematic reviews of crisis communication practices emphasize that fast, transparent, and consistent messaging builds public trust and mitigates reputational harm (Dike, 2025; Dewinta & Irawan, 2021). These principles extend directly to resource-intensive and high-risk sectors like mining, where reputational stakes are high and crises often unfold rapidly. An empirical study by Kalogiannidis et al. (2023) found that internet-based social media has a positive effect on crisis management, highlighting its value in disseminating timely information and countering misinformation. This is important, as information vacuums are a primary source of public misconceptions.

Studies employing empirical and mixed-method designs show that organisations who maintain active and credible social media presences before a crisis are better positioned to manage stakeholder perceptions during disruptions (Fannes & Claeys, 2022). Lin et al. (2016) found that messages that match the crisis origin with source credibility and message format significantly influence how deeply stakeholder sentiment aligns with organisational responses.

In mining context, Simon (2023) explored how mining and government institutions in Botswana used Facebook to reinforce credibility during organisational crises. The findings showed that when social media platforms are used strategically, they can improve stakeholder trust and mitigate reputational damage. Additionally, Chotia et al. (2022) in South Africa found that the integration of digital platforms into broader corporate communication strategies enables organisations to not only manage crises more effectively but also to demonstrate accountability, empathy, and transparency to local communities and global investors. The 2010 Chilean mining rescue is a prime example of effective social media integration, where live broadcasts and regular updates on platforms like Twitter and YouTube helped maintain global public trust and support (Abiodun, 2025).

Conversely, ineffective or delayed social media communication can lead to severe reputational damage. One such example is the case of the crisis following the 2019 Brumadinho dam collapse in Brazil which was owned by Vale mining is an example. The company was widely criticised for its delayed and emotionally detached response on social media, which failed to acknowledge the human tragedy and eroded public trust (Rotta et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Barriers and Enablers to Social Media Use for Crisis Communication in the Mining Sector

There are several significant barriers that can impede the success of social media in a crisis. Barriers often revolve around systemic and resource-related constraints. Research in disaster management contexts reveals that misinformation and disinformation proliferate rapidly in unmoderated social media environments, undermining message credibility and complicating communication efforts (Zubiaga et al., 2017). Organisations frequently lack formal policies, trained personnel, or technological infrastructure to manage this responsibly, contributing to information overload and inconsistency. Limited internet access in remote or rural areas further reduces the reach and inclusivity of digital messaging, especially among less affluent or digitally excluded populations (Coombs, 2015). Cultural and linguistic diversity introduces additional complexity, as generic messaging may be misunderstood or mistrusted unless tailored to local contexts (Ruggiero & Vos, 2014).

Another major obstacle is the lack of a clear, pre-established crisis communication plan and dedicated response team. Without defined protocols, message templates, and authorised spokespersons, organisations risk a delayed, inconsistent, and poorly coordinated response (Ramluckan, 2016). The failure to use social media proactively is a critical barrier to managing the narrative. Another significant barrier is the nature of the crisis and the organisation's prior history. A company with a history of environmental or safety incidents, or one that has previously communicated poorly, may face a higher degree of public skepticism, making it harder to rebuild trust (Chisalu, 2025). Furthermore, the authenticity and empathy of the messaging are crucial. A response that is seen as corporate, distant, or lacking in genuine concern can severely damage credibility. When communication is delayed and emotionally distant on social media, the response can draw significant criticism and eroded public trust (Nuortimo et al., 2024).

Although barriers to the effective use of social media in crisis communication within the mining sector are well documented, it is equally important to recognise the presence of enabling factors. A primary enabler is the strategic application of established theoretical frameworks, which provide a structured approach to response. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs, is widely recognized as the leading framework for analysing crisis response strategies and their impact on reputation management (Coombs, 2007; Jin et al., 2014). Another enabler is the pre-existing relationship an organisation has with its stakeholders, built on trust and transparency. Research by Frandsen and Johansen (2020) emphasizes that open communication channels and stakeholder engagement are a strategic imperative for mitigating conflicts and enhancing corporate reputation. This pre-crisis relationship acts as a reservoir of goodwill, making stakeholders more receptive to official information and less susceptible to misinformation during an emergency. Organisations with pre-established digital presence and credibility are better positioned to manage reputational threats when crises hit (Fannes & Claeys, 2022; Reuter et al., 2019). Clear policy frameworks, staff training, and defined guidelines also enhance effective deployment by reducing delay and miscommunication (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Singla & Agrawal, 2024).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a non-intervention mixed-methods case study design. A non-intervention design was selected because the study did not seek to manipulate variables or introduce experimental conditions. Instead, it aimed to examine existing practices of social media use in crisis communication at Mopani Copper Mines as they naturally occur within the organisational setting (Yin, 2018). This approach allowed the researcher to investigate real-life communication processes without interfering with normal operations. The study utilised a convergent mixed-methods design, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase of the research process, analysed separately, and later integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This design was considered appropriate because the research sought both measurable patterns (such as frequency of platform use and levels of perceived effectiveness) and in-depth explanations of organisational practices, decision-making processes, and stakeholder perceptions.

3.2 Research Area

This study was conducted at Mopani Copper Mine Plc head offices which are located in Nkana West, Kitwe on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia.

3.3 Study Population

The target population for this study comprises key stakeholders who are directly involved in Mopani Copper Mine's crisis communication efforts. This includes senior management, members of the corporate communication team, and other employees with direct experience in crisis response and management. The sampling frame was specifically constructed to include individuals who have held positions of responsibility during past crises. This ensures that the data collected comes from individuals with first-hand knowledge of the company's communication

strategies. The population was drawn from various departments within MCM, including the executive office, public relations, health and safety, and community relations, to capture a holistic view of the communication process. Mopani Copper Mines employs over 6,565 workers across its operations in Kitwe and Mufulira (Mopani Copper Mines Plc, 2024). However, the study focuses on departments that handle communication and crisis-related functions. The table below shows the estimated number of potential respondents in each department, based on available organisational structure and internal reports.

Table 1

Study Population by Department

Stakeholder Group	Number of Participants
Senior Management	21
Corporate Communication and Public Relations Team	12
Operations and Engineering Management	23
Health, Safety, and Community Relations Personnel	17
Total	**73**

3.4 Sample Size

In this study Slovin's formula is used to determine the required sample size. Slovin's formula is calculated as: $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$. The population was 73 and the margin of error (e) = 5% (0.05). After calculating the sample size came to 61 respondents. The quantitative data was obtained through structured questionnaires sent to 61 targeted participants, of which 53 were successfully completed and 8 were not responded to. This represented a response rate of 86.9%. Scholars agree that a response rate above 75% percent is sufficient for surveys (Wu et al., 2022). To ensure balanced representation, participants were drawn from different departments. This distribution allows for both vertical (management to operational staff) and horizontal (across departments) coverage of perspectives on social media use in crisis communication. Recruitment continued until adequate evidence had been obtained to comprehensively answer the research questions.

3.5 Sampling Techniques

This study employed a combination of purposive sampling and systematic random sampling techniques to support the mixed-methods research design. The study employed systematic random sampling to select participants for the quantitative component. Systematic random sampling is chosen because it ensures that every eligible participant in the target population has an equal chance of being selected. A census approach would also be ideal given the small population. However, systematic random sampling was selected due to time and resource constraints. Given the limited availability of participants from Mopani due to operational responsibilities, sampling was more feasible.

A list of workers at Mopani Copper Mines in the Public Relations, Operations, Administration, Management, Human Resources and Health & Safety departments was obtained. This served as the sampling frame for the study. The sampling interval for the study was calculated by dividing the total population (N=73) in the sampling frame (N) by the required sample size (n=61). The kth term was found to be 1.197 and was rounded up to 2. Therefore, every second person in the sample frame was selected until the sample was reached. A random number between 1 and 73 was chosen as the starting point for selection to ensure unbiased selection. For the qualitative component, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants for this study.

3.6 Data Collection Instruments

To achieve the mixed-methods objectives, primary data was collected using two distinct instruments: Structured Questionnaire and In-depth interviews.

3.7 Data Analysis

For the quantitative aspect of the research, analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the data. Data cleaning and validation was performed to ensure accuracy and reliability. The results were presented using a combination of tables, graphs, and charts for the quantitative data to enhance clarity and interpretation.

For the qualitative aspect of the research, all interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed and translated verbatim. Thematic Framework Analysis, which involves identification of common themes and issues, was used to analyse data because it is good for implementation research or programs that are being rolled out, as it is less theoretical. Analysis began with familiarizing with the interview content where the researcher carefully listened to audio recordings multiple times before transcription. Detailed transcripts were then coded by identifying meaningful

segments of text and assigning descriptive labels. One-word codes labelled by quotes were then extracted and these codes were compared and consolidated into coherent themes and sub-themes. All the data analysis was conducted on the NVivo software.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethics was adhered to when conducting this research. To begin with, clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee. Permission was sought from the Mopani Copper Mine management to carry out the research at the company. Autonomy was achieved through obtaining informed and signed consent from the individual participants before engaging them into the study. Participants were also made aware that their participation is completely voluntary, and they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. To protect the privacy of participants, no personal identifiers such as names or addresses were included in the interview transcripts or research findings. Participants were assigned unique codes to ensure anonymity, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files. Only the researcher will have access to the data, and any information shared during the interviews was used solely for the purposes of this research.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The discussion is informed by responses from fifty-three participants drawn from various functional departments at Mopani Copper Mines. In terms of sex distribution, 27 respondents (50.9%) were female and 26 (49.1%) were male. In terms of age 23 participants (43.4%) were aged between 31 and 40 years and 20 participants (37.7%) between 41 and 50 years. In terms of organisational tenure, thirty respondents (56.6%) had worked for 6 to 10 years, 15 respondents (28.3%) had between 11 and 15 years of service, and 6 respondents (11.3%) had between 16 and 20 years of experience. Educationally, twenty-four participants (45.3%) held Bachelor's degrees, 15 (28.3%) held Diplomas, 13 (24.5%) possessed Master's degrees, and 1 respondent (1.9%) held a professional certification. In terms of employment classification, 14 respondents (26.4%) were from Public Relations, 11 (20.7%) from Operations, 10 (18.9%) from Administration, 7 (13.2%) from Management, 7 (13.2%) from Human Resources, and 4 (7.6%) from Health and Safety.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Sex of Respondents	Female	27	50.9
	Male	26	49.1
Age Group	21 to 30	8	15.1
	31 to 40	23	43.4
	41 to 50	20	37.7
	Above 50	2	3.8
Marital Status	Married	35	66.0
	Single	10	18.9
	Widowed	5	9.4
	Divorced	3	5.7
Duration at Work (Years)	1 to 5 years	2	3.8
	6 to 10 years	30	56.6
	11 to 15 years	15	28.3
	16 to 20 years	6	11.3
Education Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	24	45.3
	Diploma	15	28.3
	Master's Degree	13	24.5
	Professional Certification	1	1.9
Classification of Employment	Public Relations	14	26.4
	Operations	11	20.7
	Administration	10	18.9
	Management	7	13.2
	Human Resources	7	13.2
	Health & Safety	4	7.6
	Total	**53**	**100.0**

4.1.1 Extent of Social Media Uses in Crisis Communication at Mopani Copper Mines

The quantitative findings show that Facebook is the primary social media platform used by Mopani Copper Mines during crisis situations. Out of the 53 respondents, 35 participants (66%) identified Facebook as the main platform utilised for crisis communication. This is followed by LinkedIn, which was reported by 15 respondents (28.3%) as the primary platform used during crises. In contrast, only 1 respondent (1.9%) indicated Twitter (X), while 2 respondents (3.8%) selected WhatsApp as the primary platform.

Table 3

The Main Platform Utilised for Crisis Communication

Social Media Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Facebook	35	66
LinkedIn	15	28.3
Twitter (X)	1	1.9
WhatsApp	2	3.8
Total	**53**	**100.0**

The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results. Participants consistently reported that Mopani Copper Mines relies primarily on specific social media platforms when communicating during crises. Facebook and LinkedIn were identified as the main platforms used due to their reach and suitability for engaging different stakeholder groups. These responses show that social media use during crises is not incidental but guided by deliberate platform selection aligned with communication objectives.

These finding aligns with the broader trend in the mining sector where digital platforms are increasingly used to maintain transparency and manage stakeholder expectations in high-risk operational environments (Mansour et al., 2024). Mining organisations face persistent exposure to environmental, safety, and social risks, which makes the availability of fast and direct communication channels essential. The findings also show that Mopani Copper Mines uses social media more during crises than during normal organisational communication. This pattern of supported by literature which shows that continuous digital engagement during high-pressure events reduces uncertainty during a crisis. Reuter et al. (2019), states that social media enables organisations to provide real-time updates and engage affected communities directly during emergencies.

Additionally, Mopani's use of social media to issue immediate statements and clarify its position has been observed in other countries in the African region. Agho and Nhedzi (2024) observed a similar development among South African mining companies, where social media was adopted to enhance transparency and public accountability. This trend reflects a broader transformation in crisis communication practice, where organisations increasingly bypass traditional media and speak directly to their audiences through digital platforms. In relation to the study's conceptual framework, these findings demonstrate that Mopani Copper Mines actively utilises key components of the social media use construct, particularly platform selection and communication frequency. The deliberate selection of Facebook for community engagement and LinkedIn for professional stakeholders reflects strategic alignment between communication channel and audience type. This supports the conceptual assumption that platform appropriateness enhances message reach and engagement.

In relation to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the extensive use of social media suggests that Mopani Copper Mines recognises the importance of rapid and direct response in crisis situations. SCCT argues that timely and proactive communication reduces reputational threat, especially when crises may trigger attributions of organisational responsibility (Coombs, 2015). By increasing social media activity during crises, Mopani appears to be applying response strategies that prioritise speed and narrative control. The shift away from reliance on traditional media toward direct digital communication further aligns with SCCT's emphasis on managing stakeholder perceptions in real time. The findings therefore confirm that the extent of social media use at Mopani Copper Mines is consistent with both theoretical expectations and the conceptual model linking digital communication practices to crisis response effectiveness.

The quantitative findings indicate that that social media is used more intensively during crisis periods. When asked to state the frequency of social media use during a crisis, 84.9% of the respondents indicated that social media is used either "Often" (28.3%) or "Always" (56.6%). No respondents indicated that social media is "Never" used. The mean score for the frequency of social media usage compared to traditional channels is 4.38 out of 5. The Frequency construct had a Cronbach's α of 0.784 and Extent of Use had a Cronbach's α of 0.812. The quantitative finding that 84.9% rely on social media during crises aligns with the qualitative findings that social media has become the first line of communication. In the in-depth interviews participants indicated that social media is used more intensively during crisis periods than during routine organisational communication. The data show that crisis situations trigger more frequent posting, monitoring, and engagement on social media platforms.

Participants also highlighted a shift in reliance from traditional media to social media during crisis communication. Social media was described as providing greater autonomy and immediacy compared to traditional media outlets. One participant explained that social media reduces dependence on external media organisations to convey the company's position:

> *"With social media, we are not at the mercy of traditional media to tell our side of the story. We can communicate directly with stakeholders and explain what is happening in our own words, without waiting for journalists to interpret or filter the information"* (P1, 11th December 2025, Kitwe, Zambia).

These accounts indicate that social media has become a central and preferred channel for crisis communication at Mopani Copper Mines, particularly because it enables direct, timely, and controlled dissemination of information.

4.1.2 Effectiveness of Social Media-Based Crisis Communication at Mopani Mines

Respondents rated the effectiveness of social media on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The Effectiveness of Social Media construct yielded an overall mean of 3.78, reflecting general agreement that social media contributes positively to crisis communication outcomes. The highest-rated item within this construct was that it enables rapid response (M = 4.13), followed by proactive communication improves perception (M = 4.02) and direct stakeholder engagement (M = 4.00). However, the relatively lower mean for use of social media analytics (M = 3.01)

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics on Effectiveness

Item	Mean	SD
Enables rapid response	4.13	0.83
Reduces stakeholder panic	3.81	1.01
Helps correct misinformation	3.85	0.96
Allows direct engagement	4.00	0.86
Stakeholders actively engage	3.67	1.08
Enhances transparency	3.94	0.93
Protects organisational reputation	3.83	0.99
Strengthens stakeholder trust	3.77	1.04
Proactive communication improves perception	4.02	0.84
Public reactions are monitored	3.61	1.12
Social media analytics are used	3.01	1.18
Feedback influences adjustments	3.66	1.07

Overall Construct Mean = 3.78, Cronbach's α = 0.89

The quantitative findings, particularly the high mean scores for rapid response (M = 4.13) and immediate use of social media during crises (M = 4.09), indicate that timeliness is perceived as a central strength of social media-based crisis communication. The qualitative findings showed that participants repeatedly emphasised that the speed with which information can be shared on social media is a key indicator of its effectiveness during crises. Social media was described as enabling immediate responses, which participants felt was important in preventing situations from escalating. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative evidence, supporting participants' descriptions of social media as an interactive and accessible communication platform. Participants described social media as effective because it allows direct interaction between the organisation and its stakeholders. This direct engagement was viewed as strengthening communication and making stakeholders feel informed and included during crises. Participants identified the ability to address misinformation as another key measure of effectiveness. Social media was described as a platform where misinformation can spread quickly, but also one where it can be corrected promptly if actively managed. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative mean scores, confirming that participants perceive social media as contributing positively to reputational outcomes during crises. Participants described social media-based crisis communication as having a noticeable impact on the organisation's reputation. Effectiveness was seen in how stakeholders responded to the company's communication efforts during and after crises.

These findings align with research that shows that speed, transparency, and consistency as core principles of effective crisis communication (Tufuor & Nagai, 2020; Dewinta & Irawan, 2021). In high-risk sectors such as mining, where crises can happen rapidly, delays in communication can create information vacuums that cause mistrust and misinformation. The experiences reported by participants at Mopani Copper Mines are similar to those of Kalogiannidis et al. (2023) who reported that internet-based social media enhances crisis management by enabling timely information dissemination and reducing uncertainty among stakeholders.

The findings further show that direct engagement with stakeholders improves the effectiveness of social media-based crisis communication. These findings are consistent with Lin et al. (2016), who found that message credibility and alignment between crisis type and communication strategy influence stakeholder emotional responses and perceptions of organisational responsibility. By enabling two-way interaction, social media allows Mopani Copper Mines to understand stakeholder views and adjust messaging accordingly, thereby strengthening trust and confidence. This finding also aligns with African and regional studies. Stephens and Robertson (2022), in their study of crisis communication, found that mining and public institutions that engaged stakeholders through Facebook were better able to maintain legitimacy and public trust during crises. Similarly, Chotia et al. (2022) found in South Africa that integrating social media into broader communication strategies improved stakeholder perceptions and enhanced accountability and transparency. The Mopani case therefore aligns with regional pattern where social media effectiveness is closely linked to its capacity for dialogue rather than one-way information transmission.

Another important result of social media-based crisis communication is the management and correction of misinformation. This finding can be contrasted with cases of ineffective social media use. For example, the delayed and emotionally detached response by Vale during the 2019 Brumadinho dam collapse in Brazil resulted in widespread criticism and erosion of public trust (Reuter et al., 2019). Similarly, Sasol's reliance on traditional media following the 2020 refinery explosion in South Africa created an information gap that allowed misinformation to proliferate unchecked (Ramluckan, 2016; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). The findings also demonstrate that social media-based crisis communication has an impact on organisational reputation. Fannes and Claeys (2023) similarly found that organisations with proactive and consistent social media presences experienced faster trust recovery and reduced reputational damage following crises.

From a Zambian perspective, these findings add to existing knowledge on how social media contributes to crisis communication effectiveness within the mining sector. Previous studies in Zambia have highlighted gaps in risk communication (Chisalu, 2025), the absence of formal crisis communication frameworks (Tufuor & Nagai, 2020), and historical communication failures at Mopani Copper Mines (Mulenga, 2021). Unlike these studies, the present research demonstrates that Mopani Copper Mines has increasingly using social media to address these challenges, particularly by improving speed, engagement, and transparency during crises. From the perspective of SCCT, effectiveness is closely linked to the appropriateness of response strategies. SCCT posits that organisations facing crises must select response strategies that match the level of responsibility attributed to them (Coombs, 2007). Timely updates and proactive clarification align with instructing and adjusting information strategies, which are essential in protecting stakeholders and reducing uncertainty. Furthermore, SCCT highlights the importance of prior reputation in shaping crisis outcomes. The finding that consistent social media engagement enhances stakeholder confidence suggests that Mopani has built relational capital prior to crises. This pre-existing digital presence acts as a reputational buffer, consistent with SCCT's assertion that organisations with stronger prior reputations experience less reputational damage during crises.

4.1.3 Barriers to Social Media Use for Crisis Communication at Mopani Copper Mines

Respondents rated the barriers to effective social media use in crisis communication on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The overall mean score for the Barriers to Effective Social Media Use construct was 3.52, suggesting moderate agreement among respondents that notable constraints exist. Among the identified barriers, the highest mean score was recorded for the item "Misinformation spreads rapidly during crises" (M = 3.98, SD = 0.85). The second highest mean was observed for "Internal approval processes cause delays" (M = 3.71, SD = 0.99). The item "Some stakeholders perceive social media as informal" (M = 3.55, SD = 1.05). Lower mean scores were recorded for resource limitations (M = 3.13) and past crises affecting online trust (M = 3.23), indicating that while these factors are present, they are not perceived as the most dominant barriers compared to misinformation and approval delays.

Table 5

Barriers to Social Media Use for Crisis Communication

Item	Mean	SD
Misinformation spreads rapidly	3.98	0.85
Internal approvals cause delays	3.71	0.99
Some stakeholders see social media as informal	3.55	1.05
Limited resources hinder management	3.13	1.12
Past crises affect online trust	3.23	1.07

Overall Construct Mean = 3.52, Cronbach's α = 0.78

The qualitative findings align with the quantitative results. Participants consistently noted that misinformation is one of the most significant barriers to effective crisis communication on social media. While social media allows for

fast communication, participants explained that the same speed also enables the rapid spread of inaccurate or misleading information. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative evidence. Participants also identified internal organisational processes as a barrier to effective social media use during crises. Delays caused by approval structures and decision-making procedures were described as limiting how quickly information can be released. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative findings. Participants further indicated that social media is sometimes perceived as a less formal or less serious communication channel, which can affect how crisis messages are received. This perception was described as a barrier to using social media as the primary platform for crisis communication.

This finding aligns with existing research which indicates that the speed and openness of social media environments facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly during high-uncertainty events (Zubiaga et al., 2017). In mining, misinformation can heighten public anxiety and complicate response efforts. The experiences reported by participants at Mopani Copper Mines align with broader concerns in the literature that without active monitoring and rapid corrective communication, misinformation can negatively affect the credibility of message and reduce stakeholder trust.

The findings also showed that internal approval and decision-making processes are organisational barriers to effective social media-based crisis communication. This challenge reflects observations by Ramluckan (2016), who found that the absence of streamlined crisis communication protocols often results in delayed and fragmented responses. Cartwright et al. (2021) similarly argues that speed is a determinant of crisis communication effectiveness, as delays create information vacuums that allow speculation and alternative narratives to dominate public discourse. In the case of Mopani Copper Mines, the findings show that although social media offers the technical capacity for rapid communication, internal organisational structures may limit its full potential during crises. Another barrier identified by participants relates to perceptions of social media as an informal or less credible communication platform. This perception aligns with findings by Rushkovskyi and Rasshyvalov (2023), who noted that unless messaging is carefully framed and culturally appropriate, social media communication may be dismissed or mistrusted.

From an SCCT perspective, internal delays undermine the principle of response immediacy. SCCT emphasises that delayed communication can increase attributions of responsibility and intensify reputational threat (Coombs, 2015). Therefore, internal approval bottlenecks directly weaken theoretical alignment with best-practice crisis response. Likewise, misinformation complicates crisis framing and may amplify stakeholder perceptions of organisational culpability.

Respondents rated the enablers to effective social media use in crisis communication on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The overall mean score for the Enablers of Effective Social Media Use construct was 3.81. The highest mean score within this construct was recorded for the item “Having a clear crisis communication plan improves social media effectiveness” (M = 4.02, SD = 0.86). This indicates strong agreement that structured planning enhances the strategic deployment of social media during crises. Similarly, “Consistent social media posting builds stakeholder trust” (M = 3.87, SD = 1.01) and “Leadership support strengthens crisis communication” (M = 3.87, SD = 0.94) also received high mean scores. The item “Staff training enhances social media response” (M = 3.87, SD = 0.96) further highlights the perceived role of capacity development in improving digital crisis communication. Moderately high mean scores were observed for “Monitoring tools improve response quality” (M = 3.69, SD = 1.05) and “Pre-existing trust improves message acceptance” (M = 3.77, SD = 1.02).

Table 6

Enablers of Effective Social Media Use

Item	Mean	SD
Crisis communication plan improves effectiveness	4.02	0.86
Staff training enhances response	3.87	0.96
Consistent posting builds trust	3.87	1.01
Monitoring tools improve response quality	3.69	1.05
Leadership support strengthens communication	3.87	0.94
Pre-existing trust improves message acceptance	3.77	1.02

Overall Construct Mean = 3.81, Cronbach’s α = 0.84

The qualitative findings align with the quantitative results. Participants indicated that maintaining an active and consistent social media presence before crises occur enables more effective communication during crisis situations. Regular engagement was described as helping establish familiarity and credibility with stakeholders. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative evidence. Participants also highlighted the importance of integrating social media use into the organisation’s broader crisis management planning. Social media was described as most effective when aligned with internal crisis response structures. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative results. Participants described active monitoring of social media platforms as a key enabler of effective crisis

communication. Monitoring allows the organisation to identify emerging concerns, track public reactions, and respond promptly.

4.2 Systematic Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory to Mopani's Crisis Events

To evaluate how well Mopani Copper Mines applied crisis response strategies through social media, this section applies the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework to three specific crisis events. SCCT, developed by W. Timothy Coombs, provides guidelines for matching response strategies to crisis types in order to protect organisational reputation (Coombs, 2007, 2015). The theory classifies crises victim crises (weak responsibility), accidental crises (minimal responsibility), and preventable crises (strong responsibility) (Coombs, 2015). For each crisis type, SCCT recommends specific response strategies. Victim crises call for denial or diminish strategies. Accidental crises require diminish or rebuild strategies. Preventable crises demand strong rebuilding responses, including apology and compensation (Coombs, 2015).

Table 7

Summary of Selected Mopani Copper Mines Crisis Events

Crisis Event	Date	Description	Outcome
2026 SOB Shaft Blasting Accident	January 2026	Blasting accident at South Ore Body shaft; two miners killed	Operations suspended; government and regulator investigations opened
2020 Care and Maintenance Crisis	April–June 2020	Glencore announced plan to place Mopani under care and maintenance; threatened 11,000 jobs	Government backlash; Glencore reversed decision after forced negotiations.

4.3 Analysis of the 2026 SOB Shaft Blasting Accident

The 2026 blasting accident at Mopani's South Ore Body shaft is classified as an accidental crisis under SCCT. According to Rotta et al. (2020), accidental crises include technical breakdown accidents that occur unintentionally. The incident occurred when a person in charge went to test a blasting cable, and a loud explosion was heard. Two miners lost their lives. However, some factors may shift this crisis toward the preventable cluster. An almost identical accident occurred at the same SOB shaft in March 2022, when a boiler-maker was killed. SCCT states that a history of similar crises increases reputational threat, even when the current crisis arises unintentionally (Wu et al., 2022; Coombs, 2015). The Minerals Regulation Commission suspended operations at Mopani's Mufulira mine site in February 2026 over safety non-compliance following these accidents. This external validation of safety concerns suggests possible organisational failure.

According to SCCT, an organisation facing an accidental crisis with a negative prior history should adopt a rebuild response strategy (Coombs, 2015). Aayaba et al. (2024) notes that rebuild strategies focus on assisting victims and correcting the problem. The two primary rebuild responses are apology (accepting responsibility and expressing regret) and compensation (offering money or other benefits to victims).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study examined the effectiveness of social media in crisis communication within the mining sector, using Mopani Copper Mine as a case study. Guided by three research questions, the study explored the extent of social media use, its effectiveness during crisis situations, and the barriers and enablers influencing its application. In relation to the first research question, the study concludes that social media is used as a central communication channel during crises. The findings show that platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn are strategically selected based on stakeholder reach and communication objectives. Social media use intensifies during crisis situations, with frequent updates and active engagement, indicating that Mopani Copper Mines treats social media as a primary mechanism for disseminating crisis-related information.

Regarding the second research question, the study concludes that social media is perceived as an effective tool for managing crises at Mopani Copper Mines. Effectiveness is seen in the speed and timeliness of communication, the ability to engage stakeholders directly, the capacity to manage and correct misinformation, and the positive influence on organisational reputation. Timely updates help reduce uncertainty and panic, while interactive engagement improve transparency and trust. The study further concludes that proactive and consistent communication on social media contributes to more favourable stakeholder perceptions during crises. With respect to the third research question, key barriers include the rapid spread of misinformation, internal approval delays, and perceptions of social media as an informal communication platform. At the same time, the study identifies several enablers, including a consistent social media presence, integration of social media into crisis management planning, and active monitoring and responsiveness. The findings suggest that while Mopani Copper Mines has made progress in using social media for

crisis communication, further improvements are necessary to maximise its effectiveness. Overall, the study concludes that social media has become a component of crisis communication in the mining sector. However, its effectiveness depends not only on platform availability but also on organisational preparedness, strategic planning, and continuous capacity development.

5.2 Recommendations

Mopani Copper Mines Plc should further formalise social media use within its crisis communication framework. This includes streamlining internal approval processes to reduce delays during crises and clearly defining roles and responsibilities for digital communication. The company should also invest in advanced social media monitoring and analytics tools to enhance early detection of emerging issues and misinformation. The Corporate Communications and Public Relations Department at Mopani Copper Mines Plc should promote continuous training in digital crisis communication, including social media monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and misinformation management. In addition, the department should develop crisis message templates and response protocols to improve consistency and speed during emergencies. The Zambia Institute of Public Relations and Communication (ZIPRC) should play a leading role in strengthening professional standards for social media-based crisis communication within high-risk sectors such as mining. ZIPRC should develop and disseminate professional guidelines and best-practice frameworks on digital crisis communication, with specific focus on misinformation management, ethical online engagement, and reputational risk mitigation. In addition, ZIPRC should organise continuous professional development programmes, workshops, and certification courses to enhance practitioners' competencies in social media monitoring, crisis messaging, and stakeholder engagement. The University of Zambia and other academic institutions should encourage further research on social media and crisis communication within the mining sector, including comparative and longitudinal studies. Such research will contribute to evidence-based policy development and improved crisis communication practices in Zambia.

Declaration of Interest

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