

# **Crisis Management in the Airline industry: Crisis response strategies employed by Silverstone Airline during the 2019 crises**

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## **Abstract**

The legitimacy of an airline is much dependent upon how the airline handles safety, therefore prioritizing safety and avoiding incidents is consequently a key component of crisis management. During a crisis, Airlines do respond through various strategies in order to protect their reputation. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offers a framework through which organisations investigate the impact of the response strategies on the stakeholders' perception (Hanson & Vikstrom, 2011). The guides in matching response strategy to the crisis type and guarantees protection of organization reputation during a crisis. This study therefore sought to assess the crisis response strategies employed by Silverstone Airline in managing its corporate reputation within the guidelines outlined by the SCCT. It sought to determine the extent to which Silverstone Airline correctly matched its response strategies to the crisis situations they faced and established the strength of SCCT's system of matching in the management and protection of its reputation. The study purposive collected all the five crisis related communication sent out by Silverstone Airline. The data was then coded and thematically analysed, and findings qualitatively presented. The findings revealed that the airline was faced with accidental and preventable type of crisis. In response, the airline applied the Denial, Diminish and Blotting strategies. The findings revealed that the airline mismatched their crisis type to the response strategy. This study therefore recommends that airlines should adopt and tweak SCCT in response to their strategies as per their needs, the strategies can be structured in a manner that will fit the crisis type.

**Key Words:** Crisis communication, Crisis management, Response strategies, Aviation, airline

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

A crisis is an occurrence that has a potentially negatively affect the organization reputation, interferes with the normal business operations and threatens the survival of the organization (Fearn-Banks, 2017). It is an unforeseen occurrence that could potentially affect the financial status of the organisation, lead to loss of lives, cause injuries and reputational damage for an organization (Coombs, 2012). Such occurrences lead to increased negative outcomes that is used by stakeholders to assess the effectiveness of an organization in satisfying their needs (Wartick, 1992). This means that the organisation's reputation become a valuable and intangible asset during crisis (Coombs, 2007). Reputation is an asset built based on the information received by stakeholders concerning the organization (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). When a crisis happens, it threatens or injures the reputation of an organization. It is therefore important for organisations to manage crisis using the most effectively strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Crisis response strategies are a key tool in managing crisis and organization's reputation (Fearn-Banks, 2017).

According to Coombs (2007) crisis response strategies are fundamental in managing and repairing the reputation of the organisation, reducing and preventing the negative impact of the crisis. Many researchers agree that the steps observed and response strategies used significantly affect the reputation of the organisation (Coombs, 2006). Response strategies used against a crisis shape the crisis attributions, alters organizational perceptions, and minimizes the negative impact created by the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Crisis in the aviation industry are uncommon largely due to the high safety protocols (Transportstyrelsen, 2010). Most airlines consider safety as the highest priority and a selling premium for their brand (Air France, 2010, p.4). In cases where and when they occur, there is bigger impact, such as high death rate or bigger destruction of property or financial loss. A plane accident is the worst nightmare for any airline company (SAS, 2008). Airline accidents attract dominant media and public attention, therefore an airline's communication and actions during a crisis are of high importance. When a crisis happens, the airline have to respond soonest to reduce the number and impact

of injuries and other negative outcomes. Timely and consistent communication minimizes the negative impact (Hale, Dulek and Hale, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

In Africa, over 30 airlines have faced aircraft crashes including Cameroon, Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana and Morocco among others (Aviation Safety Network, 2020). Nigeria's EAS Airlines Flight 4226 crash-landed on May 4th, 2002 in a residential area of Gwammaja city. It caught fire upon impact and 64 passengers perished and 78 civilians on the ground. The Nigerian President then, Olusegun Obasanjo, suspended his tour of South Africa and ordered an investigation of the crash (Robson, 2017). In March 2019, the Nairobi bound Ethiopian plane ET302 had an accident in Bishoftu town and all 157 passengers perished. The first news update about the accident came when Abiy Ahmed, the Prime Minister expressed his sympathies on Twitter (BBC, 2019). The airline stated that the cause of the accident was not yet clear. The Airline's CEO Tewolde Gebremariam told reporters that "At this stage, we cannot rule out anything. We cannot also attribute the cause to anything because we will have to comply with the international regulation to wait for the investigation" (BBC, 2019). He regretted the fatal accident and expressed deep sympathies to relatives of crash victims.

In Kenya, flight KQ431 belonging to Kenya Airways flying the Abijan-Lagos-Nairobi route crashed into the Atlantic Ocean minutes after take-off from Ivory Coast. The crash which happened in January 2000, killed 169 passengers and crew, there were only 10 survivors (Kubania, 2018). In 2008, another flight, flight KQ507 also flying from Abijan with a stopover in Douala then onwards to Nairobi crashed into a swamp right after take-off and killed all 114 people on board. The airline established an emergency command center at JKIA in Nairobi, the CEO, Mr. Titus Naikuni immediately issued a press statement regarding the accident (BBC News, 2007). The airline immediately dispatched a team from Nairobi to Douala, that included reservations staff to re-route passengers and psychologists to handle victims and relatives (West, 2019). Kenya Airways outsourced the services of a South African Company to handle the repatriation of human remains with none of their staff to oversee the exercise, a fatal mistake that would come to haunt the airline (West, 2019). This caused a substantial delay in repatriation of the bodies to families leading to public outcry. It is on this basis that this study examines the crisis in the airline industry, assessed the crisis response strategies used by the Airline companies, and how they manage their corporate reputation during crisis. Using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the study examined the crises that happened in the month of October -November, 2019 at Silverstone Airline -Kenya.

Organizations are dependent on the support of key stakeholders for their continued survival (Pajunen, 2006). If an organisation is considered to be illegitimate by those it relies upon for its survival, then the stakeholders are likely to withdraw their support (Massey, 2001); making the future of the organization uncertain (Chess, 2001). An organization can be seen as legitimate if it is perceived by its stakeholders as acting appropriately, keeping to societies' norms and living up to the expectations of their stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Massey, 2001). If the services of an organization can cause unacceptable harm, the stakeholders may consider the organization to be illegitimate. A major occurrence with potentially negative outcome must be managed in such a way that the negative outcome does not affect the legitimacy and reputation of the organisation. However, crises are becoming more prevalent, severe and difficult to control due to increased complexity and dynamics of stakeholder relationships (Stephens et al., 2005; Acquier et al., 2008). The crisis at Silverstone Airline where three passengers were injured and aircraft destroyed caused panic amongst the key stakeholders. The passengers cancelled their tickets leading to irreparable damage to the airline's equity, and put pressure on the airline leading to a one-month redundancy notice to all its staff.

The legitimacy and reputation of an airline can be restored through crisis response strategies. The SCCT model offers a framework through which organisations can investigate the impact of response strategies on the stakeholders' perception (Hanson & Vikstrom, 2011). The response strategy and crisis communication influence stakeholder perception. Lee and Lariscy's (2008) called for further testing of the efficiency and strength of matching crisis situations to response strategies. The SCCT framework provides a clear guideline on how to match crisis to response strategies, and guarantees protection of organization reputation during a crisis. Therefore, this study sought to assess the crisis response strategies employed by Silverstone Airline in managing its corporate reputation within the guidelines outlined by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. It sought to determine the extent to which Silverstone Airline correctly matched its response strategies to the crisis situations, and established the strength of SCCT's system of matching in the managing its reputation.

### **Objectives for the study**

- i. To examine the crisis clusters under which the Silverstone Airline crises.
- ii. To analyse the crisis response strategies employed by Silverstone Airline during the crises.
- iii. To assess how Silverstone Airline managed their corporate reputation during the crises

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Crises situation at Silverstone Airline**

Silverstone Airline is a privately owned airline operating in Kenya, was founded in 2017 to operate commercial flights, private charter, commercial cargo, evacuation, and humanitarian and relief services (Silverstone Air, 2019). On November, 12<sup>th</sup> 2019, the airline suspended all flights after an accident occurred when the plane was forced to make an emergency landing after and the wheel fell off, one passenger was seriously injured (Reuters, 2019). In a press briefing Silverstone Airline stated “We have had an outstanding safety record and have been re-certificated by Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA).” Silverstone Airline experienced several crises episodes in October – November 2019, that forced the airline to halt its operations (Mwita, 2019).

The company experienced its first major accident on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2019 when its Fokker 50 aircraft that was heading to Lamu Airport veered off the runway. The aircraft ran over the airport’s perimeter fence and came to a stop in the bush after one of its wings hit a tree. Two hours later, the company released a press statement stating “the passengers and crew have safely disembarked.” A few minutes earlier, the Kenya Airports Authority (KAA) had issued a press statement confirming the runway excursion incident and added that ‘two passengers were slightly injured and are receiving appropriate medical attention.’ The aviation regulator Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA) released a press statement in contrast to Silverstone Airline’s statement stating that ‘the aircraft had 55 persons on board with no fatalities but three seriously injured passengers have been taken to hospital and three others are being attended to for shock’ (KCAA, 2019). Silverstone’s Fokker 50 aircraft hit another airline’s aircraft on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2019. The company never gave a statement regarding the incident until two days, which was against the ‘golden hour’ practice in crisis communication. The airline’s delayed communication gave room for speculations and inaccurate information. On 28<sup>th</sup> October, Silverstone aircraft hit and damaged another plane at the Wilson Airport. In response to the crisis, Silverstone Airline blamed the congested status of the airport that is congested with active and disabled aircraft.

Further damage occurred when the airline experienced yet another accident on 28<sup>th</sup> October, that involved one of its aircrafts’ rear-right wheel falling off during take-off. The aircraft made an emergency landing at Eldoret airport after tyre falls off. Yet again, it took Silverstone Airline over two hours to respond to the incidence. After a sequence of mishaps, KCAA suspended Silverstone’s Dash 8 series aircraft operations for 7 days (KCAA, 2019). On the 18<sup>th</sup> of November, Silverstone issued a one-month redundancy notice to its staff members amid pending closure of its operations (Silverstone Airline, 2019). In the termination letters, the management said, ‘Silverstone Airline has become redundant. We have made this decision as a result of the recent decision by KCAA to ground the company’s fleet, thereby grounding our passenger services.’ The statement further read, ‘this has resulted in irreparable damage to the company’s brand equity as evidenced by mass cancellation of tickets. The company cannot therefore continue to operate commercially’ (Silverstone Airline, 2019). By this action, at a time investigations were coming to a close, Silverstone prematurely folded up its commercial operations. The next day on 19<sup>th</sup> November, KCAA lifted the suspension of the Aircraft operations. In a press statement, KCAA confirmed that the airline has provided satisfactory corrective measures as per the Civil Aviation Regulations (2018). Silverstone Airline never responded to the KCAA statement about the lifted ban and their commercial flights have since been out of operation.

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

The theory provides a framework for selection of crisis response strategy in terms of a crisis responsibility and reputational risk, and how to improve the reputational protection achieved after crisis communication is effected (Coombs, 2007). SCCT is premised on three key components, namely the situation of the crisis, crisis response procedures, and a framework for matching the crisis scenario and response strategies (Coombs, 2007). SCCT suggests that the fundamental approach to deciding on the most suitable crisis response depends on understanding the crisis scenario regarding the type of crisis and the degree of reputation risk posed by the crisis. The reputational risk presented by a crisis is assessed based on the type of crisis, history of the crisis and past reputation (Coombs, 2012).

Crisis type is a frame through which you interpret the crisis or simplified further as the way through which a crisis is framed (Druckman, 2001). Frames help in organising information for knowledge acquisition and retention. The manner in which we frame a message determines how individuals understand problems, associate responsibility and solutions to the said problems (Cooper, 2002). Crisis managers should therefore define the crisis frames based on whether a crisis was caused by a rumour, boycotts, deaths, explosions, technology failure or human error (Coombs & Holladay (2002). The crisis types have various traits but tend to fall into different types (Coombs, 2012); and the frames guide on how much responsibility is attributed to a crisis by the stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). According to Coombs (2007b) each crisis cluster forms a frame that evokes a certain level of crisis responsibility. SCCT clusters the crisis types into three major categories,

including the victim, accidental and preventable. In the victim type, the firm is a victim, natural disasters and rumors fall in this category. In the accidental cluster, the actions of an organization leading to the crisis are not intentional (Coombs, 2007b). There is a weak or low crisis responsibility attributions which as a result has mild reputational risk. Examples of accidental cluster crisis include a technical-mistake, accidents and the harm caused by a product. The preventable class of risk is one in which an organization unintentionally exposes people to risk via inappropriate action or law violations (Coombs, 2012) and this poses strong crisis responsibility attributions with serious reputational risk. Each of the cluster define how stakeholders interpret the crisis situation.

The second stage in assessing reputational risk involves the history of a crisis and the reputation that has existed before occurrence of a crisis. In evaluating the degree of reputational risk a firm faces, crisis handlers have to understand the crisis history, whether the firm had suffered the same crises type previously. The organization's previous reputation equally plays a key part in evaluating reputational risk (Coombs, 2007). Porritt (2005) stated that previous reputation is not favourable if the firm treated stakeholders badly in the past. The history and reputation of the company has the potential of heightening crisis responsibility attributions and may pose an impact on the reputational risk posed by a crisis. Reputational threat and crisis responsibility impact emotional and behavioral changes (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). If an individual considers an organization to have a high crisis responsibility, high chances are the individual will have anger feelings toward the firm. On the other hand, a low degree of crisis responsibility held may trigger sympathy feelings. All these feelings may influence the stakeholder behaviors toward an organization.

SCCT also offers a theoretical basis to the crisis responses which have the assumption that the firm has accepted some degree of responsibility for the crisis event. Cooley and Cooley (2011) showed that crisis response tactics are employed for reputational repair, to minimize negative outcomes and to protect the organization against negative behavioral intentions. Coombs (2007) indicated that crisis response procedures are intended to shape crisis responsibility attributions, shift perceptions towards the organization in crisis, and minimize the negative impact occasioned by the crisis. Coombs (2007) identified several response strategies to crises including denying, diminishing and rebuilding. These strategies serve the organization in transmitting its account of the story to its key stakeholders. How the crisis is framed will shape how the firm's stakeholders perceive the situation. The strategy of denying is key in establishing a crisis frame and distances any perceived link between the firm and the crisis. If the firm is not involved, or if the crisis arises through rumors that the organization can dispute, the stakeholders and the media will understand that there was no crisis in the first place and hence no reputational injury will be suffered (Coombs, 2007). In this stage, the organization can use three key tactics namely; attack the one accusing, deny and scapegoat.

The strategy of diminish assures the stakeholders that the crisis is not as severe as it is portrayed or that the organization did not play any role in the crisis occurrence. This serves to reduce the link between the organization and the crisis with the aim of ensuring that the stakeholders perceive the crisis from a lower negative light (Coombs, 2007b). In the event of conflicting crisis frames, the stakeholders will accept whatever frame that originates from the most trustworthy source. Therefore, the response strategy employed must be strengthened with believable evidence to avoid contradictory frames. At this stage, crisis managers can use two tactics: excuse and justification. The rebuild strategy helps in changing perceptions of a firm during a crisis by providing real or symbolic types of help to crisis victims and apologising. These tactics try to shift focus away from the crisis by accepting positive action. The organisation can use compensation and apology as tactics. Bolstering is where an organization tries to heighten positive reputational perceptions by portraying "fresh, positive information regarding the organization and reminding the organisation's publics of previous outstanding performances by the organization" (Coombs & Holladay 2001, p. 327). These tactics can improve goodwill and evoke sympathy. However, Coombs cautions that the strategy should be employed to complement the primary responses and not be employed as replacements (Coombs, 2007b). Crisis managers can use the following tactics in bolstering: reminder, ingratiation and victimage. The belief is that the more accommodative the strategy is, the more effective it is at reducing anger and the negative communication dynamics (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Coombs further incorporated the defensive strategies, which includes placing the firm's interests first, to accommodative strategies, which puts the victim's interest first. Through this continuum of strategies, the crisis teams can align the crisis response to the degree of crisis responsibility. Denial and Diminish postures fall under defensive strategies that protect the organizational image and are dominant in cases where crisis responsibility towards the organization is weak. The Rebuild category falls under accommodative strategies that fundamentally address concerns of victims, resulting in the perception of a firm assuming a higher responsibility for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). According to the SCCT theory, the higher the crisis responsibility, the more accommodative the strategies have to be. This implies that the degree of accommodation involved in responding to a crisis is directly proportional to the organization's crisis responsibility, since this is equally directly proportional to the reputational injury suffered (Coombs, 2007). Crisis responsibility is a threat to a

firm's reputation since higher crisis responsibility attributions trigger a higher reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). Therefore organizations in crisis situations with strong attributions of crisis responsibility should embrace more accommodative response strategies. The principle of matching the firm's crisis response tactic to the kind of crisis situation is justified by the crisis responsibility and reputational damage. A crisis situation is evaluated and attached to the most appropriate response strategies. The strategies employed in crisis response are to be chosen based on the organization's perceived acceptance of crisis responsibility.

The SCCT is relevant in this study as it offers an evidence-based guide to evaluating and reacting to crises, enabling the organisation to arrive at effective and strategic decisions in the event of a crisis. The study applied SCCT's clusters and four-step response strategies to assess and determine Silverstone's understanding of the crisis situations they faced, the attribution level(s) of crisis responsibility, level(s) of reputational threat posed, the response strategies used and if they were correctly matched with the crisis situations experienced. Further, the theory offers an evidence-based structure for knowing how to achieve maximum protection of an organization's reputation. It outlines the procedures to be taken in matching the strategic crisis responses to the crisis informed by the levels of crisis responsibility and reputational threats. Thus, the study assessed the crisis type(s), crisis history and response strategy applied by Silverstone Airline.

### **Crisis Management**

Crisis management is the process of strategically planning on how a crisis will be effectively controlled to alleviate the risk and uncertainties caused by a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007). The management of a crisis involves four related steps, namely: Preparation, Response, Prevention and Revision (Coombs, 2012). Prevention includes actions observed to avoid crises through detection of warning signs and acting on them; Preparation involves having the crisis management plan (CMP) which encompasses diagnosing vulnerabilities of a crisis, establishing and training a crisis management team (including a spokesperson), establishing a crisis portfolio and updating a crisis communication framework. Response refers to the testing via drills to establish the fitness of the CMP. Revision consists of evaluating the firm's response during crisis simulation or a genuine crisis.

According to Coombs (2012) there are three main phases of a crisis, namely: (1) Pre-crisis, (2) Crisis event and (3) Post-crisis. The Pre-crisis phase deals with planning, prevention and preparation. It is a component of a firm's risk management exercise that seeks to reduce known risks that could explode into full blown crisis. At this stage, it is important for organizations to have: (1) Crisis Management Plan (CMP) that is reviewed at least once a year, (2) an identified team for managing a crisis, (3) crisis simulations through drills to assess crisis management plans at least yearly, and (4) pre-drafted crisis messages. These four activities enable crisis management teams to respond quickly and arrive at effective decisions. Fearn-Banks (2010) noted that a CMP is time saving in the event of a crisis since it pre-allocates tasks, collects crisis information in advance, and acts as a source of reference. Employees working in key departments like legal, finance, public relations, security and human resources commonly constitute the membership of the crisis management team and needs to have a spokesperson. However, the membership may vary depending on the kind of crisis. Coombs (2007) notes that crisis management protocols and players are of limited value if they are not tested. Management will never know how effective an untested CMP is, but through simulations, they can gauge the performance of the crisis team and improve on their plan if need be. Lastly, crisis management may draft messages in advance that will help in case a crisis occurs. Crisis management needs to develop crisis message templates. The templates consist of news releases and communication channels (Corporate Leadership Council, 2003). Templates provide blank spaces where key information and messages, approved by the crisis management team, can be inserted during a crisis.

The Crisis event stage begins when the crisis occurs and ends when it is resolved. This is the point that crisis managers must realize that they are in a crisis that requires appropriate actions. It has two sub-stages: (1) crisis recognition and (2) crisis containment. At this stage, the management realizes the existence of a crisis (recognition) and must respond to the crisis event through words and actions (containment). Crisis containment focuses on how organizations respond during crisis, highlights the importance of an initial response and lays emphasis on communication's relationship to reputational management. Coombs (2007) advises that the initial response must be quick, accurate and consistent. This facilitates the firm to be in total control of the crisis by telling its side of the story through key messages regarding the crisis as approved by management.

The Post-crisis is the learning stage that offers the organization an opportunity to evaluate its crisis management efforts and find better ways for better preparation in future crises. This ensures that stakeholders remain with a positive perception of the firm, thus protecting the organizational reputation. It recognizes post-crisis steps like follow-up communication with stakeholders to maintain positive organization-stakeholder relationships (Coombs, 2007b), cooperation with investigators, and confirmation of the end of the crisis. This study will assess Silverstone's crisis management efforts, including the post-crisis actions and/or communication with their stakeholders.

### **Corporate reputation management during a crisis**

During crises, managers have increasingly used accommodative strategies for reputation management (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Stakeholders are most likely to heighten the pressure on the affected organization through various media (Meer et al., 2017). Stakeholders management becomes an integral component of crisis management, organizations must therefore assess their relationships and interactions with stakeholders (Stephens et al., 2005). Crises can cause reputational damage and harm stakeholders through natural, accidental or organizational-induced incidents (Nwogwugwu, 2018). During a crisis, stakeholders “can be less supportive or have severe ties with the organization” (Coombs and Holladay, 2014, p. 44). When stakeholders support the organization, they can enhance the crisis management efforts. The severity of a crisis on stakeholder attitudes/behaviors towards an organization is determined by how the organization manages its corporate reputation. Kim (2016) argues that if reputation is poorly managed then after a crisis, “stakeholders may not only have negative perceptions of the organization’s reputation but can also stop buying its products and no longer support the organization” (p. 35). Understanding stakeholder needs and behaviors are therefore crucial as they can help the organization design effective crisis communication strategies and manage reputation. Stakeholders need to be informed and to know what the organization is doing to protect their interests. Stakeholder reactions are crucial, because they can indicate whether they have accepted the crisis and these responses are important in shaping organizational reputations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Crisis communication therefore influences the stakeholder perception of the organization and to keep a favorable image (Stephens et al., 2005).

In order to manage the reputation during a crisis, Coombs and Holladay (2008) suggest that managers of a crisis should provide the information promised or may end up losing the stakeholders’ trust. The organization should provide timely communication on the process of recovery, corrective measures, and investigative reports about the crisis. The organization should assess the crisis management measures to consider what is working and what requires review for improvement (Coombs, 2006) and enhance preparation, prevention, and the reaction as a step in managing organizational reputation. Coombs and Holladay (2008) suggests that communication strategies like compensation” and “sympathy” were as successful as an “apology” in developing the perceptions of stakeholders in regard to the organization taking crisis responsibility.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study applied purposive sampling in selecting the sample size for this study. Crossman (2019) defines purposive sampling as the selection of subjects with specific characteristics and eliminates those subjects that fail to meet the established set of criteria. The method allowed the researcher to select and sample only the content deemed to bear the greatest potential to advance an understanding of Silverstone’s crisis response strategies. The paper sampled the communication released by Silverstone Airline during the crises in the month of October -November, 2019. In total, there were five press statements released by the airline during the October -November crises. The airline experienced two accidents that led to cancellation of airtickets and aircraft license revoked. In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative analysis following Creswell (2013) approach was picked as an appropriate method. The approach included five stages broken into: (1) initial exploration of the data reading (2) coding the data by segmenting and labelling the texts, (3) using codes to develop themes by aggregating similar codes together in line with the code sheet, (4) connecting and interrelating themes, and (5) constructing a narrative.

The researcher read and revisited all the communication materials garnered for purposes of immersion and deeper understanding of the information. This aided in establishing the central and recurring ideas that helped in identifying the crisis clusters under which Silverstone crises fell, the attribution of responsibility and the response strategies used. The researcher then coded the texts by scanning word for word to draw the codes. To achieve this, underlining the words that captured key thoughts and concepts based on the SCCT guidelines was performed. The researcher noted down his impressions and preliminary analysis derived from the texts. The researcher consequently labelled and grouped the codes under themes and sub-themes as captured by the code sheet that was constructed in line with the SCCT framework. The themes and subthemes that emerged were classified and the procedure was repeated to the point that no additional new insights significant to the study could materialize. The next step was to determine the connection and interrelationship among the themes and sub-themes. Finally, the researcher provided a narrative format of his observation and findings as the final step of qualitative analysis. A qualitative content analysis was used in analysing data, code sheet was developed.

### **IV. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

#### ***Crisis clusters or Types within the Silverstone Airline incidences***

The study did a content analysis to establish the crisis clusters. The airline’s incidences a fell under two categories: the accidental and preventable crisis, where the manager minimized the airline’s responsibility by denying any intention to cause harm, claimed the crisis event was out of the organization’s control and

minimized the perceived damage triggered by the event. In this cluster, the organization's action that led to the crisis was treated as unintentional. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019 at 11:11am, Silverstone Airline issued a press release notifying the public that "Our Fokker 50, 5Y-IZO has had an incident while taking off at Wilson Airport at 09:00am this morning." Two hours later, the Kenya Airports Authority (KAA) whose mandate is to provide and manage all airports in Kenya, posted a press release stating that 'Silverstone Airline's aircraft had veered off the runway with 50 passengers on board out of which two were injured and were receiving medical attention'. The Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA) further stated that three other passengers had been seriously injured and another three were being attended to for shock.

This occurrence falls within the definition of SCCT's accidental cluster. Accidental situations include challenges like stakeholders accusing an organization of operating inappropriately, technical error accidents like technology or equipment failure and technical-error product harm where a technology or equipment failure causes product recall. Silverstone Airline's accident was unintentional and by their own submission mentioned that there were ongoing investigations by Government authorities to ascertain the cause of the accident through auditing of the Flight Data Recorder and Cockpit Voice Recorder. This put the accident closest to the technical error accident (technology/equipment failure).

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, Silverstone Airline stated, "We would like to confirm that earlier today our flight Dash 8 – 300 from Lodwar to Nairobi experienced an incident during takeoff and as a result, lost the number 3 wheel assembly." This message was posted after Citizen TV had reported the incident an hour before Silverstone Airline did stating, "Silverstone aircraft makes an emergency landing at Eldoret airport after tyre falls off during flight to Nairobi from Lodwar." It took the airline more than two hours to respond to the information that was already in circulation on social and mainstream media. This gave room to a lot of speculation. Through response, the Airline placed their crisis event under accidental cluster. However, having experienced similar crisis earlier, this automatically placed the crisis under the preventable cluster. This observation is in line with SCCT that highlights that a crisis with a history of a similar event (including the incident of 27<sup>th</sup> October) should use strategies of the subsequent stronger cluster.

#### ***Crisis response strategies employed by Silverstone Airline during the crises***

Silverstone Airline used the adapting information strategy in which case they provided information by saying: "We can confirm that our Fokker 50, 5Y-IZO has had an incident while taking off at Wilson at 09:00am this morning. The aircraft was operating the Wilson- Mombasa- Lamu- Mombasa-Wilson route." A crisis creates the need for information from the public and the adapting information strategy fills this gap. Secondly, the airline used "adjusting information" in their response, where an expression of concern for victims is expressed and is considered as one of the most effective ways to reduce negative influence. Silverstone added in the press release that, "The passengers and crew members have all been safely disembarked and we are currently working with the relevant authorities to assess the situation." The airline projected an image of having taken care of all the passengers and that they were all safe. These strategies are supplemental to SCCT's core strategy of justification that states that the crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis. Instead of referring to the event as an accidental, the Airline preferred the use the term- incident yet KAA and KCAA has earlier confirmed that a few passengers were injured and extensive structural damage to the aircraft. The

Airline response strategy was to minimize the perceived damage that the crisis had caused. The use of informing and adjusting information is effective when a crisis has weak attributions of responsibility (the victim category), zero history of similar episodes of crisis and either a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation. In Silverstone Airline's case, they had no similar crisis and it enjoyed a relatively positive prior relationship reputation as evidenced by the number of clients and repeat clients they had carried, over one million in two years ([www.silverstoneairline.com](http://www.silverstoneairline.com)), before the crisis. Despite using the two supplementary ethical responsibilities strategies (adapting and adjusting), their crisis however fell under the accidental crisis that called for specific strategic and tactical response actions. The Airline used justification tactic that falls under the diminish strategic response. They also employed bolster strategy through the ingratiation tactic by praising their stakeholders. They said, "We thank the emergency services at Wilson Airport for their quick response and cooperation."

The captain's decision to divert to Eldoret International Airport was for the safety of the passengers and the crew. This was a precautionary action and the aircraft landed safely. The Airline rebooked the affected passengers on to the next flight. The two actions responded to the Pre-cautionary and Contingency strategy as proposed by SCCT. They provided corrective action by stating that the captain diverted the flight to Eldoret Airport in the interest of safety. The Airline stated that "This was a precautionary action and the aircraft landed safely," they used justification strategy to minimise the perceived harm. In an effort to minimize their responsibility, the Airline stated "The safety of our customers and crew is always our top priority." In this case the Airline explained their lack of intent to cause harm as a way to bolster their image. Other tactics that the

Airline used were the ingratiation strategy by the managers who engaged their stakeholders to protect the airline’s reputation. In a press statement, the airline stated “We would like to thank our employees, passengers and key stakeholders for your continued support.”

**Silverstone Airline management of their corporate reputation during the crises**

In response to research objective, the study examined whether the airline matched the response strategies to the appropriate crisis clusters. The findings reveal in the first incident that happened on 11<sup>th</sup> October, the Airline employed justification and apology tactics which are under the accidental and preventable strategy. The airline matched their response strategies to the crisis clusters as guided by SCCT. They also upheld the ethical considerations in initial crisis response formulation and dissemination. See the table below for the matching of response strategies to the crisis cluster.

Crisis Cluster	Response Strategy used
Victim Cluster	Deny strategies: <i>Attack the accuser Denial Scapegoat</i>
<b>Accidental Cluster*</b>	Diminish strategies: <i>Excuse Justification*</i>
Preventable Cluster	Rebuild strategies: <i>Compensation Apology</i>
	Bolster: <i>Reminder Ingratiation* Victim image</i>

*Response strategy used by Silverstone Airlin in matching the crisis type/cluster of 11<sup>th</sup> October*

The second incident that happened on 28<sup>th</sup> October, was addressed using the Diminishing and Bolstering tactics, yet this was a preventable crisis that should have been matched with intensifiers which required compensation, apology or regret tactics. The airline did not match the crisis type to the response strategies they used. Every crisis situation needs to be evaluated and the most appropriate crisis response strategies chosen, although apology tactic is the best strategy within every crisis situation. Nevertheless, organisations tend to use it for crisis events that involve high level of responsibility for the avoidance of legal liability. It is important that the organisation be open and disclosure information to build stronger and better relationships. because the uncertainty that a crisis elicits brings about psychological stress among stakeholders. In their bid to help the public cope with the psychological stress, the airline issued information, albeit brief, regarding the accident, the aircraft’s route, the status of the passengers and the ongoing investigations.

Crisis Cluster	Strategy used
Victim Cluster	Deny strategies: <i>Attack the accuser Denial Scapegoat</i>
Accidental Cluster	Diminish strategies: <i>Excuse* Justification*</i>
<b>Preventable Cluster*</b>	Rebuild strategies: <i>Compensation Apology</i>
	Bolster: <i>Reminder Ingratiation* Victim image</i>

*Response strategy used by Silverstone Airlin in matching the crisis type/cluster of 28<sup>th</sup> October*

**V. DISCUSSION**

In their bid to help the public cope with the psychological stress, the airline issued information, albeit brief, regarding the accident, the aircraft’s route, the status of the passengers and the ongoing investigations. Stakeholders are likely to increase the pressure on the stricken organization through various media (Meer et al., 2017), but once the organization provides information and gives an assurance that everyone is safe as Silverstone Airline did, then the public’s psychological stress is deflated and the need for more information is weakened.

The Airline experienced accidental crisis type that could have affected their reputation, however due to the positive relationship with its stakeholder, the airline was able to manage the crisis. Park and Reber (2011) argued that organizational responsibility and how organization-public relationships affect public perceptions of a crisis and the attitudes toward the organization. The scholars partially agreed that publics with a favourable relationship towards a company have a more positive attitude towards it. They also found out that regardless of the level of relationship, attribution of crisis responsibility is influenced by what the public perceives to be the cause of the crisis. This can mean that if they do not perceive the company as responsible for the crisis even when they are, then the airline will be treated not as the cause and may be seen as victims. The most effective strategy is to cultivate the relationship between the organization and the public (Park & Reber, 2011).

The airline response with an apology was an effective strategy, that showed concern and projected an image of having taken care of its passengers coupled with thanking their emergency service providers for their quick response. The action reduced the negative behavioral intentions, which is in line with Coombs (2007) argument that crisis response strategies are used to reduce or prevent negative effect and behavioral intentions.

The Airline stated that they had safely disembarked all passengers and crew, this showed that everything was under control and safe. The airline used the diminish and bolster as their response to the crisis type they experienced. These strategies were correctly aligned to and matched with the crisis type. Every crisis situation needs to be evaluated and the most appropriate crisis response strategies chosen (Coombs, 2012).

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study analysed the crisis communication and management at Silverstone Airline, by examine the type of crisis the airline faced and the response strategies used. The airline faced the accidental, preventable and victim type of crisis. The response strategies applied were bolster and denial strategies even in situation where they would have matched the crisis type to the response strategy, for a more effective response. The study findings revealed that the airline appropriately matched response to the crisis type in the first incidence, however, in the second and third incidence the Airline mismatched the response strategies to the crisis type. During the crisis, accuracy in dissemination of information is key. Silverstone Airline gave information on the incidences contrary to the regulatory bodies (KCAA, KAA). It is important to constantly audit your crisis response strategies during crisis by looking at the effect they had on stakeholders and their perceptions of the organization. This will reveal the mood of the public, their thoughts on your responses and the overall reputational health of the organization. This will in turn inform and help improve future strategies by highlighting the most effective responses/strategies.

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