

**Dancing on Thin Ice: The BBC's Crisis Communication Strategies in Managing  
*Strictly Come Dancing* Controversies**

*A Qualitative Content Analysis*

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**ABSTRACT**

When the news becomes the story: How does the BBC handle reporting on its own crisis?

This study examines how the BBC navigated a critical reputational crisis involving allegations of misconduct against professional dancers on *Strictly Come Dancing*, following complaints from contestants regarding training methods and workplace culture. As both the programme's producer and news broadcaster covering the controversy, the BBC found itself in a precarious position, reporting on these allegations impartially while maintaining institutional credibility.

Two critical questions drive this research: (1) How are crisis communication strategies operationalised in the BBC's institutional communications during the *Strictly Come Dancing* crisis? (2) How is the crisis framed across the BBC's institutional communications? As one of the oldest public service broadcasters, with a mandated commitment to impartiality and transparency, the BBC offers a particularly compelling case for examining institutional crisis communication in the context of increasing public accountability pressures. This context provides valuable insights into institutional self-coverage and the crisis communication strategies employed to manage both public perception and organisational accountability.

Employing Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Framing Theory, Reputation Management, and Image Repair Theory, this study examines how the BBC strategically controlled its external messaging throughout the crisis. Through Qualitative Content Analysis of BBC sources, including BBC News articles, public statements from victims and the accused, and formal apologies from the BBC Director-General, the analysis identifies distinct communication patterns. The BBC employed measured reporting and strategic distancing from implicated individuals, before shifting toward controlled acknowledgement during peak crisis moments, suggesting institutional responsiveness while avoiding full organisational responsibility. As allegations escalated and pressure intensified, distinct communication patterns emerged from the BBC's deliberate use of strategies, including denial, distancing, corrective measures, and narrative reframing.

This research contributes to crisis communication studies by examining how a public service broadcaster addresses the complex challenge of reporting on internal crises while maintaining both journalistic credibility and institutional reputation, providing insights into organisational accountability within media institutions. Furthermore, it illustrates how traditional crisis communication frameworks operate within public service media contexts, where commercial reputational concerns conflict with democratic accountability obligations, and where tensions have been revealed between institutional self-preservation and public service mandates during internal organisational crises.

Keywords: *Crisis Communication, Internal Crisis, Media Framing, BBC, Strictly Come Dancing*

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## 1. Introduction

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) remains one of the world's oldest and influential Public Service Media (PSM) institutions, providing extensive news, radio, and television services in both the UK and globally (BBC, n.d.; Collins, 2007, p. 164). Operating under strict ethical and editorial standards, the BBC is subject to constant public and political scrutiny. Reputational threats, whether internal or external, directly affect how the organisation is perceived and functions.

For public service broadcasters like the BBC, internal crises present distinct risks. They do more than disrupt operations; they undermine public trust and institutional legitimacy, both of which are central to the organisation's credibility and identity (Collins, 2007, p. 167). Addressing internal crises, therefore, requires sophisticated communication strategies that extend beyond operational fixes to preserve institutional credibility and public confidence.

This thesis examines how the BBC responded to an internal reputational crisis during the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy. It focuses on how crisis communication strategies and editorial framing were operationalised within its public communications. Specifically, it analyses how these strategies were employed to manage reputational risk, how they shifted across the crisis lifecycle, and how the BBC balanced the demands of editorial integrity with institutional self-protection.

Launched in May 2004, *Strictly Come Dancing* became one of the BBC's most successful programmes by reimagining the legacy format of *Come Dancing*. The series paired celebrities with professional dancers, merging ballroom traditions with prime-time reality television appeal (ID\_1). The show rapidly became a cultural sensation, originally presented by Tess Daly and Bruce Forsyth, and judged by a panel of four, including Len Goodman, Arlene Phillips, Bruno Tonioli and Craig Revel Horwood. Its success revitalised interest in ballroom dancing and led to international adaptations in over 50 countries under the *Dancing with the Stars* franchise (ID\_1).

However, in late 2023, *Strictly* became the focus of a significant reputational crisis after several allegations of misconduct emerged against professional dancers. According to BBC coverage, these accusations included verbal abuse, emotional harm, online harassment, and implied sexual misconduct (ID\_35). The controversy intensified after actress Amanda Abbington abruptly withdrew from the competition in October 2023 (ID\_2). While her departure was initially attributed to "medical" and later "personal" reasons, subsequent media

reports identified continuous verbal abuse by her dance partner, Giovanni Pernice, as a significant factor (ID\_40). This revelation challenged the BBC's authority, questioning the show's internal management and the organisation's response to the claims.

Following Abbington's testimony, other former contestants shared similar accounts, suggesting systemic issues within the show. Laura Whitmore, Will Bayley, and Zara McDermott each reported experiences that implied a pattern of inappropriate behaviour by professional dancers (ID\_25, ID\_18, ID\_11). Among the more serious allegations was a claim against Graziano Di Prima, accused of physically aggressive conduct, including an incident in which he allegedly kicked McDermott during rehearsals (ID\_13). In July 2024, Di Prima, like Pernice, withdrew from the programme amid ongoing allegations. The departures of both dancers from the show signify the crisis event stage, a crucial moment in the crisis management process where the BBC's response and actions are under intense scrutiny, as the allegations progressed toward formal investigations (Coombs, 2015, p. 11).

The crisis exposed the conflict between the BBC's public commitment to accountability and its internal management of staff and participant welfare. In its official response, the BBC reiterated its commitment to addressing all allegations with "care, fairness and sensitivity to everyone concerned" (ID\_6). However, the scale and nature of the allegations revealed internal pressures within one of BBC One's most high-profile productions, with reports indicating that verbal abuse by professional dancers extended beyond celebrity contestants to members of the production team (ID\_28). This raises questions about the BBC's protection processes, its handling of internal crises, and its compliance with PSM standards.

Consequently, crisis type, organisational history, and prior reputation are all factors that influence stakeholders' perceptions of institutional accountability during a crisis. The allegations against Pernice and Di Prima are classified as "organisational misdeeds with injuries," a crisis type wherein the organisation is perceived as having knowingly placed individuals at risk (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). This classification exacerbates reputational risk by framing the crisis as an instance of institutional negligence. This reputational risk is amplified for the BBC due to its dual authorities. As the producer of *Strictly Come Dancing*, the institution is directly accountable; meanwhile, as a news broadcaster, it must remain objective when reporting these events, adding a layer of complexity to its responsibilities. These converging roles inherently produce tensions between editorial independence and institutional self-preservation, with direct implications for transparency, accountability, and narrative control (Coombs, 2015, p. 125).

Crisis communication is typically conceptualised as a reactive strategy to control immediate reputational threats. Nevertheless, as a PSM organisation, the BBC is expected to implement a proactive and sustained approach that protects accountability, maintains institutional authority, preserves public trust, and reinforces its core public service values (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 20). This becomes especially pertinent for media institutions, where reputational risk is closely connected to public and stakeholder perceptions. Thus, effective crisis communication aims to generate favourable media coverage, ensure accurate reporting, and monitor reputational impact over time (Coombs, 2015, p. 137). Therefore, this analysis aims to examine how the BBC managed reputational risk during the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy, offering a case study that contributes to research on how media institutions handle internal crises in the public eye (Burns, 2016, p. 135). The following research questions guide the study:

**RQ1:** How are crisis communication strategies operationalised in the BBC's institutional communications during the *Strictly Come Dancing* crisis?

**RQ1a:** Which strategies, including denial, distancing, corrective action, mortification, and withdrawal, are employed, and how do their uses shift throughout the crisis?

**RQ1b:** How do these strategies address the tension between the BBC's role as broadcaster and programme producer?

**RQ2:** How is the *Strictly Come Dancing* crisis framed across the BBC's institutional communications?

**RQ2a:** What dominant frames, including conflict, victim testimony, justification, and deflection, are employed throughout the crisis?

**RQ2b:** How do editorial choices, such as tone modulation and selective omission, contribute to reputational management?

## 1.1 Theoretical and Methodological Approach

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines crisis communication, media framing, reputation management, and image repair to address the research questions. Central to this approach is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which evaluates how organisations adapt their crisis responses based on stakeholder attributions of responsibility, while also considering contextual factors such as prior

reputation and crisis history (Coombs, 2004, p. 163). However, SCCT does not fully account for crises in which media organisations report on themselves, a particular challenge for public service broadcasters balancing editorial independence with institutional transparency.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993, p. 53) complements this perspective by examining how editorial decisions, including emphasis, omission, and lexical framing, shape public interpretations of events, particularly when organisational credibility is at stake (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 20). Reputation Management Theory supports this analysis by explaining how editorial framing sustains or undermines institutional legitimacy over time (Coombs, 2015, p. 6), particularly when public communication must balance both immediate reputational risk and longer-term perceptions of credibility. Additionally, Image Repair Theory explains how rhetorical strategies, such as denial, justification, apology, and corrective action, are utilised when accountability is publicly implied or accepted (Benoit, 1997, p. 179).

The analysis employs Qualitative Content Analysis to operationalise the theoretical frameworks, enabling a systematic examination of how BBC communication developed across different stages of the crisis (Schreier, 2014, p. 171). The dataset comprises public statements, interviews, and transcribed official statements from BBC News and BBC Newsround. The analysis codes for explicit crisis responses, such as denial, justification, apology, and corrective action, and framing strategies reflected in editorial choices, including lexical emphasis, omission, narrative shifts, and the attribution of responsibility (Schreier, 2012, p. 187), facilitating an integrated analysis of how these strategies developed across distinct phases of the controversy.

## **1.2 Scientific and Societal Relevance**

Empirical research on how public institutions handle internal crises remains notably underdeveloped, despite crisis communication becoming an increasingly significant field within organisational studies. Although theoretical models have evolved, a persistent gap remains in investigating internal organisational dynamics, communication strategies, and reputational outcomes (Ayoko et al., 2017, p. 620). Existing research has predominantly concentrated on private sector contexts, with case studies such as Toyota highlighting how response framing influences public perceptions of credibility and control (Kim & Atkinson, 2014, p. 648). Similarly, despite the rise of social media, research demonstrates that traditional media continues to amplify emotionally charged crisis narratives (Liu et al., 2011, p. 351), exemplifying the impact of narrative control within news outlets like the BBC.

Alongside research on external crisis narratives, Ayoko et al. (2017, p. 620) identify a critical gap in crisis communication research on internal conflicts, particularly those arising from tensions between employees and organisational leadership. Thus, by applying the *Strictly* case study to analyse the internal dynamics of a PSM institution, this study contributes to addressing this research gap.

Additionally, managing reputational risk in public institutions remains underexplored in crisis communication research. Snoeijers and Poels (2018, p. 68) note that public organisations often delay crisis communication to avoid acknowledging reputational threats that could further undermine institutional legitimacy. Ethical obligations, transparency requirements, and political pressures constrain the use of corporate-style crisis response strategies by public institutions, as framing efforts aimed at projecting coherence or excellence often conflict with public service values such as neutrality and accountability (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012, pp. 200-201). Therefore, these constraints stress the need for context-sensitive research that addresses the accountability pressures, operational constraints, and public responsibilities faced by institutions such as the BBC.

Despite notable exceptions, such as Frandsen and Johansen's (2017, p. 18) analysis of social media use by Danish public authorities and Christensen and Læg Reid's (2015, p. 2) work on bureaucratic accountability, PSM remain underrepresented in empirical crisis communication research. Empirical research rarely addresses the specific challenges public service broadcasters face when simultaneously reporting on and managing internal controversies, particularly those related to editorial control and institutional credibility, as exemplified by the BBC's handling of the *Strictly Come Dancing* crisis.

Public service broadcasters, like the BBC, face increasing pressure to maintain ethical consistency across both their editorial content and internal organisational practices. Social movements such as #MeToo have reshaped public expectations, increasing pressure on PSM to demonstrate ethical consistency between editorial decisions and organisational conduct (Hillstrom, 2018, p. 1). This expectation is reflected in the *Strictly* case, which reveals the operational demands of maintaining editorial accountability alongside organisational responsibility during internal crises.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing how the BBC managed its reputational crisis through external communication and editorial framing. It contributes to research on crisis communication, media ethics, and public service accountability by applying SCCT, Framing Theory, Reputation Management, and Image Repair Theory to a context where a public service media organisation is conflicted in its role as both the subject and narrator of a

crisis. This thesis examines the crisis communication strategies employed by the BBC through its news broadcasting to report impartially on a reputational crisis originating from its own production.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Crisis communication has evolved into an integrative framework that combines theories of reputation management, organisational response, and public accountability (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 278). Within this field, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) outlines how organisations select response strategies based on stakeholder attributions of responsibility and perceived reputational threat (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). Framing Theory examines how these strategies are communicated, focusing on how narrative construction and editorial decisions influence public interpretation (Entman, 1993, p. 53; 2007, p. 164; Cornelissen, 2020, p. 20). Reputation Management Theory adds a longer-term perspective, addressing how organisations maintain stakeholder trust and institutional legitimacy over time through sustained communication (Coombs, 2015, p. 6; Cornelissen, 2020, p. 20). Agenda-setting theory intersects with all three, influencing how organisations prioritise issues during a crisis and shapes which controversies receive prominence through salience, repetition, and tone (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 212; Scheufele, 2000, p. 298).

The growing relevance of this framework reflects heightened stakeholder expectations, especially in the public sector, where institutions are under increasing pressure to manage reputational threats effectively (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 279). Crisis communication research typically distinguishes between two areas of focus: form and content. Form explores how crises emerge, evolve, and resolve, including the stages and typologies of crises. Content examines how organisations frame and deliver messages during and after crises, emphasising the strategic choices that shape public understanding and influence perceptions of legitimacy (Tachkova & Fediuk, 2025, p. 3). This distinction informs the present study, which applies these frameworks to examine how the BBC managed reputational risk during the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy. It focuses on how crisis response strategies were selected, framed, and operationalised within the BBC's public communications.

Central to this inquiry is the recognition that crises within media institutions extend beyond operational disruption, involving reputational harm, threats to editorial independence, and heightened public scrutiny (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 278; Billings et al., 1980, p. 302). In the BBC's case, agenda-setting directly informed how the *Strictly* controversies were sustained in public discourse, while others were strategically minimised or downplayed. Crisis communication, therefore, is not only a managerial function but also an ethically complex task that requires balancing journalistic impartiality with institutional self-preservation (Bélair-Gagnon, 2013, p. 482; Lewis & Cushion, 2017, p. 494). While the field has expanded, much of the literature centres on corporate crises, offering limited insight

into how public service organisations respond under similar reputational pressures. This study addresses that gap through a theory-driven analysis of the BBC's handling of the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversies, contributing to a broader understanding of crisis communication in the public sector.

These three frameworks form a coherent sequence for analysing the BBC's crisis response: SCCT guides the selection of response strategies, Framing Theory explains how these responses are communicated, and Reputation Management considers their long-term impact on stakeholder trust. Collectively, they reflect the whole progression of crisis communication, from initial reaction to reputational recovery (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 259). This integrated framework enables a comprehensive examination of how the BBC managed the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy while balancing transparency with institutional protection. The following subsections provide an in-depth exploration of each framework and its application to this case study.

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

The ability to respond swiftly and coherently to reputational threats has become central to organisational survival, establishing crisis communication as a substantial field within organisational studies that integrates strategic communication, crisis management, and reputation management (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 278; Fediuk et al., 2022, p. 31). As a core component of crisis management, effective crisis communication maintains control over developing narratives and organisational messaging, ensuring stakeholders remain confident in the protection of their interests (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 278). These actions are not merely managerial responses but reflect narrative control and demonstrate a continued commitment to social, safety, and environmental standards (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 278). Crisis communication, therefore, functions as strategic improvisation linked to reputation management, protecting or restoring legitimacy during reputational threats (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022, p. 417). In public institutions, these factors are amplified by accountability obligations and heightened scrutiny (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017, p. 92). The BBC case introduces new contextual complexity, demonstrating how SCCT must adapt to values like editorial impartiality and legal caution, which are less commonly restricted for corporate organisations.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) offers a clear framework for understanding how organisations manage reputational threats. It connects crisis responses to public perceptions of responsibility, historical reputation, and stakeholder expectations

(Coombs, 2004, p. 173). Rather than treating crisis communication as a universal approach, SCCT encourages tailored responses corresponding to perceived responsibility and stakeholder expectations (Haigh & Ngondo, 2024, p. 36). This responsiveness forms the core of effective crisis management in high-stakes reputational environments.

SCCT categorises crisis responses into three types: primary strategies, such as apologies and taking responsibility; deny strategies, including accusation or rejection of claims; and secondary techniques, which aim to reinforce the organisation's image through reminders of past good deeds or by positioning the organisation as a victim (Coombs, 2007, pp. 170-174). The choice among these strategies must be informed by crisis type, the organisation's crisis history, and prior relationship reputation. SCCT posits that when an organisation has a negative history or has previously treated stakeholders poorly, the public is more likely to assign blame, and the reputational threat is amplified (Coombs, 2007, p. 169). Despite its typical use in corporate settings, this study applies SCCT to a public broadcaster, where strategic constraints and expectations differ, providing a new context to evaluate its relevance and adaptability.

Though SCCT traditionally emphasises strategic message content, the timing and source of crisis communication have become increasingly significant. Stakeholders react more positively when organisations proactively disclose crises, interpreting such actions as a sign of transparency and ethical commitment. Self-disclosure by the organisation, particularly when it precedes media coverage, enhances perceptions of trustworthiness and improves public reception of subsequent responses (Tachkova & Fediuk, 2025, p. 2). This broadens SCCT's focus from message framing alone to include the sequencing and origin of communication, which can significantly inform stakeholder attributions of responsibility and perceived authenticity.

Applying SCCT to a public service broadcaster such as the BBC reveals inherent tensions. While SCCT favours strategies common in corporate settings, such as apologies or blame reduction to mitigate reputational harm (Coombs, 2016, p. 120), these can conflict with the BBC's core values of impartiality, transparency, and journalistic integrity. SCCT's emphasis on the link between reputational threat and perceived responsibility (Coombs, 2007, p. 170) is further complicated by the BBC's prior reputational baggage, where historic transparency controversies heighten scrutiny and amplify blame even when responsibility is ambiguous. This case study thus offers a valuable opportunity to examine the applicability of SCCT beyond the corporate sphere, highlighting its limitations when applied to a public service institution operating under distinct legal, editorial, and ethical constraints.

Moreover, SCCT's focus on reputation as the primary outcome may overlook essential relational and emotional elements. While crisis communication plays a modest role in shaping reputation, factors such as stakeholder emotions and word-of-mouth are often under-examined (Coombs, 2016, p. 122). This proves especially significant for public service institutions, where long-term trust and perceived integrity frequently outweigh short-term reputational benefits. The emphasis on "instructing" and "adjusting" information, core components of SCCT's ethical foundation that help stakeholders manage crises, remains underutilised in both research and practice (Coombs, 2016, p. 122).

The theory also highlights the importance of ethical accountability in crisis response. Coombs (2022, p. 197) notes that denial is no longer recommended for real crises involving any degree of responsibility, as it tends to worsen reputational damage. While denial was once applied to paracrises, such as rumours or false accusations, it has been removed from the framework's list of recommended strategies. Instead, all crisis responses should begin with an "ethical base response," which involves providing clear instructions to affected stakeholders and addressing emotional concerns (Coombs, 2022, p. 198). This foundational step is essential, as even strategies such as apologies or justifications may be perceived as inadequate if ethical expectations are not first met.

Building on this, both SCCT and broader crisis communication theory emphasise that the choice of response strategy should reflect the degree of responsibility attributed to the organisation by stakeholders. Cornelissen (2020, p. 291) argues that perceptions of responsibility, whether low, moderate, or high, are crucial in shaping public expectations and determining the most suitable communicative approach. When perceived responsibility is low, such as in external accidents or unintentional missteps, organisations may credibly employ distancing strategies (Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 287-288). However, when the crisis originates internally or is seen as a violation of norms or values, as in cases of misconduct or ethical failure, stakeholders are more likely to assign high responsibility, demanding accommodative responses such as apologies, corrective actions, and behavioural change (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 288).

Accordingly, the nature of the crisis, whether classified as a faux pas, accident, transgression, or act of terrorism, determines stakeholder perceptions and appropriate response strategies (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 287). Since stakeholder perceptions of responsibility matter as much as factual culpability (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 291), organisations must strategically frame crises by emphasising or minimising particular aspects to influence narrative construction (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 201). For the BBC, maintaining trust across

diverse stakeholder groups, from audiences to public figures, is essential, as these groups can significantly shape public discourse despite lacking formal power (Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 34, 110, 134). Effective crisis communication, therefore, depends on aligning strategy with stakeholder expectations and their perceived level of responsibility.

SCCT also reframes responsibility through accountability, encompassing responsibility, openness, and answerability (Coombs, 2024, pp. 223-224). These interrelated dimensions require not only the acceptance of fault where appropriate but also transparency in communication and a willingness to justify organisational decisions. Importantly, this construct demonstrates the growing emphasis on issue-specific salience in media environments, where perceptions of organisational accountability are often shaped by complex interactions between media framing, stakeholder expectations, and real-world context (Erbring et al., 1980, p. 19). Therefore, responses to crises are rarely considered independently; instead, audience characteristics and past experiences with an organisation significantly inform what is deemed credible, salient, or trustworthy.

In addition to overt strategies, SCCT acknowledges more defensive approaches such as “cloaking,” where organisations attempt to downplay or obscure negative information to protect their reputation (Coombs, 2024, p. 222). This approach may involve minimising coverage or redirecting media attention. However, for public service institutions, the use of cloaking raises significant ethical concerns. Efforts to deflect public perception may directly conflict with foundational values, like transparency, editorial independence, and public accountability. Therefore, even when cloaking is effective in reputational terms, it may undermine trust and institutional credibility over time (Coombs, 2022, p. 198).

Another dimension of SCCT involves Organisation-Public Relationships (OPR), which recognises that the strength of an organisation’s relationship with its stakeholders shapes the context in which crisis responses are interpreted (Haigh & Ngondo, 2024, p. 36). Investing in stakeholder relationships during non-crisis periods can reduce the likelihood that stakeholders will attribute high responsibility to the organisation when a crisis occurs. Reputational capital, in this context, refers to the accumulation of perceptual and social assets associated with stakeholder trust and regard (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). These assets are particularly vulnerable during crises, especially when attribution theory assigns clear organisational responsibility, leading to stakeholder frustration and disengagement (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). Stakeholders are often more forgiving when a crisis occurs within an organisation that has cultivated long-term trust and positive engagement.

Additionally, the pressures on public organisations during crises often reflect broader institutional challenges. Balancing institutional stability with the need for immediate adaptation has become increasingly complex in fast-changing environments. Organisations are frequently required to operate simultaneously under the demands of predictability and the pressures of innovation and change, an inherently difficult balance (Tekletsion, 2024, p. 2). SCCT's flexibility in accounting for stakeholder expectations and ethical considerations offers a framework through which these pressures can be strategically managed.

Therefore, by emphasising strategic alignment, ethical accountability, and contextual adaptation, SCCT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how organisations manage reputational threats. It examines the relationship between perceived responsibility and accountability, offering valuable insight into the ethical and strategic choices guiding each phase of the BBC's crisis response.

## 2.2 Framing Theory

While SCCT focuses on how organisations adapt strategies to different levels of perceived responsibility, Framing Theory complements this by exploring how those strategies are constructed, communicated, and received across media platforms. It asserts that media outlets control how information is presented, guiding audience interpretation in ways that support institutional authority and preferred narratives (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

A crucial concept related to framing is agenda-setting theory, which distinguishes between the salience of issues (first-level agenda-setting) and the salience of issue attributes (second-level agenda-setting or frame-setting) (Scheufele, 2000, p. 298). In the case of *Strictly Come Dancing*, the BBC may determine which controversies are significant and shape how they are interpreted, whether as procedural errors, social justice issues, or editorial misjudgments. These distinctions are crucial, as media frames enable the audience to “connect the mental dots” and make specific interpretations more accessible and influential (Iacob, 2022, p. 47). However, the temporal dynamics between media agendas and audience responses remain insufficient, emphasising the need for further exploration into how the BBC handles crisis narratives over time (Scheufele, 2000, p. 305).

This process, known as salience, involves selectively emphasising certain aspects of a story while trivialising or omitting others, thereby directing how audiences understand and engage with news events (De Vreese, 2005, p. 53). As news organisations operate within strict time and space limitations, they can only feature a fraction of the available stories or perspectives. This editorial filtering, defined by journalistic norms and values, determines

which issues are highlighted as most essential and omitted altogether (Coleman et al., 2009, p. 148). Thus, agenda-setting is a filter that can elevate specific issues into public awareness while simultaneously quieting others.

According to the typology formulated by De Vreese (2005, p. 52), the theory is based on three interrelated components: frame building, frame setting, and framing effects. Frame-building refers to the construction of media frames that are shaped by both internal journalistic practices and external influences, such as political and social movements. Frame-setting examines how these frames interact with individuals' pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, influencing their interpretations and responses to news. Finally, framing effects, as conceptualised by De Vreese (2005, p. 52), refer to the broader communicative processes through which media discourse contributes to shaping public opinion, individual attitudes, and sociopolitical narratives.

Following this, frame-setting examines how audiences internalise and interpret media frames through the perspective of their existing attitudes and predispositions toward the BBC (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52; Iacob, 2022, p. 48). This involves assessing the BBC's use of examples, such as references to past controversies, alongside symbolic language and appeals to shared values like mental health and public accountability. These framing strategies shape public perception and emotional responses, including trust, anger, and empathy (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52). Second-level agenda-setting expands on this by examining the frequency with which issues or individuals appear in the news and how they are portrayed. Media coverage often emphasises particular attributes, such as competence, integrity, or justice, and combines them with an emotional tone that is positive, neutral, or negative (Coleman et al., 2009, pp. 149-150). The framing and affective context of these portrayals, rather than their mere repetition, form how audiences perceive the actions and intentions of public figures and institutions.

Crucially, framing choices carry ethical implications, particularly for a public service broadcaster whose legitimacy depends on impartiality and trust. As Bowen and Gallicano (2013, pp. 194-198) note, the moral weight of language and the way issues are defined highlight the need for careful framing, especially in sensitive crises. This poses a distinct challenge for the BBC, balancing editorial independence with institutional responsibility while ensuring that message framing remains transparent and ethically sound. This is evident in the BBC's handling of the *Strictly Come Dancing* case, where editorial decisions, such as editing headlines, demonstrated a deliberate balance between journalistic transparency and institutional preservation.

Digital platforms complicate traditional framing processes. Opaque algorithms affect frame circulation and prominence unpredictably, prompting journalists and institutions to adjust strategies for visibility and engagement (Entman & Usher, 2018, p. 305). As a result, journalistic practices and algorithms shape the BBC's response, influencing how narratives circulate across traditional and digital media.

This dynamic reflects Entman's concept of cascading network activation, where narratives flow from institutional elites to media professionals and, ultimately, to the public, each level contributing to the construction of meaning (Entman, 2003, p. 420). Jacob (2022, pp. 43-49) emphasises the strategic nature of this process: media outlets do not merely report frames but often select from pre-existing narratives introduced by elites. This selection is shaped by cultural congruence and existing power structures. Frames that resonate with dominant societal values, such as impartiality or cultural sensitivity, are more likely to gain traction. Journalists then refine these elite-generated frames and disseminate them to the public, reinforcing discourse that reflects prevailing cultural norms (Jacob, 2022, p. 43). This reinforces the idea that framing is not a neutral act, but a strategic process embedded in media power relations. This is particularly evident in the BBC's handling of internal controversies, where its role as a public service broadcaster complicates public perception management, influencing trust and credibility (D'Angelo, 2009, p. 10).

Framing must also be understood as a dynamic and evolving process throughout the crisis life cycle. In the initial stage, the BBC's framing may have been defensive or neutral, focusing on procedural responses. As the crisis moved toward resolution, marked by Abbingdon's formal departure, the framing likely shifted to emphasise closure, support, or institutional control (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 259). In the post-crisis phase, reputational repair may involve framing the incident in the context of improvement or continuity (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 259). Understanding this evolution is crucial for evaluating short-term and long-term reputational implications.

However, while Framing Theory offers valuable insights into media discourse and meaning construction, its application becomes more complex in contexts where the media organisation is also the subject of the crisis. This particular role heightens the risk of perceived bias, undermining credibility. As Pan and Kosicki (1993, p. 59) note, framing operates across syntactic, thematic, rhetorical, and narrative levels, all of which must be critically analysed when a news entity like the BBC manages its controversy.

In this context, corporate communication plays a pivotal role. As Dowling (2006, p. 83) argues, effective messaging strengthens trust by informing stakeholders, justifying

decisions, and ensuring internal coherence. During reputational crises such as the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy, the BBC's communication strategy became a process of framing, constructing narratives to manage public perception while protecting institutional reputation.

### 2.3 Reputation Management

As SCCT focuses on immediate crisis responses, Reputation Management expands on this by examining how framed narratives are oriented toward maintaining long-term public trust and organisational credibility. This is particularly crucial in public service contexts, where institutions like the BBC face ongoing scrutiny regarding transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. Unlike private corporations, public organisations must manage reputational concerns while maintaining editorial independence and fulfilling their obligations to the public (Haigh & Ngondo, 2024, p. 34). Situationally, reputation is not fixed but a contingent, performative construct continually reinforced through communication practices, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing media discourse (Benoit, 2013, p. 216; Cornelissen, 2020, p. 20). In moments of crisis, stakeholder perception becomes central, shifting attention from an established reputation to how it is interpreted and contested in real-time. CSR and OPR frameworks complement this analysis by situating reputation within social and relational contexts. CSR links an institution's reputational credibility to its ethical and social conduct (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 332), while OPR highlights how stakeholder trust and relationship history shape the framing and reception context of crisis communication efforts (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 227).

Reputation management is not merely a post-crisis initiative but a pivotal aspect of strategic crisis communication, determining immediate responses and long-term legitimacy. Maintaining a positive reputation gives organisations a strategic advantage (Haigh & Ngondo, 2024, p. 34), particularly in media-saturated environments where reputational risks are more visible and frequent (Schermer, 2021, p. 13). The complexity of reputation management stems from the interplay between communication, audience perception, and stakeholder expectations. It is inherently multifaceted, involving anticipatory strategies, real-time decision-making, and post-crisis evaluation (Benoit, 2013, p. 219). Critically, reputational vulnerability does not arise solely from the crisis itself, but from how the audience assigns blame. As Benoit (1997, p. 178) asserts, reputational damage stems not from actual culpability but from stakeholder perception. In crisis management, perception often outweighs reality; mere association with controversy can negatively impact an organisation's image. This emphasises the crucial role of image repair strategies in

maintaining credibility. For the BBC, this becomes critical as a result of *Strictly Come Dancing*'s cultural prominence (ID\_1), as reputational damage to the flagship programme carries institutional risks which could permeate the broader organisation, making effective crisis management a strategic imperative rather than merely a defensive response.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory offers a comprehensive framework for navigating such reputational threats. It identifies five core strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 2013, pp. 216-217). Denial involves rejecting allegations or shifting blame; evasion of responsibility refers to mitigating circumstances, such as provocation or accident; reducing offensiveness includes bolstering, minimisation, and transcendence; corrective action focuses on solving the problem and preventing recurrence; and mortification involves offering formal apologies (Benoit, 2013, p. 217). While these strategies can be effective, their success varies considerably. Research demonstrates that mortification and corrective action are generally more effective at restoring trust than bolstering (Benoit, 2013, p. 219). However, this effectiveness depends on authenticity, as corrective action may damage credibility if perceived as insincere or inadequate (Benoit, 1993, p. 184). The BBC illustrates this principle clearly: reputational damage depends less on actual fault and more on public perception and crisis management, directly influencing image repair strategy choices.

For public service broadcasters like the BBC, applying image repair strategies is further complicated by the demands of journalistic transparency. This imperative complicates their ability to manage reputational threats, particularly when they become the subject of their own reporting (Bélair-Gagnon, 2013, p. 482). Thus, communication within such organisations must navigate the strain between preserving institutional credibility and maintaining editorial integrity, which makes reputational management for the BBC particularly challenging during crises.

This tension between accountability and reputation management is further amplified by how media narratives shape public perception during crises. Consequently, the role of media in influencing reputation is further illustrated through agenda-setting theory. As Cornelissen (2020, p. 212) suggests, the media not only advise the public on what to think but subtly shape how audiences perceive issues by foregrounding specific attributes and omitting others. This dual-layered process, comprising first-level object salience and second-level framing, is especially significant during crises, where the salience of issues is manipulated through narrative emphasis (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016, p. 784). In such moments, strategic framing enables organisations to highlight positive values, downplay negative consequences,

or shift focus entirely. This capacity for framing becomes a strategic asset, operating similarly to Benoit's offensiveness-reduction strategies, such as differentiation and transcendence (Benoit, 2013, p. 217). Significantly, agenda-setting extends beyond external media dynamics to reflect an organisation's internal prioritisation of stakeholder relationships and reputational concerns.

Therefore, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is essential in this process. Organisations frequently use CSR initiatives to enhance reputational capital, particularly in competitive or monitored environments. CSR often serves both moral and strategic purposes, enabling organisations to meet their ethical responsibilities and social expectations (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 332). These strategies range from defensive and charitable responses to promotional and transformative models, with the latter integrating social values into the organisation's primary operations (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 333). This is reflected in the BBC's commitments to diversity, editorial impartiality, and public accountability, demonstrating how transformative CSR upholds trust and reinforces legitimacy during reputational challenges (Luengo & Gil-López, 2024, p. 3).

Moreover, implementing CSR can help protect a company's reputation during periods of heightened scrutiny. An institution's environmental, social, and ethical actions often indicate to stakeholders and potential employees that the organisation operates with integrity and a concern for societal well-being (Hein et al., 2025, p. 3). However, reputational risks are associated with CSR initiatives when perceived as inauthentic. Overly aggressive or exaggerated CSR messaging may provoke scepticism and lead to negative evaluations, particularly when communication is perceived as "spin" rather than substance (Cornelissen, 2020, pp. 337-338). This risk is especially pertinent to the BBC, whose public service values amplify scrutiny regarding whether CSR-driven messaging reflects an authentic commitment or functions merely as reputational management.

Additionally, CSR communication strategies also vary in intent and effectiveness. Informational strategies involve distributing facts and reports without overt persuasion, while stakeholder response strategies encourage feedback but retain organisational control (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 338). More advanced is the stakeholder involvement strategy, which promotes genuine dialogue and shared decision-making (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 339). For institutions like the BBC, these considerations are essential, as their legitimacy depends on demonstrating responsiveness, transparency, and inclusivity.

The BBC's handling of the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy demonstrates this in practice, as the tension between overexposure and perceived editorial avoidance emphasises

the necessity of measured response and narrative control. (Renton & Schlosberg, 2017, p. 14; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016, p. 784). Thus, following this, SCCT and framing theory demonstrate how media organisations, under pressure, must balance transparency with institutional protection.

Subsequently, reputation is managed at the organisational level and mediated through the structural hierarchies of the journalistic field (Schultz, 2007, p. 1969). Journalists possess varying degrees of editorial capital, influencing their ability to shape what matters as newsworthy (Schultz, 2007, p. 196). This leads to a complex environment in which dominant (orthodox), subordinate (heterodox), and taken-for-granted (doxic) values interact, particularly during crises when such values are more likely to be questioned or reaffirmed (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017, p. 1473).

The immediacy of contemporary media, particularly digital and broadcast formats, necessitates rapid but reflective responses (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 220). Press releases thus serve as informative statements and strategic framing devices specifically targeted to shape media narratives (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 220). In this regard, the BBC's press responses operate as editorial clarifications and as part of an expansive agenda-setting strategy that balances editorial standards with reputation management, strategically managing audience interpretation to preserve institutional integrity and maintain legitimacy.

As Schermer (2021, p. 13) emphasises, reputational crises must be analysed concerning four critical elements: the organisation, the stakeholders, the media, and the dynamics of how crises develop. This highlights the importance of adapting reputational strategies to specific stakeholder groups, as the effectiveness of a message can vary depending on the audience. Therefore, stakeholder perception and engagement should inform successful image repair strategies (Schermer, 2021, p. 34).

Alternatively, preparation plays an equally vital role in effective crisis communication. Benoit (1993, p. 182) emphasises the importance of developing crisis contingency plans to minimise response time and reduce the risk of communicative errors. He maintains that an immediate and credible response is central to projecting accountability and trustworthiness in organisational communication (Benoit, 1993, p. 183). However, image restoration goals may sometimes conflict with legal or organisational interests, requiring careful judgment about admitting fault or prioritising damage control (Benoit, 1993, p. 183).

Reputation management is fundamentally a dynamic, stakeholder-driven process closely interconnected with crisis communication. It involves managing narrative

construction and tone while ensuring that responses align with institutional values and stakeholder expectations.

Overall, the integration of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Framing Theory, Reputation Management, Image Repair Theory, Agenda-Setting, OPR, and CSR provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how organisations navigate reputational threats. Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate how crisis communication strategies are operationalised to manage stakeholder expectations and how framing, editorial choices, and narrative construction serve as reputational devices. This framework informs the analysis of how the BBC's crisis communication balances public accountability, editorial integrity, and institutional self-preservation.

### 3. Research Design and Methods

Building on this theoretical foundation, this research is situated within the analysis of media products, focusing on textual outputs produced by the BBC during a reputational crisis. The study applies three complementary frameworks: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which examines the implementation of crisis communication strategies; Framing Theory, which explores how organisations construct and manage crisis narratives; and Reputation Management, which concerns the preservation of institutional credibility during reputational threats. These frameworks directly inform the research design and align with the questions outlined in the introduction.

The decision to focus on textual analysis aligns with Schreier's (2012, p. 5) principle that Qualitative Content Analysis facilitates systematic, replicable interpretation beyond everyday understanding by translating textual meanings into structured, theory-informed categories. This approach establishes its suitability for analysing institutional communications.

This study employed Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to investigate how the BBC addresses reputational crises in which it is both the subject and reporter of controversy. QCA is a systematic method for interpreting meaning from qualitative data, focusing on specific aspects directly related to the research question. It offers a structured methodology that enables effective data reduction while preserving interpretive depth (Schreier, 2014, p. 173).

The analysis adopted a mixed inductive-deductive approach to ensure comprehensive data examination. Initially, all textual material was analysed inductively, allowing categories and patterns to emerge organically through iterative engagement with the data. This was followed by a deductive phase that refined and structured the coding process using the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. This combination of theory-driven and emergent insights facilitated a comprehensive examination of the BBC's communicative strategies in response to reputational threats.

The methodological approach enabled a systematic examination of BBC-authored content produced in response to the *Strictly Come Dancing* abuse allegations. Textual materials, including news articles, press releases, and official statements, were manually coded to identify recurring frames, lexical choices, and narrative patterns through iterative analysis (Schreier, 2014, p. 171). Particular attention was paid to repetition, framing techniques, and how the BBC positioned itself within its dual roles as broadcaster and journalist throughout the crisis lifecycle.

### 3.1 Data Collection & Sampling Strategy

This study examines how the BBC managed crisis communication during the escalation of allegations involving Giovanni Pernice and Graziano Di Prima, which developed from individual claims into an institutional crisis between October 23, 2023, and December 22, 2024. In line with Tracy's (2010, p. 840) principle of "rich rigour," a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 44 BBC-authored publications representing crucial moments across the crisis lifecycle and the organisation's evolving communicative strategies.

Although a broad range of BBC content was available, including broadcast videos, televised news, and social media posts, this study focused exclusively on textual, editorially produced outputs to maintain analytical coherence within a QCA framework. iPlayer content was considered but ultimately excluded to preserve consistency with the institutional self-representation focus. Consequently, the dataset comprises BBC News articles, CBBC Newsround articles, Media Centre press releases, and other formal textual communications sourced directly from official BBC platforms.

Audiovisual content was excluded as it relies on tone, gesture, and visual cues, requiring alternative analytical frameworks such as reception analysis (Schreier, 2012, pp. 181-183). Social media posts were similarly omitted due to their brevity, reactive nature, and platform-specific conventions that differ fundamentally from formal editorial outputs (Jin, 2019, p. 26). External materials, including audience responses, third-party commentary, and unrelated programming, were excluded to maintain focus on the BBC's official communicative stance during the crisis.

However, one exception to this exclusion criterion was the BBC Director-General's official video statement (ID\_19), which was included due to its significance as the only official BBC institutional statement addressing the crisis. To maintain methodological consistency, the video was transcribed and analysed solely as text, without consideration of tone, delivery, or visual presentation.

The final dataset comprises five categories of BBC institutional communications: BBC News articles, CBBC Newsround content, Media Centre press releases, History of the BBC content, and the transcribed Director-General's video statement. Searches were conducted using the BBC's internal search engine with keywords including "Strictly Come Dancing," "Giovanni Pernice," "Amanda Abbington," and "Graziano Di Prima." Results were filtered to the defined time frame, with a cut-off on 22 December 2024. Although

additional content may have been published subsequently, this study confines its analysis to this period to maintain methodological coherence. An iterative refinement process ensured comprehensive coverage of substantial materials, while periodic self-reliability checks during manual coding helped mitigate subjectivity and enhance consistency. The data collection process, outlined in Table 3.1.1, systematically operationalises these steps, ensuring transparency and methodological rigour.

**Table 3.1.1**

*Data Collection Procedure for BBC Crisis Communications Analysis*

<b>Step</b>	<b>Description</b>
Keyword Search	Systematic search using BBC’s internal search engine with terms including “Strictly Come Dancing,” “Giovanni Pernice,” and others to identify crisis-relevant outputs
Date Range Filter	Applied temporal filters from 23 October 2023 to 22 December 2024 to reflect the crisis lifecycle and response phases (Coombs, 2007, p. 4)
Inclusion Criteria	Included BBC-authored outputs such as BBC News articles, Media Centre press releases, and the Director-General’s statement, focusing on institutional communications
Exclusion Criteria	Excluded audience comments, third-party media, and audiovisual materials due to their reliance on multimodal analysis, which falls outside QCA’s textual focus (Schreier, 2012, pp. 181-183)
Review & Selection	Manual assessment of relevance based on headline, summary, and publication metadata. Texts were purposively sampled to align with the research questions (Tracy, 2010, p. 840)

Following the structured data collection procedure, the next phase of the research applied Schreier’s (2014, p. 171) systematic coding model. The analysis focused on excerpts pertinent to the research questions. Open coding identified thematic patterns and rhetorical strategies, developing codes inductively based on tone and institutional stance. From initial coding, 11 primary codes were retained based on relevance and frequency. A comprehensive coding table documented each code with an ID, definition, exemplary quote, and frequency count (see Appendix A). The most recurring themes were then organised into a hierarchical code tree to support the final analytical framework (see Appendix B).

This approach ensured that the dataset combined qualitative richness, through detailed analysis of institutional discourse, with quantitative sufficiency to identify recurring patterns rather than isolated incidents. The final coding structure directly supported a theory-led analysis grounded in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Framing Theory, and Image Repair Theory, with explicit coding criteria and data triangulation enabling a focused examination of the BBC's crisis communication strategies.

### **3.2 Operationalisation of Theoretical Frameworks**

Qualitative Content Analysis was employed to identify latent, context-dependent meanings within the text through a hypothesis-driven coding framework established before data collection (Selvi, 2019, p. 442). This approach combined a systematic content analysis structure with interpretative depth, reflecting a mixed inductive-deductive methodology (Selvi, 2019, p. 442). A hybrid coding process applied a predefined scheme informed by established theoretical models, while remaining flexible to accommodate emergent themes when the data did not align with the initial categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). This maintained analytical precision while enabling theoretical refinement.

The operationalisation of three theoretical frameworks, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Framing Theory, and Reputation Management, aimed to illustrate critical dimensions of the organisation's crisis communication strategy. A coding framework was developed that translated each framework's conceptual categories into observable variables within the textual data, serving as the primary coding structure for crisis communication analysis. Where patterns extended beyond these initial frameworks, supplementary inductive codes were developed, which included relational categories examining efforts to restore integrity, demonstrate accountability, and rebuild public trust beyond transactional image repair.

In applying SCCT, crisis responses were categorised using four core communication strategies proposed by Coombs (2007, pp. 163-176): deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster. Deny strategies were identified in statements that rejected responsibility, disputed the crisis's existence, or shifted blame. Diminish strategies were coded when the organisation downplayed the severity of the crisis or its own involvement. Rebuild strategies were characterised by efforts to repair reputational harm through apologies, compensation, or corrective action. Bolster strategies were reflected in responses that reinforced positive organisational attributes by highlighting values and achievements. Crisis incidents were further classified into one of three attribution clusters derived from SCCT: victim, accidental,

or intentional, each reflecting different levels of perceived organisational responsibility (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). This classification guided analysis of whether the BBC's response strategies aligned with attribution-based expectations, as responses incongruent with perceived responsibility levels are associated with greater reputational harm (Coombs, 2007, pp. 163–176). SCCT's foundation in Attribution Theory clarifies these dynamics by suggesting that stakeholder emotions are shaped by perceptions of responsibility, blame, and severity, which influence expectations for organisational responses (Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 100).

Furthermore, the operationalisation process reflected the BBC's unique relational role as a public service broadcaster. The integration of Organisation-Public Relations (OPR) theory was substantial, emphasising the BBC's responsibility to maintain long-term, trust-based relationships built on ethical accountability, mutual respect, and shared public interest values (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 227). This perspective informed the coding framework by identifying both short-term image repair efforts and broader communicative strategies aimed at restoring relational integrity and rebuilding public trust.

Framing Theory was operationalised to examine how internal editorial decisions and external pressures shaped the BBC's crisis communication construction. It systematically analysed textual elements to uncover dominant frames and assess how the BBC managed narrative control across its dual roles as broadcaster and content producer. This revealed how the organisation balanced institutional accountability with preserving its public image (Lewis & Cushion, 2017, p. 482).

The research began with frame-building, focusing on internal journalistic practices and institutional policies influencing event selection and communication. Key framing devices were identified, including headline language, metaphors, emotional appeals, and the omission or inclusion of specific story elements, alongside reasoning devices such as justifications, causal attributions, and consequence framing (De Vreese, 2005, p. 54; Iacob, 2022, p. 45). Linguistic cues, including tone and word choice, were examined to determine how the BBC constructed its identity, particularly when framed as responsible for the crisis (Entman, 1993, p. 57; D'Angelo, 2009, p. 1; D'Angelo, 2018, p. 9).

Reputation Management theory complemented these analyses by examining how crisis narratives conveyed efforts to manage public perception. Reputations were understood as collective stakeholder perceptions affecting trust, loyalty, and legitimacy (Coombs, 2007, p. 163; Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 213). Attribution theory supports the connection between SCCT and Reputation Management: when stakeholders perceive the organisation as

responsible, reputational damage intensifies, often leading to anger or disengagement (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). For the BBC specifically, existing scrutiny around accountability meant its reputational capital was already strained (van Riel & Fombrun, 2004, p. 32). This history of crises amplified stakeholder perceptions of responsibility, necessitating accommodative response strategies (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; 2016, p. 121).

This integrated operationalisation approach, grounded in multiple theoretical frameworks, enabled a comprehensive analysis of the BBC's crisis communication. It accounted for the broadcaster's unique public service role by identifying both immediate strategic responses and broader relational efforts to manage institutional accountability and protect reputational credibility throughout the crisis lifecycle.

### **3.3 Coding Strategy and Analytical Framework**

Each code was developed based on its theoretical origin within SCCT, Framing Theory, and Reputation Management, requiring an integrated analytical approach. SCCT addressed why particular crisis messages were issued; Framing Theory examined how these messages were constructed; and Reputation Management explored how these messages were oriented toward maintaining stakeholder trust and organisational legitimacy.

The coding process began with open coding, following an inductive approach, which allowed categories to emerge from the data. As patterns were established, the process transitioned toward a more structured, deductive phase consistent with QCA (Schreier, 2012, p. 111). This involved segmentation, trial coding, and iterative refinement of the coding frame (Schreier, 2014, p. 174). Once initial categories were developed, they were selectively organised into typologies informed by the three theoretical frameworks. Double coding ensured consistency and clarity in category definitions (Schreier, 2014, p. 171). A critical evaluation of language use further revealed how the BBC constructed crisis discourse while maintaining journalistic standards. Sub-research questions guided the analysis, structured around the following key areas:

#### *3.3.1 Situational Crisis Communication Strategy (SCCT)*

This section assessed how the BBC positioned itself in crisis responses (Coombs, 2004, p. 174). Communications were analysed to classify statements and editorial responses under SCCT categories. Strategy changes were mapped across pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis to evaluate how messaging evolved (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 268).

This included shifts in tone, framing, and accountability, with more official statements emerging as the crisis progressed (Nguyen et al., 2024, p. 3).

### *3.3.2 Crisis Framing*

The analysis investigated how the BBC framed its coverage of the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversies, focusing on language, imagery, and metaphors (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Frames were defined by sentiment, tone, and underlying textual meaning (Entman, 1993, p. 57). Changes in framing were tracked over time, from pre-crisis to escalation and post-crisis (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 268). The analysis also examined how corporate messages aligned with or diverged from dominant media frames, with rhetorical devices such as justification and empathy highlighted as crucial framing strategies (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 217). Linguistic and symbolic cues were examined line by line, including tone, word choice, and visual elements.

### *3.3.3 Linguistic and Discursive Patterns*

Content analysis evaluated how the BBC constructed impartiality in reporting internal controversies (Boeije, 2010, p. 95). The study focused on lexical choices, narrative voice, and emotional tone to assess how blame or accountability was conveyed. Tone was categorised as positive, neutral, or negative, and sentiment was analysed by genre and context (Boukes et al., 2019, pp. 84-85). Although open coding initially generated over 100 codes, the analysis ultimately focused on 11 key patterns that shaped narrative perception (Schreier, 2014, p. 170). This enabled an in-depth understanding of how language choices reinforce or challenge dominant crisis narratives (Boeije, 2010, p. 95).

### *3.3.4 Reputation Management: Image Repair Strategies*

The coding scheme followed Benoit's (1997, p. 179) classification of Image Repair strategies. Five overarching categories and their sub-strategies guided a deductive coding framework. Text segments were coded according to denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Multiple codes were applied when statements reflected more than one strategy, for example, a single message combining apology and corrective policy was coded under both mortification and corrective action (Schermer, 2021, p. 27). The coding framework also enabled comparison across the BBC's institutional roles. BBC News content and

*Strictly Come Dancing* communications were analysed separately to determine whether distinct reputational strategies were deployed depending on organisational positioning.

### **3.4 Procedural Approach**

This study employed a combined inductive and deductive QCA approach to ensure analytical accuracy and interpretive depth. Beginning with open inductive coding and subsequently applying predefined theoretical categories, the method systematically explored the BBC's discursive strategies across crisis contexts. Manual coding was selected to enhance analytical reliability, allowing for close interpretive engagement, which is essential for identifying subtle discursive features, such as tone shifts, indirect attributions, and strategic omissions.

A structured four-step coding procedure ensured transparency and reliability. First, textual data, including headlines, quotations, and statements, were extracted and formatted for analysis. Second, the texts were manually reviewed to identify linguistic and rhetorical patterns. Third, manual coding maintained analytical sensitivity, particularly in interpreting institutional ambiguity and reputational positioning. Fourth, consistent coding rules and repeated data engagement sustained analytical quality (Schreier, 2012, p. 187).

To further enhance reliability, the coding framework was developed iteratively over a period of 25 days, beginning with a pilot phase following Schreier's (2012, p. 146) recommendations. This phase involved trial coding, category refinement, and repeated review to stabilise the coding structure. A follow-up assessment was conducted, 10-14 days after the initial pilot, which enabled re-engagement with the data and further refinement of the category system, enhancing internal consistency and responsiveness to emerging themes.

Validity and analytical rigour were maintained through deliberate strategies designed to maximise transparency, consistency, and interpretive depth. Validity was strengthened by ensuring a clear connection between the findings, the source materials, and the broader social and institutional context. This was achieved through systematic coding and sustained engagement with the data, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the data. Methodological validity was further reinforced by analysing multiple data types, written texts and video transcripts, which enabled pattern recognition across formats. Theoretical triangulation, incorporating Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Framing Theory, and Reputation Management, further stabilised interpretive outcomes and enhanced analytical robustness.

A documented and iteratively refined codebook ensured consistency in category application, while cross-checking and re-coding enhanced thematic coherence. This approach sustained analytical rigour through repeated data engagement and disciplined coding procedures (Schreier, 2012, p. 187). The credibility, dependability, and objectivity standards of qualitative research were upheld throughout (Tracy, 2010, pp. 837, 843), supported by standardised textual analysis methods (Silverman, 2011, p. 364) and the use of transcripts alongside original video and article sources. The sampling strategy further enhanced analytical reliability by representing the BBC's multi-platform response, across BBC News, Newsround, and official statements, while accounting for variations in audience, format, and editorial tone. This ensured that findings reflected institutional communication patterns rather than isolated examples.

The Director-General's video statement (ID\_19) required specific treatment to ensure consistency within the textual dataset. It was transcribed using automated tools and manually verified for accuracy. Although transcription captured only limited vocal elements, this content ensured systematic integration within the same coding framework as other textual materials.

### **3.5 Methodological Limitations**

Despite employing a systematic and theory-driven analytical process, this study is subject to methodological limitations which should be acknowledged. Initially, the decision to focus on textual analysis necessarily omits non-verbal communicative cues such as tone and gesture, which influence message perception during crises (Schreier, 2020, pp. 2-13). Although transcription identified some aspects of the Director-General's statement (ID\_19), this approach constrains interpretations that rely solely on delivery rather than the language itself.

Additionally, Qualitative Content Analysis enables an extensive exploration of rhetorical and framing strategies, but it does not capture audience reception or assess how the public interprets these narratives. The study focuses on message construction rather than reception, excluding analysis of how emotional states are transmitted from the BBC to audiences through emotional contagion (Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 100). This limitation, however, establishes a foundation for future research that could complement these findings with reception data, such as audience comments or social media sentiment analysis (Nenadić & Kovačević, 2024, p. 160).

Furthermore, the dataset consists exclusively of BBC institutional outputs, excluding external media commentary and broader public discourse that shape reputational outcomes. This focused approach enables detailed examination of organisational self-representation but limits insights into the dialogic nature of crisis communication.

These limitations reflect deliberate methodological choices and do not undermine the validity of the study within its defined scope.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The research exclusively utilised publicly available materials, including published news articles and BBC statements. No personal or private data was collected. All sources were cited accurately to ensure transparency and honesty. Ethical approval was not required because the study did not involve human participants. Consideration was taken to avoid sensationalism and respect for present potentially sensitive content (Schreier & Groeben, 1996, p. 123).

## 4. Results

This section presents the results of a QCA of the BBC's crisis communication strategies during the *Strictly Come Dancing* controversies, with a focus on its dual role as both news broadcaster and programme producer. The analysis is guided by three theoretical frameworks, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Framing Theory, and Reputation Management Theory, which inform the thematic structure and interpretation of the findings.

A total of 44 BBC-produced texts, published between October 2023 and December 2024, were analysed, including BBC News articles, CBBC Newsround reports, and an official statement transcript. These addressed allegations of verbal abuse, mistreatment, and concerns over workplace duty of care. Excerpts were coded by strategic function and rhetorical framing, then grouped thematically based on frequency, relevance, and alignment with the theoretical models. This enabled a structured comparison of the BBC's strategies, ranging from proactive image repair to reactive responses such as denial, conflict framing, and selective reframing.

To enhance analytical clarity, findings are organised into three primary forms of BBC discourse, each serving a distinct communicative role: official statements assert institutional authority, BBC News reporting balances editorial distance with audience framing, and programme transcripts subtly convey organisational values through tone, emphasis, and omission. Accordingly, the results are structured thematically, progressing from proactive to defensive strategies, resulting in an analysis of editorial decisions that reveal the BBC's broader crisis communication position.

### 4.1 Post-Crisis Restoration and Policy Reform

Corrective Measures (CM1), referring to commitments to investigations, fairness, or internal reviews, emerged as the most frequently applied strategy, appearing in 15 excerpts. This was followed by Policy Reform (PR1), which included announcements of structural or procedural change, identified in 11 excerpts. The two codes were merged for analysis, as both were consistently framed as proactive efforts to restore organisational credibility by "correcting the problem" and preventing its recurrence (Benoit, 1997, p. 77).

Across BBC communications, formal and procedural language was consistently used to communicate reform through a carefully managed and impersonal tone. This rhetorical strategy reinforced both CM1 and PR1, aligning with discourse renewal, which frames reputational threats as opportunities for institutional learning and long-term improvement

(Coombs, 2024, p. 224). A recurring example is the announcement, “There will now be a member of the production team in rehearsals at all times as well as two new producers looking after both the celebrities’ and dancers’ welfare” (ID\_10, ID\_20, ID\_21, ID\_30). Phrases such as “welfare” and “production team” project responsiveness while preserving emotional distance, contributing to a narrative of organisational control and reform.

This strategic variation in tone aligns with the “ethical base” strategy in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasises transparency, acknowledgement, and reassurance when moderate responsibility is assumed (Coombs, 2022, p. 198). References to procedural reform, such as “The BBC is conducting an internal investigation” and “There will also be enhanced training and two new dedicated welfare producers” (ID\_21), illustrate a mixed strategy combining corrective action with mortification. This enables the BBC to demonstrate accountability while maintaining composure and reinforcing institutional stability (Benoit, 2013, p. 219).

Tone modulation is further evident across BBC platforms, where the same core message is adapted for different audiences. CBBC Newsround, targeted at younger audiences, employs accessible language such as “looking after both the celebrities’ and dancers’ welfare” (ID\_12). In contrast, BBC News uses more formal and depersonalised phrasing, “The BBC has said it will introduce measures to ‘strengthen welfare and support’ on the show, including a chaperone who will be present ‘at all times’ during training room rehearsals” (ID\_30). Though stylistically distinct, both versions convey the same message of procedural reform, strategically framed to align with audience expectations. This reflects audience-sensitive framing aimed at sustaining credibility while preserving institutional authority.

These tonal variations also extend across other BBC outputs. Official statements employ hierarchical phrasing such as “protocols and structures” and “keep these under review” (ID\_19). In contrast, BBC News articles adopt a journalistic register, blending institutional language with softer expressions, such as “takes issues extremely seriously” and “robust duty of care procedures,” while simultaneously noting that the organisation “would not comment on the latest claims” (ID\_17, ID\_24). The same corporate emphasis is embedded within the BBC Director-General’s apology (ID\_19), repeating institutional mantras such as “I’m not going to talk about individuals” (ID\_19, ID\_16). These patterns demonstrate how tone is carefully managed across outputs to preserve neutrality and composure while communicating accountability.

Despite differences in style and intended audience, the messaging remains unified, consistently reinforcing procedural authority. This coherence exemplifies vertical communication, which ensures strategic alignment across organisational levels during reputational crises (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 243). While official statements assert organisational control, news reports maintain editorial neutrality, and programme content reinforces institutional values through selective emphasis, omission, and tone. Cornelissen (2020, p. 211) argues that such framing significantly influences how audiences interpret organisational behaviour.

As the crisis progressed, tonal contrasts became more pronounced, with a distinct pattern of juxtaposing hyperbolic and celebratory language. Headlines described *Strictly* as “glittering” while simultaneously stating the show was “plagued” by controversy (ID\_35). The term “plagued” evokes an external, invasive problem, something imposed on the programme rather than originating from within. This framing subtly shifts responsibility away from the BBC, presenting the crisis as misfortune rather than institutional failure. When paired with celebratory descriptors like “glittering,” this rhetorical contrast encourages audiences to emotionally and cognitively distance themselves from the allegations, thereby detaching them from the show’s established cultural prestige. By preserving the programme’s status while downplaying organisational failings, the strategy mitigates reputational risk. It exemplifies how framing shapes both emotional response and cognitive interpretation, ultimately influencing how audiences assess the severity of reputational threats and their relevance to institutional credibility (Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004, p. 2).

Tim Davie’s apology (ID\_19) reflects a similar strategy, combining mortification with corrective action while preserving institutional stability. His opening line, “*Strictly*, which is obviously in the headlines, is a wonderful show that brings a lot of joy to a lot of people and has done so for twenty years,” demonstrates positive reframing, reinforcing the show’s cultural value. This aligns with SCCT’s recommendation to embed forward-looking, reassuring messaging within crisis responses to reinforce stakeholder confidence (Coombs, 2007, pp. 170-174). Similarly, his closing remark, “Meanwhile, we do have a brilliant lineup for this year who I’m sure are itching to get going...,” shifts focus toward future programming, deflecting attention from the crisis. This approach aligns with SCCT’s rebuild strategy (Coombs, 2007, pp. 170-174) and Benoit’s (1997, pp. 63-67) principle that combining apologies with reforms strengthens reputational repair.

Additionally, reputational concerns are acknowledged but rarely explored in depth. The use of vague language, such as “controversies,” operates as a linguistic distancing

device, strategically avoiding direct institutional attribution to the BBC. This reflects a deliberate effort to separate the institution from the crisis. Such selective framing aligns with the applicability effect (Tewksbury et al., 2000, p. 807), which posits that repeated emphasis on specific attributes increases the accessibility of preferred interpretations while diminishing those of others. Here, reform is foregrounded while direct discussion of blame is minimised, reinforcing PR1 by presenting structural change as the focal response while sustaining the emotionally neutral tone established by CM1.

These strategies reflect Entman's (2003, p. 420) cascading activation model, where elite institutions embed interpretive cues in media framing to maintain narrative control. The repeated use of corporate mantras such as "the BBC takes its duty of care very seriously" (ID\_24), typically positioned at the end of reports and statements, serves to reaffirm institutional legitimacy while preserving a neutral, authoritative tone (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 220). These mantras consistently link corrective measures to long-term institutional values, connecting the immediate crisis response to broader reputational management.

Beyond the immediate crisis, this approach aligns with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies, which emphasise the importance of ethical communication to sustain stakeholder trust and organisational legitimacy (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 332). From an Organisation-Public Relationship (OPR) perspective, the BBC's role as a public service broadcaster enhances the perceived authenticity of its messaging, thus mitigating reputational backlash (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 227). The frequent use of duty-of-care statements and references to welfare protocols further anchors crisis messaging within the BBC's public service identity, reinforcing its commitment to transparency while protecting institutional stability.

These communicative choices exemplify SCCT's rebuild strategy, appropriate for moderate reputational threats (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). The preference for procedural over emotional language reflects Framing Theory's treatment recommendation function (Entman, 1993, p. 52), where responsibility is acknowledged through structured, depersonalised discourse. CM1 are operationalised through internal reviews, while PR1 depicts structural change.

#### **4.2 Media Framing vs. Organisational Response**

Conflict Framing (CF1) appeared in 12 cases, revealing coverage that emphasised scandal or institutional tension. Victim Testimony (VT1) emerged in 9 cases, reflecting personal narratives that reinforced BBC accountability. Both frames are significant because

they are externally constructed, driven primarily by media discourse rather than as part of the BBC's formal crisis response. Their presence highlights how external narratives can escalate reputational threats independent of organisational messaging. Accordingly, both were coded as "N/A" for crisis response strategy, representing reputational risk rather than deliberate communicative choices by the BBC.

CF1 is exemplified through language such as, "Strictly has been at the centre of controversy as claims have emerged about the treatment of some of the celebrities on the show" (ID\_29). This constructs a narrative of unresolved tension, positioning the programme within a prolonged environment of conflict while subtly deflecting moral judgement away from the organisation itself. This reflects Entman's (1993, p. 52) framing functions, in which media highlight selected aspects of an issue to shape public perception. The prominence of CF1 also aligns with second-level agenda-setting, where repeated emphasis on attributes like controversy and blame shapes how the issue is cognitively prioritised by audiences (Scheufele, 2000, p. 298; Coleman et al., 2009, p. 149).

According to SCCT, the BBC's limited direct engagement indicates a reliance on a "no response" posture, which Coombs (2007, p. 166) identifies as particularly high-risk in crises perceived as preventable. This absence of proactive engagement also diverges from Image Repair Theory, which recommends mortification or corrective action when reputational harm is ongoing (Benoit, 2013, pp. 216–217). Furthermore, this silence strains stakeholder relationships, which OPR theory identifies as central to sustaining legitimacy during crises (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 227).

The theme of VT1 further amplifies reputational risk by extending harm beyond interpersonal disputes to a critique of the BBC's institutional culture. Public claims, such as Amanda Abbington's reference to a "30-page report" still under legal review (ID\_44), combine with BBC News reports that "15 current and former members of staff" had spoken anonymously about the programme's internal culture, citing fear of career repercussions (ID\_28). This shift from isolated conflict to systemic critique reinforces the impression that the issue is organisational rather than episodic.

This dynamic becomes particularly significant when considering the BBC's dual responsibilities. While BBC News operates with formal editorial independence from BBC Studios, its investigative framing strategically relies on anonymous sources to establish editorial distance while remaining part of the same organisation. This approach enables the BBC to fulfil its journalistic obligations while managing reputational risk, a form of anticipatory framing that allows for the controlled disclosure of damaging information before

external outlets can do so. Anonymous testimonies, justified by “fear of repercussions” (ID\_28), serve to acknowledge internal issues without necessitating formal accountability.

The pattern of anonymous testimony indicates a clear strain in employee-organisation identification. As Cornelissen (2020, p. 237) notes, when employees perceive misalignment between their personal values and those of the organisation, identification diminishes. This is further compounded when internal communication lacks clarity and relevance, undermining employees’ sense of belonging and commitment. Misalignment between employees and the organisation increases internal reputational pressure and directly shapes how external stakeholders interpret the crisis.

Consequently, this strategy balances transparency with institutional protection by evading and reducing apparent responsibility through strategic distance (Benoit, 2024, p. 18). The BBC acknowledges internal concerns while distributing responsibility across anonymous individuals and broader organisational processes. This framing enables the organisation to maintain public legitimacy and editorial independence while minimising direct liability for institutional failure. The recurrence of CF1 and VT1 demonstrates how reputational harm can escalate beyond formal crisis strategies, highlighting the communicative challenges of the BBC’s dual role as broadcaster and producer.

#### **4.3 Denial and Deflection: Strategic Distancing and Controlled Messaging**

Denial-related strategies appeared prominently across the dataset. Institutional Protection (IP1) appeared in 9 instances through deflective language or refusal to comment, while Distancing Commentary (DC1) was identified 8 times through language that denies involvement or dissociates the institution from allegations. These patterns align with Image Repair Theory’s concepts of denial and defeasibility, where organisations reject allegations or claim insufficient knowledge or control (Benoit, 1997, pp. 63-67). Similarly, SCCT identifies denial and distancing as high-risk strategies when the organisation is perceived as responsible (Coombs, 2016, p. 120).

IP1 is characterised by formal, procedural language that deflects responsibility while avoiding emotional engagement. Vague phrases like “robust duty of care procedures” and “appropriate action” (ID\_19, ID\_42) project institutional control while evading accountability. Scripted statements such as “the BBC does not comment on specific matters related to individuals” and “we would urge people not to indulge in speculation” (ID\_16, ID\_17, ID\_23) exemplify strategic ambiguity, preserving legitimacy while limiting reputational exposure.

This strategy is further reflected in phrases like “For personal reasons I am unable to continue” (ID\_3), which frames a potentially institutionally pressured exit as a voluntary choice. While serving legal or strategic purposes (ID\_43), it rhetorically obscures causality, privileging institutional protection over communicative openness. This conflicts with normative conceptions of transparency, which demand not only disclosure but also communicative sincerity and traceable accountability (Kim et al., 2024, p. 171).

IP1 frequently overlaps with DC1, particularly through the BBC’s reliance on third-party voices to maintain narrative control while deflecting responsibility. As Cornelissen (2020, pp. 287-288) notes, discursive distancing allows organisations to limit reputational risk by shifting accountability externally while retaining editorial authority. Even when reporting on itself, the BBC sustains neutrality not through direct comment, but by foregrounding voices that simultaneously defend and distance the organisation.

This is evident in Craig Revel Horwood’s remarks, “Don’t forget they are allegations at this point in time. Who’s right and who’s wrong is up to the investigators” (ID\_37). Although not an official spokesperson, Horwood’s long-standing role confers institutional weight (ID\_1). His language redirects focus toward the investigation while subtly instructing audiences to suspend judgement, phrasing that risks sounding patronising yet simultaneously reinforces organisational control. This strategy deflects responsibility by foregrounding factors beyond the organisation’s control, thereby shifting accountability externally and avoiding commitments to internal reform. It simultaneously exemplifies Framing Theory’s functions of causal attribution and moral evaluation, where blame is redirected and internal change is minimised (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

As Bonner (2013, p. 179) observes, *Strictly* judges historically frame the programme as skills-based, prioritising professionalism, while audiences engage with it as entertainment. Horwood’s response reflects this tension, revealing an institutional bias embedded within third-party commentary, which prioritises the protection of the show’s operational identity over addressing the severity of the allegations. Ultimately, these remarks exemplify DC1 by managing reputational risk through affiliated voices that deflect responsibility and reinforce procedural narratives, all the while avoiding direct institutional denial while preserving an appearance of neutrality.

IP1 and DC1 represent a high-risk yet deliberate communication strategy. Through ambiguity, euphemism, and procedural framing, the BBC contained reputational threat while avoiding direct confrontation, compromising transparency and accountability.

#### 4.4 Personal and Organisational Justifications

Bolstering and Justification (BJ1), where contestants expressed personal growth, empowerment, or justification post-crisis, appeared in 5 instances. Personal Defence (PD1), where participants defended their character, intentions, or actions, occurred 2 times. These codes demonstrate clear conceptual overlap, illustrating how individuals associated with *Strictly Come Dancing* defended their own, or other contestants' behaviour, while indirectly reinforcing the BBC's credibility. Operating on both personal and institutional levels, these narratives helped deflect criticism, manage blame, and shape public perception. While framed as personal commentary rather than formal strategy, they nonetheless reflect underlying organisational concerns around image management and reputational protection.

Giovanni Pernice, the dance instructor accused of abusing his partner, exemplifies BJ1 with the statement, "After a difficult year I'm back" (ID\_44), framing personal recovery as symbolic of broader reputational stability. The phrasing signifies personal endurance while subtly reaffirming stability within *Strictly Come Dancing* and, by extension, the BBC. Within SCCT, this functions as a reminder strategy, reinforcing favourable associations through continuity despite disruption (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). It shifts attention away from organisational scrutiny, framing the controversy as an individual setback rather than institutional failure (De Vreese, 2005, p. 252).

Additionally, BJ1 is strategically deployed in the BBC headline, "Ex-Strictly dancer shocked at complaints" (ID\_24), which deliberately constructs the allegations as aberrant and inconsistent with institutional norms. The calculated use of "shocked" establishes rhetorical distance by signalling doubt, subtly undermining the credibility of the complaints while reinforcing the BBC's legitimacy. This functions as bolstering by association, reducing offensiveness by framing insider testimony as a counter-narrative that deflects reputational risk (Benoit, 1997, p. 180; Benoit, 2013, p. 217). As a headline, it acts as a direct counter to the dominant narrative, reframing the controversy in the BBC's favour. It also shifts attention from systemic accountability to individual experience, deflecting responsibility while maintaining an appearance of transparency.

Ex-Strictly dancer Chloe Hewitt's comment reinforces both BJ1 and PD1: "There is support on the show, but I never needed it, but if I did, I felt like there was somebody there I could've talked to." While framed as personal reflection, it affirms the idea of welfare support without offering concrete evidence. "I felt like" avoids directly confirming whether support mechanisms existed, while "I never needed it" functions as PD1, distancing her from any perception of victimhood and implicitly justifying her own experience. As an

ex-contestant not directly involved in the controversy, Hewitt's narrative serves a strategic function. By foregrounding a peripheral insider voice, the BBC employs bolstering by proxy, framing the allegations as inconsistent with programme norms. Simultaneously, elements of distancing redirect focus from institutional accountability to individual perception, implying the complaints are exaggerated or not universally experienced. Including this narrative reduces the need for a formal institutional response, shifting focus away from organisational fault.

PD1 strategies appeared less frequently and typically in direct response to criticism. Pernice's statement, "Teaching the way I teach is the successful way to approach this" (ID\_44), functions as a clear justification, a core component of Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2013, p. 217). His follow-up, "Dancing is a difficult discipline," employs transcendence, reframing his behaviour within the demands of professional dance (Benoit, 1997, p. 179). Referencing the inherent rigour of the discipline strengthens his defence and reduces perceived blame without conceding fault. Within SCCT, this operates as a diminish strategy, acknowledging criticism but presenting his actions as reasonable given the circumstances (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). By amplifying this narrative, the BBC indirectly legitimises the defence, shifting accountability from organisational processes to individual professional norms.

Similarly, Zara McDermott states, "I would like to thank the BBC & BBC Studios for their swift action and incredibly high level of support" (ID\_11). Referencing "BBC" and "BBC Studios" as separate entities reinforces institutional distancing, framing the BBC as a broadcaster and BBC Studios as a content producer, and subtly positioning the crisis within the production side rather than the broadcaster. This phrasing softens blame while guiding audience perception toward procedural fairness and shared responsibility rather than organisational fault. More than a matter of personal gratitude, it serves as a bolstering frame, portraying the BBC as responsive, supportive, and ethically sound (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). The editorial decision to amplify this statement embeds reputational repair within third-party narratives, enabling the BBC to protect its journalistic identity while distancing itself from the controversy.

Moreover, PD1 is evident in Pernice's appeal to personal history, as seen in the statement, "Those who have followed my journey on *Strictly Come Dancing* over the last decade will know that I am passionate and competitive" (ID\_5). This frames him as principled and dedicated, redirecting attention away from the allegations and toward his long-term professional identity. The shift from organisational critique to individual character

reflects second-level agenda-setting, elevating personal attributes while diminishing focus on the controversy (Scheufele, 2000, p. 298). Illustrating how the BBC foregrounds personal testimony as a reputational buffer, reducing the need for direct institutional response.

Former *Strictly* contestant Laura Whitmore, who competed in 2016, initially framed her experience as isolated but later recognised it as part of an institutional pattern “that needs to stop” (ID\_25). Her testimony evolves from personal to organisational critique. Yet, her follow-up, “I know the BBC... continue to do their best to be better, but for that to happen we must speak up,” balances criticism with reassurance, exemplifying BJ1 and PD1 strategies. However, the phrasing “do their best” subtly undermines the strength of this reassurance, signalling effort without fully committing to accountability. While acknowledging systemic issues, her statement nonetheless reinforces the BBC’s image as responsive and focused on improvement. By amplifying this narrative through third-party testimony, the BBC deflects direct responsibility while projecting institutional concern and credibility.

Collectively, BJ1 and PD1 demonstrate that reputational repair prioritised personal narratives, gratitude, resilience, and professionalism over formal institutional statements. Through emotional framing and third-party narratives, the BBC deflected potential criticism and maintained credibility without direct institutional engagement.

#### **4.5 Apology and Selective Vindication**

The Apology and Vindication (AV1) code, which acknowledges fault, validates victims, and implies institutional responsibility, appeared only 3 times, indicating cautious use of mortification strategies. This aligns with SCCT’s recommendation to avoid overusing apologies, which risk appearing insincere and undermining trust (Coombs, 2022, p. 198). Despite its rarity, AV1 illustrates how the BBC managed reputational risk through selective acknowledgement, controlled editorial tone, and rhetorical relief.

The most prominent example of mortification appears in BBC Director-General Tim Davie’s statement, “The BBC’s director general has apologised to *Strictly Come Dancing* contestants after complaints of abusive behaviour on the show” (ID\_19). This aligns with Benoit’s mortification strategy, which involves acknowledging harm and expressing emotional accountability (Benoit, 2013, p. 219; Tachkova & Fediuk, 2025, p. 2) while also reflecting SCCT’s “deal” strategy for high-severity crises (Coombs, 2024, p. 224). Delivered by a senior executive, the apology reinforces credibility through transparency and ethical responsibility (Haigh & Ngondo, 2024, p. 36).

Linguistic choices reflect an effort to balance sincerity with institutional control. The original headline, “BBC Boss Tim Davie: ‘We’ll never tolerate unacceptable behaviour,’” was later revised to “We will never tolerate unacceptable behaviour” (ID\_19). This shift from a personalised to an institutional voice signals formality and consistency. However, Davie’s delivery, “and be in no doubt, we will take it seriously, listen, and deal with it as appropriately, as appropriate,” features a verbal slip that slightly undermines the polish and perceived authenticity of the message. Similarly, minor textual errors in article content, such as the spelling mistake “Parter” (ID\_41), suggest lapses in editorial precision. While small, these moments risk undermining trust, particularly when linguistic precision is central to reputational repair.

Tone variation across headlines demonstrates the BBC’s strategic editorial framing. CBBC Newsround employed softened language with “bad experiences” (ID\_20), acknowledging harm without fully addressing its severity. This balances audience sensitivity with institutional protection, softening the acknowledgement while deflecting accountability pressures. Conversely, BBC News opted for the neutral term “complaint” (ID\_21), reframing the issue as procedural rather than emotional. Both headlines notably avoided the term “abuse,” reflecting efforts to reduce the perceived threat (Kim et al., 2024, p. 174).

The headline “BBC boss says sorry for bad experiences on show” (ID\_41) further exemplifies this editorial softening. BBC News employed formal yet vague language, avoiding emotionally charged terms. This rhetorical strategy is consistent across other revisions. For example, “BBC apologises to Amanda Abbington over Strictly verbal bullying by Giovanni Pernice, but he is cleared of physical aggression” was later revised to “BBC apologises to Abbington, but her claims only partly upheld” (ID\_39). The updated version removes emotionally charged terms such as “verbal bullying” and “physical aggression,” reducing intensity and distancing the BBC from potentially defamatory language.

Concessions are also moderated through the use of vague phrasing. The BBC noted that the production team “did take steps to address the issues at the time but acknowledged that ultimately these were not enough.” This concedes some responsibility while avoiding direct accountability (Coombs, 2024, pp. 223-224). Similarly, justifying the delay in the review as “due to its complex nature” frames the issue as internal and sensitive, protecting the institution from immediate scrutiny.

Senior executive Charlotte Moore’s involvement also signals the BBC’s attempt to convey empathy and high-level accountability. She described the online abuse Abbington received as “terrible” and reportedly apologised to her twice (ID\_39). Moore’s repeated

apology, despite claims only being “partly upheld,” suggests profound institutional regret and an effort to demonstrate emotional engagement, possibly to minimise reputational fallout beyond what was formally acknowledged.

Audience metrics were also used defensively. One article reported, “Nearly a million fewer people tuned in to the launch show this year than last,” while Moore responded that “people watch in different ways” (ID\_37). This reframes the data to shift focus from potential disengagement to evolving viewing habits. Similarly, describing the upcoming report as one that would “draw a line under a challenging few months” (ID\_37) constructs a sense of closure while avoiding unresolved reputational concerns. Together, these strategies use metrics and metaphor to frame the crisis in more favourable terms (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Headline revisions also emerged as a reputational tool. For example, “Has Strictly been tainted by scandal after Amanda Abbington claims partly upheld?” was revised to “Has Strictly Come Dancing been tainted by scandal?” (ID\_38). Removing Abbington’s name softens the controversy’s individual focus and reduces emotional specificity. By detaching the issue from a named subject, the headline reframes the controversy as broader and less personal, distancing the BBC from direct association. This reflects a wider strategy of narrative control, consistent with Cornelissen’s crisis life cycle model, which moves from denial and ambiguity to selective mortification and reputational repair (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 259).

Across the 44 items reviewed, 41 were news articles from BBC News and BBC Newsround. Among these, 23 headlines were altered, often reflecting tonal shifts and strategic reframing. Noor Nanji was responsible for 13 of these, 11 as sole author, 2 as co-author, followed by Ian Youngs (5), Shannen Headley (2), and 1 each by Steven McIntosh, Cachella Smith, BBC News, and Christy Cooney. Although the full article content was not archived, the headline revisions alone demonstrate how word choice, punctuation, emphasis, and name inclusion influenced audience interpretation.

Collectively, these editorial decisions emphasise a communication strategy centred on reputational softening and measured acknowledgement. The BBC’s approach does not rely on full denial or complete transparency, but rather on careful tone modulation, strategic ambiguity, and emotional distancing. From a relationship management perspective (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 227), the BBC’s long-standing public trust enables even limited admissions or softened apologies to be received more sympathetically. This accumulated credibility provides institutional protection, reinforcing organisational resilience during a crisis.

#### 4.6 Withdrawal and Delayed Responses

Withdrawal Statements (WS1), which are announcements of withdrawal framed as ethical or personal, occurred three times, while Delayed Responses (DR1), which are reactive statements following external pressure or new developments, were identified in two instances. These are grouped analytically due to their shared reliance on defeasibility, a critical image repair strategy in which responsibility is downplayed through claims of insufficient control or knowledge (Benoit, 1997, pp. 63-64). Both exemplify SCCT's excuse-based diminish strategy, designed to reduce perceptions of institutional culpability while preserving reputational capital (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). This shared strategy reflects a systematic institutional approach of carefully managing reputational risk by shifting or diminishing responsibility in external communications.

WS1 illustrates this diminish logic through strategic ambiguity and discursive distancing. For example, "The actress was forced to miss this week's show due to medical reasons and on Monday it was announced she would be withdrawing from the competition" (ID\_9). The phrasing "forced to miss" implies external pressure, while "medical reasons" preserves a level of respectful ambiguity. This language protects individual privacy while legitimising the withdrawal. The choice of vague, neutral phrasing suggests sincerity, but simultaneously obscures any direct institutional agency, illustrating an apparent effort to manage reputational vulnerability without inviting further scrutiny. This acts as accident-based image repair (Benoit, 1997, p. 67) and demonstrates how withdrawal was strategically framed to shift focus from the BBC to individual circumstances.

Though presented as neutral and ethically motivated, these statements serve a more strategic function. They enable the BBC to appear sensitive and responsive, without offering institutional commentary or assuming responsibility. The result is a pattern of withdrawal, presented as individual or circumstantial, which effectively protects the organisation from further reputational exposure.

In contrast to the preemptive nature of WS1, DR1 reflects a more reactive use of the same underlying strategy, typically issued once reputational pressures have increased. These responses tend to follow media attention or the emergence of new information. For instance, "Di Prima thought the matter had been resolved, but video of the incident is believed to have been brought to the attention of the BBC last week, and the dancer was then removed from this year's line-up" (ID\_13). The passive construction, "is believed to have been brought to the attention," deflects institutional agency and presents the BBC as responding to

circumstances beyond its immediate control. The organisation positions itself as merely reactive, responding to external developments rather than acknowledging any oversight failures. Although the dancer's removal implies some recognition of fault, the BBC offers no formal admission of responsibility. Instead, a discursive gap emerges where accountability is suggested but never directly assumed. This reflects Entman's (1993, p. 52) causal framing function, where responsibility is shifted by emphasising timing and informational delay over institutional accountability.

WS1 and DR1 reveal the BBC's strategic use of diminish strategies, specifically defeasibility and causal ambiguity, to manage reputational risk while maintaining an ethical public stance. Both employ passive phrasing, vague attribution, and editorial restraint to minimise institutional exposure, though WS1 anticipates potential criticism while DR1 responds to intensifying scrutiny. Through coordinated editorial framing and formal statements, the organisation shaped public interpretation by foregrounding personal or external explanations whilst leaving internal processes unexamined. This approach enabled the BBC to project responsiveness while deflecting accountability and containing reputational damage.

## 5. Discussion

The BBC's crisis communication strategies and editorial framing were ultimately insufficient in balancing its dual role as both the producer of *Strictly Come Dancing* and a public news broadcaster. While corrective measures and controlled framing supported institutional credibility, the reliance on distancing, selective apology, and narrative control limited the overall efficacy of its response. The strategy sustained operational continuity but failed to fully mitigate reputational damage or meet stakeholder expectations for transparency and accountability. These dynamics influenced the framing and timing of the BBC's communications throughout a controversy that unfolded over several months, during which its approach was repeatedly adapted in response to intensifying public scrutiny.

Across the crisis lifecycle, discernible patterns emerged in the BBC's use of denial, distancing, corrective action, and narrative reframing, often applied incrementally and reactively as allegations escalated. Framing decisions, including tone modulation, selective emphasis, and omission, consistently served to manage reputational risk. While procedural reforms were enacted with some success, strategies such as distancing and selective apology proved less effective in meeting stakeholder demands. This discussion, therefore, considers the BBC's communicative responses not only as strategic crisis management but as expressions of broader institutional pressures, journalistic constraints, and the ethical complexities inherent in reporting on internal misconduct.

### 5.1 Operationalising Crisis Communication Strategies

Central to the BBC's initial response were Institutional Protection (IP1) and Distancing Commentary (DC1), reflected through procedural language and formal refusals to comment on individual allegations (ID\_16, ID\_17, ID\_34). This approach framed the crisis as isolated instances of individual misconduct rather than systemic organisational failure, consistent with a denial strategy aimed at preserving editorial neutrality while minimising legal and reputational exposure (Coombs, 2015, p. 146).

While effective in limiting immediate risk and preserving operational stability, this reliance on denial conflicted with SCCT's guidance for preventable crises, where stakeholder attribution of responsibility is high (Coombs, 2015, p. 146). It undermined perceptions of transparency and relational trust, as reflected in Image Repair Theory's denial strategy, where rejecting allegations or reframing blame often proves ineffective once accusations are publicly credible (Benoit, 2013, p. 217). This approach reflects manipulative or contractual relationship typologies, where organisations fulfil procedural expectations to protect their

own interests, without showing a genuine commitment to openness or mutual welfare (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 276).

Corrective Measures (CM1) and Policy Reform (PR1) were emphasised through internal investigations and welfare improvements, symbolising accountability without full admission of culpability (ID\_21, ID\_30). This partial mortification balanced responsiveness with procedural distancing, reinforcing institutional legitimacy. However, while procedurally competent, the overall strategy remained cautious and self-protective, offering reputational containment without fully addressing stakeholder expectations for openness, sincerity, and long-term trust repair.

Apology and Vindication (AV1) were employed selectively, primarily through public statements by senior executives (ID\_20, ID\_21), which avoided acknowledging structural failings and instead conveyed empathy toward individuals directly affected by the crisis. Bolstering and Justification (BJ1), alongside Personal Defence (PD1), emerged in third-party commentaries from former staff and participants (ID\_24, ID\_32, ID\_44), attributing issues to personal misunderstandings and operational pressures rather than organisational deficiencies.

Withdrawal Statements (WS1) and Delayed Responses (DR1) framed participant departures as reactive measures to newly surfaced evidence, prioritising procedural explanations over direct engagement with reputational concerns (ID\_13, ID\_32). While effective in preserving operational credibility and limiting exposure, as shown in the use of selective apologies (ID\_20, ID\_21), delayed responses (ID\_13, ID\_32), and narrative framing that emphasised personal misunderstandings (ID\_24, ID\_32, ID\_44), these strategies were less successful in rebuilding trust or addressing perceptions of accountability, reinforcing the perception that the BBC prioritised risk avoidance over transparency.

### **5.1.1 Shifts in Crisis Communication Strategies**

Expanding on this preliminary understanding of strategic operationalisation, the BBC's crisis communication evolved cautiously and reactively as the controversy unfolded. Initially, the organisation prioritised denial and distancing, attributing responsibility to individual behaviour while emphasising internal duty of care protocols (IP1, DC1; ID\_16, ID\_17, ID\_34). For example, the BBC stated that it “does not comment on specific matters related to individuals” (ID\_17), framing the issue as personal rather than systemic. Repeated references to “robust duty of care procedures” (ID\_16) further reinforced procedural distancing. As the crisis developed, procedural reforms (CM1, PR1) became increasingly critical, articulated through commitments to welfare improvements and internal reviews

(ID\_10, ID\_12, ID\_21, ID\_39). This included measures like “a member of the production team in rehearsals at all times” (ID\_10, ID\_12) and the initiation of an internal investigation (ID\_21, ID\_39). In parallel, selective mortification (AV1) emerged through executive apologies, framed to express empathy without acknowledging full organisational responsibility. In the post-crisis phase, the BBC increasingly relied on timing and narrative control, framing decisions as procedural rather than reputational responses (WS1, DR1; ID\_13, ID\_32). Emphasis on programme culture and participant resilience was subsequently maintained, sustaining a narrative of institutional strength and continuity (BJ1).

### **5.1.2 Managing Organisational Tension**

Imperative to the BBC’s communication approach was the management of its dual institutional role. BJ1, along with PD1, redirected the narrative focus onto individual experiences and professional conduct, reinforcing a framing that temporarily deflected reputational risk onto personal misconduct rather than organisational responsibility. Consequently, DC1 aimed to frame the controversy as programme-specific, protecting the institution from direct association (ID\_16, ID\_17). Editorial decisions such as headline framing and tone moderation further supported this distancing by presenting the controversy primarily within the context of *Strictly*. IP1, CM1, and PR1 continued to emphasise procedural responses, allowing the BBC to demonstrate responsibility while avoiding direct organisational attribution (ID\_10, ID\_19). However, this framing was only partially effective in fully resolving reputational scrutiny, as continued media coverage, anonymous staff testimonies, and evolving public discourse sustained the perception that more substantive organisational responsibility had not been adequately addressed.

## **5.2 Crisis Framing in BBC Communications**

Narrative framing and editorial choices were essential in shaping public perception and managing reputational risk. CF1 positioned the crisis as a reputational controversy tied to the programme’s culture rather than an isolated dispute. Headlines like “hit by a string of damaging allegations” (ID\_14) and “centre of controversy” (ID\_29, ID\_40) reinforced this by framing the issue as institutional strain while avoiding direct attribution of responsibility. This preferred symbolic framing, rather than a detailed examination of claims (Entman, 2010, p. 395), thus sustains the focus on the controversy while deflecting scrutiny from individual complaints and the BBC’s potential responsibility for the alleged harms.

VT1 introduced counter-narratives that directly challenged procedural messaging and editorial control. Statements such as “injuries that still affect me to this day” (ID\_18) shifted the discourse toward experiential accounts. This was reputationally damaging. According to SCCT and Image Repair Theory (Efthimiou, 2010, p. 115), stronger use of mortification and more transparent corrective action would likely have been more effective in addressing the relational harm caused by credible victim testimony. The absence of these strategies heightened the risk of sustained reputational pressure and further weakened stakeholder trust.

IP1 and CM1 were collectively employed to minimise reputational risk. Statements such as “robust duty of care” (ID\_16) deflected accountability, while “steps to strengthen welfare and support” (ID\_10, ID\_30) demonstrated responsiveness without a full admission of fault. Thus, combining strategies of denial (IP1) and selective rebuilding (CM1, PR1; Cornelissen, 2020, p. 259). This strategy proved procedurally effective in containing immediate reputational risk but was less successful in addressing relational trust, as the denial component undermined the credibility of corrective actions.

DC1 reinforced reputational distancing by separating the BBC from individuals or specific incidents. Phrases like “It’s complete news to us” (ID\_15) and “the recent scandal was not referenced on stage” (ID\_33, ID\_36) distanced the organisation from individuals while also limiting reputational damage. This distancing was critical in protecting the BBC’s institutional identity and maintaining its impartiality as a broadcaster. However, while effective in limiting immediate reputational exposure, it was less successful in addressing longer-term concerns around transparency, perceived accountability, and stakeholder confidence.

PR1 became central during the post-crisis phase, signalling resolution and progress. Statements such as “a member of the production team will now be in rehearsals at all times” (ID\_12) redirected the narrative from moral evaluation to preventative measures. This approach was partially practical; although it emphasised institutional accountability and reform, ongoing victim testimonies and external conflict framing ultimately undermined complete reputational recovery.

Lexical and tonal adjustments strategically shaped audience reception across platforms. CBBC Newsround employed simplified, emotionally neutral phrasing (ID\_9), while BBC News utilised formal, legalistic language that controlled emotional responses (ID\_14, ID\_33). Headlines demonstrated a reduction in emotive intensity over time, transitioning from crisis-focused language, such as “string of damaging allegations,” to resolution-oriented framing, “lessons have been learned” (ID\_39). The BBC integrated

problem definition, causal interpretation, and treatment recommendation frames while typically avoiding direct moral evaluation, except through controlled apologies (ID\_20, ID\_21) or public welfare assurances (Entman, 1993, p. 52). This strategic ambiguity partially facilitated the selective acknowledgement of harm, aiming to limit liability and shape the conclusion of the crisis narrative. However, persistent victim testimonies and external conflict framing reduced its overall effectiveness, weakening the appearance of impartiality and complicating reputational protection (Entman, 2003, p. 420).

### **5.2.1 Dominant Media Frames**

Across the crisis timeline, CF1 and VT1 were the most frequently employed frames, maintaining media attention on the controversy while limiting the perception of reputational harm. Conflict framing emphasised uncertainty and disagreement, highlighting the contested aspects of the crisis, while victim testimony focused on individual experiences, stressing perceived institutional failings. Justification and deflection frames (BJ1) appeared regularly, especially during periods of increased media coverage, using vague language and shifting responsibility to reduce organisational accountability. IP1, DC1 further supported these strategies by reinforcing organisational defences and creating discursive distance from contentious issues or individuals.

CM1 and PR1 frames emerged primarily during later stages, signalling procedural responses aimed at addressing concerns and managing reputational risk. Additional frames, including PD1, AV1, WS1, and DR1, were deployed selectively throughout the coverage based on the evolving nature of reputational threats. The BBC strategically matched frame selection to threat type, employing different approaches for isolated complaints, formal accusations, and systemic institutional issues, aligning with Benoit's (1997, p. 217) framework for situational response strategies.

These editorial choices, including the strategic use of ambiguous language, selective emphasis on external factors, and gradual tonal shifts from defensive to corrective positioning, served as deliberate reputational management mechanisms. However, their effectiveness diminished over time due to concerns about transparency.

While these frames initially enabled the BBC to demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns and manage immediate reputational risk, the organisation's overreliance on deflection and justification strategies ultimately weakened its crisis response. Implementing corrective measures and comprehensive policy reforms earlier would have enhanced the preservation of stakeholder trust and mitigated long-term reputational damage.

### 5.2.2 Editorial Choices in Reputational Management

Analysis demonstrates how tone modulation and selective omission were critical to the BBC's reputation management during the crisis. Headline revisions (ID\_28, ID\_19) shifted the framing from systemic failure to isolated incidents, aligning with second-level agenda-setting, which shapes not only what audiences think about but also how they assess reputational issues (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 213). Omitting direct references to institutional failure redirected focus to interpersonal conflict, minimising blame but potentially weakening perceptions of transparency.

Tone modulation worked alongside omission as a complementary strategy, shaping how severity and accountability were conveyed. The BBC employed distinct linguistic choices across various platforms, demonstrating a conscious approach to audience segmentation (ID\_16). This was further supported through the strategy of language adjustment across platforms. BBC News employed formal, legalistic language, whereas CBBC Newsround adopted a softer tone for younger audiences (ID\_12), reflecting demographic framing (Entman, 2010, p. 394). While this demonstrates effective framing based on demographic expectations (Entman, 2010, p. 394), it also introduces inconsistency across platforms that could weaken the BBC's broader claim to editorial neutrality.

As the crisis progressed, tone modulation became more pronounced, with sharper rhetorical contrasts emerging. A clear pattern was the juxtaposition of celebratory and hyperbolic language, which positioned the programme's entertainment value against the seriousness of the crisis. For example, the contrast between "glittering" and "plagued" (ID\_35) subtly redirected responsibility away from the BBC, reframing the issue as misfortunate rather than organisational failure (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004, p. 2). This strategy proved rhetorically effective in generating emotional distance and containing reputational risk, though it risks trivialising the concerns raised.

Craig Revel Horwood's comments further illustrate defeasibility, a strategy in which responsibility is downplayed by attributing failure to external or uncontrollable factors (Benoit, 2024, p. 18). Instead of acknowledging the demanding conditions of the show, Horwood shifted accountability onto the dancers themselves, suggesting their inability to "keep up" was the problem (ID\_36).

Reinforcing this pattern, the BBC also employed subtler linguistic devices, particularly the strategic use of quotation marks in headlines. This is especially evident in how headlines consistently framed the most serious or potentially damaging claims. Rather

than presenting these as institutional statements, they were attributed to third parties using quotation marks (ID\_36). This distancing maintains editorial objectivity while managing reputational risk by presenting accusations as reported speech rather than verified fact. It also moderates emotional tone, as quotation marks reduce the perceived assertiveness of claims. While subtle, this approach was practical in neutralising emotional responses and aligning with research indicating that anger-inducing coverage heightens reputational vulnerability (Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 100).

The distinction between reactive and proactive CSR is central to reputational management in crisis communication. Reactive strategies aim to mitigate damage after a crisis arises, while proactive strategies involve promoting positive identity narratives to build long-term resilience (Rim & Ferguson, 2020, p. 548). This balance is evident in the BBC's editorial handling of the *Strictly* crisis. Distancing strategies, headline revisions, and emphasis on the programme's cultural value illustrate an integrated communication approach. Reactive responses addressed immediate reputational threats, while proactive framing reinforced the BBC's public value and institutional relevance. This reflects Cornelissen's (2020, p. 40) assertion that identity consistency, achieved through strategically aligned reactive and proactive messaging, is essential for maintaining organisational credibility. Overall, these editorial techniques were largely effective in preserving the BBC's institutional legitimacy and the programme's public appeal. However, their success relied heavily on subtle framing rather than transparent institutional engagement.

Ultimately, tone modulation and selective omission functioned as deliberate strategies to minimise the perceived severity of the crisis, manage blame, and protect both the BBC's reputation and *Strictly*'s brand identity. While these strategies proved effective in narrative control and audience segmentation, their longer-term effectiveness may be limited if not accompanied by more substantive institutional accountability.

### **5.3 Theoretical and Implications**

The analysis of the BBC's crisis communication during an internal crisis reveals significant theoretical and practical implications. The case demonstrates that SCCT, Framing Theory, Reputation Management and Image Repair Theory require adaptation when applied to public broadcasters facing internal crises. The BBC's dual role, as a journalistic institution and subject of scrutiny, creates structural tensions that existing models do not fully address.

The application of SCCT highlights its limitations in such contexts. While SCCT typically recommends accommodative strategies, such as apology, reform, and corrective

action, these become complicated when the organisation is both the reporter and the subject (Coombs, 2007, pp. 168-170). Although SCCT classifies the BBC's situation as a "preventable crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 168), expected responses, such as apology and transparency, were often diluted through procedural messaging, distancing, or editorial framing (Coombs, 2024, pp. 223-224). This reveals a gap in SCCT's applicability when impartiality and accountability contradict.

Yet the BBC's response also expands SCCT's concept of accountability to include responsibility, openness (transparency), and answerability. Its messaging reflects a negotiation between journalistic integrity and institutional self-preservation, often achieved through editorial framing. This is seen in corrective reforms and procedural language, such as hiring welfare producers (ID\_12), internal reviews, and references to duty-of-care protocols. However, such measures were frequently presented using formulaic phrases, such as "the corporation insisted it would always take any issues seriously" (ID\_14). While signalling accountability, these mantras risk appearing superficial when not supported by visible action. This highlights that procedural messaging alone is insufficient; concrete reforms matter more in mitigating reputational harm.

Framing functioned not simply as a reflection of editorial choices, but as a reputational defence strategy. This supports Entman's (1993, p. 52; 2010, p. 394) argument that framing is an operational tool that shapes public perception. The BBC's use of emotional distancing, omission, and headline modulation managed moral evaluations and calls for accountability. This aligns with Entman's (2003, p. 420) cascading activation model, in which elite institutions shape narrative flow while appearing neutral and unbiased. The headline shift from "Abbington claims partly upheld" to "tainted by scandal" (ID\_38) demonstrates how framing redirects focus from institutional responsibility to broader, less personally damaging themes.

Subsequently, structural and ethical constraints limit the use of Image Repair Theory. The BBC's selective use of mortification, bolstering, and partial denial shows that these strategies are less effective in systemic, rather than individual, failures. Full mortification, accepting total responsibility, is politically constrained for public institutions like the BBC, as it risks compromising perceived impartiality. This emphasises the limitations of apology within both SCCT and Image Repair Theory. Apologies often serve a symbolic function for internal stakeholders or regulators, rather than genuinely repairing public trust (Coombs & Holladay, 2008, p. 255). This was evident in the BBC's official apology (ID\_19) and article coverage (ID\_20, ID\_21), which followed procedural norms but lacked clarity and direct

accountability. The analysis reinforces that reputation management in media organisations is not purely reactive; it is structurally embedded.

Furthermore, the research reveals that adverse emotional reactions during a crisis not only influence immediate public perception but also retroactively shape how audiences remember an organisation's crisis history and pre-crisis reputation. This reinforces the dynamic interplay between emotional framing and subsequent audience evaluations, where reputational risk is heightened when a crisis is presented using anger-inducing or sensational language (Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 104). To mitigate this risk, the BBC employed strategies such as a conversational tone, quotation marks, and the omission of inflammatory terms to limit the potential for anger escalating into blame attribution (Entman, 1993, p. 52; Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 104).

CSR and OPR theories further demonstrate how pre-existing stakeholder trust acts as a buffer against reputational harm. The BBC's ability to maintain public trust despite inconsistencies in transparency underscores the significance of long-term organisation–public relationships (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013, p. 227). The strategic use of CSR framing (Cornelissen, 2020, p. 332) was central to the BBC's repair strategy, where procedural reforms, such as internal reviews and welfare measures, were presented as evidence of ethical commitment rather than reactive crisis management.

#### **5.4 Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this research highlight that the tension between journalistic impartiality and brand protection is not unique to the BBC but a structural dilemma faced by all public service media with dual roles. This conflict becomes especially acute in internal crises, where the need to protect organisational legitimacy often clashes with expectations of unbiased reporting (Snoeijers & Poels, 2018, p. 68; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012, pp. 200–201). The findings suggest that neutral reporting in such cases often results in strategic distancing, omission, and indirect attribution, as seen in standard responses, such as “the BBC does not comment on individual cases” (ID\_16).

The research reinforces that strategic transparency cannot rely solely on procedural mantras. Phrases such as “robust duty of care” or “we take this seriously” (ID\_17, ID\_14) may signal accountability but risk appearing hollow without meaningful follow-through (Coombs, 2024, p. 224). Apologies, especially in cases of systemic harm, are ineffective without visible corrective action. The BBC's focus on procedural reforms, such as the implementation of welfare producers (ID\_12), was likely more reputationally protective than

limited verbal mortification. However, without audience analysis, this remains a cautious conclusion.

Editorial framing, through tone, language, headlines, and omission, operates not merely as a journalistic practice but as a deliberate risk management strategy. These strategies redirect attention from institutional accountability to individual conflict or familiar scandal narratives (Entman, 1993, p. 52), and should be recognised as central to crisis communication. Such editorial choices carry long-term implications, shaping not only the immediate narrative but also broader perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Through subtle edits, omissions, and softened language, the BBC illustrates how public association and institutional memory are shaped over time (Entman, 2003, p. 420).

Tone modulation further reveals institutional awareness that emotional responses influence how blame is assigned. Adverse audience emotions shape both the immediate reception and retrospective evaluations of organisational behaviour (Lu & Huang, 2018, p. 104). Effective crisis communication must therefore manage emotional tone, attribution, and framing early to prevent reputational damage from escalating.

For public organisations, crisis response is not only reputational, it is also ethical. Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012, pp. 200-201) argue that such institutions face intensified legitimacy pressures, requiring a careful balance among transparency, accountability, and neutrality. The BBC's case shows how failure to meet all three can undermine both institutional and journalistic trust.

Without clear boundaries between editorial independence and reputation management, organisations risk accusations of bias and a loss of credibility. This was evident in the BBC's use of distancing language, headline revisions, and quotation marks to balance impartiality with institutional protection. While based on a single case study, these findings extend to other public broadcasters navigating similar crises. Not all editorial changes are purely strategic; some arise from legal, operational, or time pressures, yet their reputational consequences remain significant. This reinforces the broader conclusion that in internal crises, narrative control through framing, tone, and attribution is as impactful as any formal corporate statement or apology.

## **5.5 Limitations of the Study**

Several methodological limitations emerged, constraining the study's analytical scope. Firstly, the decision to focus exclusively on BBC-produced written news articles was determined by the scope and timeframe of the research. While this ensured methodological

consistency in analysing text-based editorial content, it also excluded audiovisual material, including broadcast footage and interviews, where verbal cues, tone, and body language may have conveyed additional meanings critical to the BBC's crisis communication strategies. Thus, the analysis is limited to the linguistic construction of crisis narratives, solely in journalistic outputs, excluding non-verbal communicative elements.

Similarly, the exclusion of BBC social media content and social media commentary from other stakeholders represents a significant constraint. Social media operates as a dynamic space for real-time crisis communication, audience engagement, and reputational management, particularly in contemporary media environments where digital and broadcast platforms are significantly connected (Jin, 2019, p. 26). Thus, its omission limits the study's ability to examine how the BBC managed the crisis in more immediate, dialogic formats, potentially overlooking elements of responsiveness, tone modulation, and iterative engagement characteristic of those platforms.

This analysis is confined to the BBC's formal responses as represented in news articles, rather than incorporating real-time announcements, audience reactions, or interactive communications (Castells, 2010, p. 9). This constraint restricts the study's ability to identify how the crisis unfolded across platforms or how early public discourse may have shaped subsequent BBC responses beyond the sampled data. Including these sources would enable a more comprehensive understanding of crisis dynamics and the reciprocal relationship between public discourse and institutional response.

Due to the ongoing nature of the crisis and the temporal constraints of the research, the study focused exclusively on material published between October 2023 and December 2024. Some relevant articles discussing this issue, or related developments outside this period, were not identified or systematically documented. This limitation does not materially affect the validity of the core analysis but may have resulted in the omission of later developments or retrospective commentary outside the defined timeframe. Additionally, 23 headline changes were tracked; however, body text changes could not be verified due to inconsistent archiving, which limited a full analysis of editorial evolution.

Another methodological constraint involves data reduction. Due to the volume of content, the analysis focused on selected quotes and extracts rather than a comprehensive, line-by-line examination of every article. This approach was necessary within the time and resource constraints of the project. Yet, it carries the risk of overlooking patterns, repetitions, or thematic links that a more exhaustive analysis might reveal. The use of qualitative data analysis software could have enhanced data management and pattern recognition, however,

manual coding was adopted as the most feasible approach, given the research timeline and constraints. As a single-researcher project, coding and interpretation were conducted independently, without cross-checking or inter-coder reliability measures, though subject to bias, coding was applied systematically.

While these methodological limitations might affect the transferability of findings to other public service broadcasters or crisis contexts, they do not undermine the analytical validity or theoretical contributions of this study (Schreier, 2018, p. 94). The detailed, context-specific analysis of the BBC's crisis communication strategies provides valuable theoretical contributions to crisis communication literature and establishes a methodological base for future comparative studies across different broadcasting institutions and crisis contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates how public service broadcasters strategically adapt crisis communication approaches through their external media communications, offering significant theoretical insights and identifying critical areas for future comparative research to build upon these context-specific findings.

## **5.6 Future Research Recommendations**

This study presents several opportunities for further research. Expanding the scope to include multimodal analysis would enable a comprehensive examination of how verbal, visual, and paralinguistic elements shape crisis communication. This would incorporate broadcast materials, iPlayer content, video interviews, and televised segments to assess how these platforms aligned with or diverged from textual coverage, illustrating how broadcast framing functioned within broader crisis strategies.

Future analysis must also consider how information circulates across digital, broadcast, and social media platforms (Nguyen, 2020, pp. 19–20). A sole focus on text-based news overlooks the influence of live broadcasts, video statements, and social media on audience responses and reputation management. Social media analysis forms a critical extension, as platforms like Instagram, X, and Facebook facilitate real-time communication and public commentary beyond formal reporting. Integrating social media would examine how crisis messaging adapted across platforms and how user-generated commentary interacted with institutional responses, highlighting the reciprocal dynamics between media institutions and audiences.

Building on this, audience reception research offers another direction for future study. It would provide insights into how the BBC's framing strategies influenced public trust and

perception during the crisis, allowing assessment of communication effectiveness and audience response (Nenadić & Kovačević, 2024, p. 160). This is particularly important, as *Strictly* is widely regarded as a “family television show” (ID\_1), making audience trust vital.

A comparative analysis with broadcasters such as ITV and Channel 4 could further clarify whether the BBC’s public service mandate influences its crisis framing relative to commercial counterparts. This would show how organisational models, editorial norms, and institutional mandates shape crisis responses when media organisations are both reporters and subjects. Further research might also examine internal communications to explore how public-facing responses intersect with institutional culture. This could involve staff perspectives, particularly among those involved in *Strictly* (ID\_28), to understand how internal stakeholders perceived both the allegations and the BBC’s external handling of the crisis.

Finally, the scale of the dataset poses challenges, including the risk of researcher bias. Incorporating qualitative data analysis software could mitigate this by supporting systematic coding, enhancing consistency, and enabling more precise tracking of narrative patterns over time. Maintaining a systematic data log at the point of collection would further ensure that editorial changes are identified and traceable, strengthening the ability to track narrative evolution and reducing the risk of missing undocumented shifts.

## 5.7. Conclusion

The BBC’s handling of the *Strictly Come Dancing* crisis highlights the structural and communicative tensions faced by public service broadcasters when reporting on internal controversies. As both news broadcaster and institutional subject, the BBC adopted crisis communication strategies, including omission, distancing, and tone modulation, not simply as editorial decisions, but as tools of reputational management. While these techniques helped preserve operational continuity and contain immediate reputational risk, they proved less effective in meeting stakeholder expectations for transparency, accountability, and ethical coherence.

This case highlights the limitations of existing crisis communication models when applied to public service media. Theoretical frameworks such as SCCT, Reputation Management and Image Repair Theory, while useful, require adaptation to account for the dual responsibilities of public service institutions. However, through Framing Theory, these findings illustrate how editorial framing operates as a point of tension between journalistic independence and institutional self-preservation. Thus raising broader questions about the

credibility and obligations of PSM in navigating internal controversy. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing scholarship on how public broadcasters manage internal crises within increasingly demanding and accountability-focused media environments.

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## Appendix A: Codebook

Code ID	Code Label	Definition	Example Quote	Freq.
CM1	Corrective Measures	Promises of investigation or fairness presented as institutional responses	“We will always look at any issues raised with care, fairness and sensitivity to everyone concerned” (ID_6)	15
CF1	Conflict Framing	Coverage presenting the crisis as a tension or controversy involving the BBC	“The BBC’s flagship Saturday night show has been in the headlines for the wrong reasons” (ID_33)	12
PR1	Policy Reform	Announced structural changes demonstrating accountability and future prevention	“Enhanced training and two new dedicated welfare producers” (ID_21)	11
IP1	Institutional Protection	Strategic language, like refusal to comment, to limit liability and protect reputation	“We would urge people not to indulge in speculation” (ID_23)	9
VT1	Victim Testimony	Personal accounts framed to humanise harm and position the BBC as accountable	“There’s a 30-page report me and my lawyers are still digesting, there are still things in there that are unresolved” (ID_42)	9
DC1	Distancing Commentary	Denials or dissociation from allegations by individuals or institutions	“We’re kept very, very separate to the rest of the company, so for us it’s complete news” (ID_15)	8
BJ1	Bolstering & Justification	Narratives of resilience, gratitude, or recovery that bolster the BBC’s credibility	“After a difficult year I’m back” (ID_44)	5
AV1	Apology & Vindication	Statements acknowledging fault that validate victims and imply institutional responsibility	“The BBC’s director general has apologised to Strictly Come Dancing contestants after complaints of abusive behaviour on the show” (ID_19)	3
WS1	Withdrawal Statement	Announcements of withdrawal framed as ethical or personal, with reputational impact on the BBC	“Amanda Abbington is unable to continue in Strictly Come Dancing” (ID_2)	3
DR1	Delayed Response	Statements issued reactively after external pressure or new developments	“Video of the incident is believed to have been brought to the attention of the BBC last week” (ID_13)	2
PD1	Personal Defence	Personal defences that also protect the BBC’s image when featured in BBC content	“Training has to be tough” (ID_36)	2

## Appendix B: Code Tree

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Code Label
Rebuilding Reputation through Action	Internal Accountability Measures	CM1	Corrective Measures
	Structural and Policy Reform	PR1	Policy Reform
Crisis Narratives in Public Discourse	Media Framing of Controversy	CF1	Conflict Framing
	Personal Accounts of Harm	VT1	Victim Testimony
Defensive Positioning Strategies	Institutional Deflection	IP1	Institutional Protection
	Strategic Distancing from Allegations	DC1	Distancing Commentary
Identity Bolstering and Justification	Self-Justification	BJ1	Bolstering & Justification
	Self-Defence and Image Repair	PD1	Personal Defence
Apology and Moral Accountability	Admissions of Harm	AV1	Apology & Vindication
Reputational Withdrawal	Strategic Withdrawal from Crisis	WS1	Withdrawal Statement
	Reactive and Delayed Engagement	DR1	Delayed Response

## Appendix C: AI Declaration Page

Erasmus School of  
History, Culture and  
Communication

### Student Information

Name: Maiya Bardsley

Student ID: 730185

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050

Supervisor Name: Sergül Nguyen

Date: 02/07/2025

Declaration:

### Acknowledgement of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

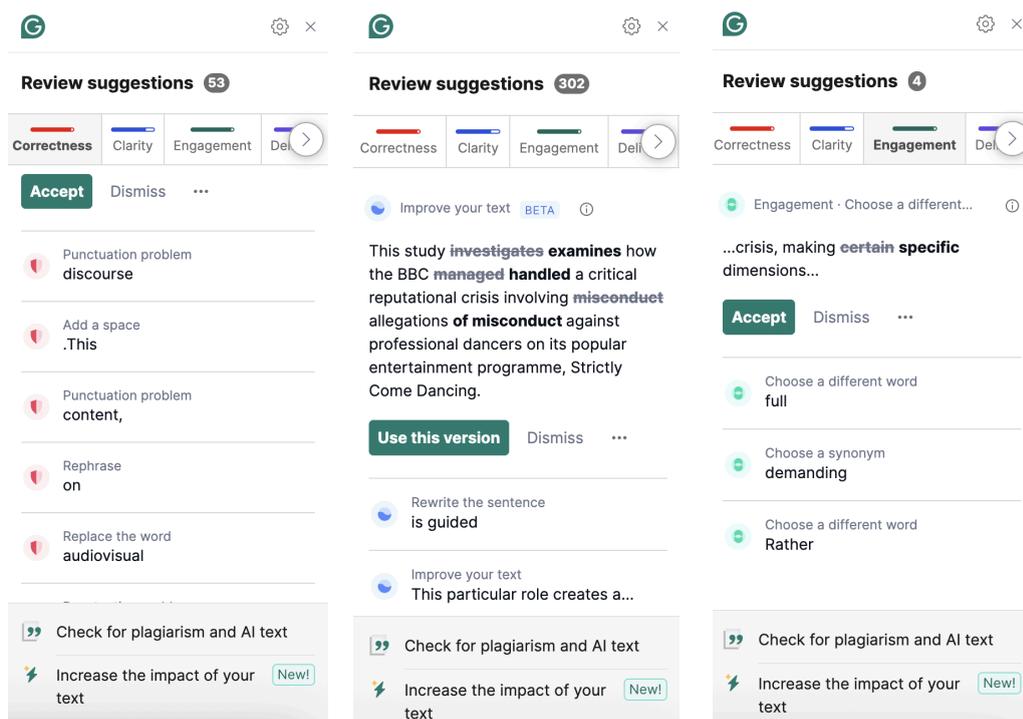
GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) is limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books

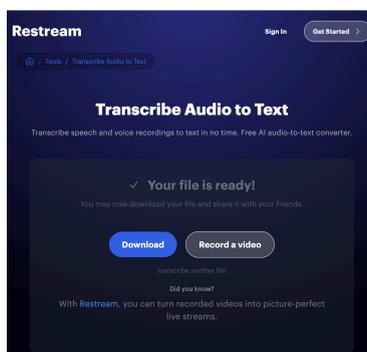
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically Grammarly, Restream, and ChatGpt, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.	<input type="checkbox"/> I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.
<b>Extent of AI Usage</b>	<b>Ethical and Academic Integrity</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I confirm that while I utilised generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of tools in coursework. I assure you that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken the necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.	Signature:  Date of Signature: 02/07/2025

## Appendix D: AI Logs

1. **Writing Support (A):** The primary AI tool used was Grammarly, installed as a browser extension on my laptop. Grammarly was used to assist with spelling, grammar, and occasional sentence structure improvements during the writing process. As Grammarly provides real-time suggestions while typing, no comprehensive log is available. However, a sample of typical suggestions (see “Review Suggestions” images below) has been provided for reference.



2. **Transcription:** AI was also used to transcribe one video statement (ID\_19) as part of the data collection process. Transcription was completed using the ReStream platform. A log of this transcription process is included below.

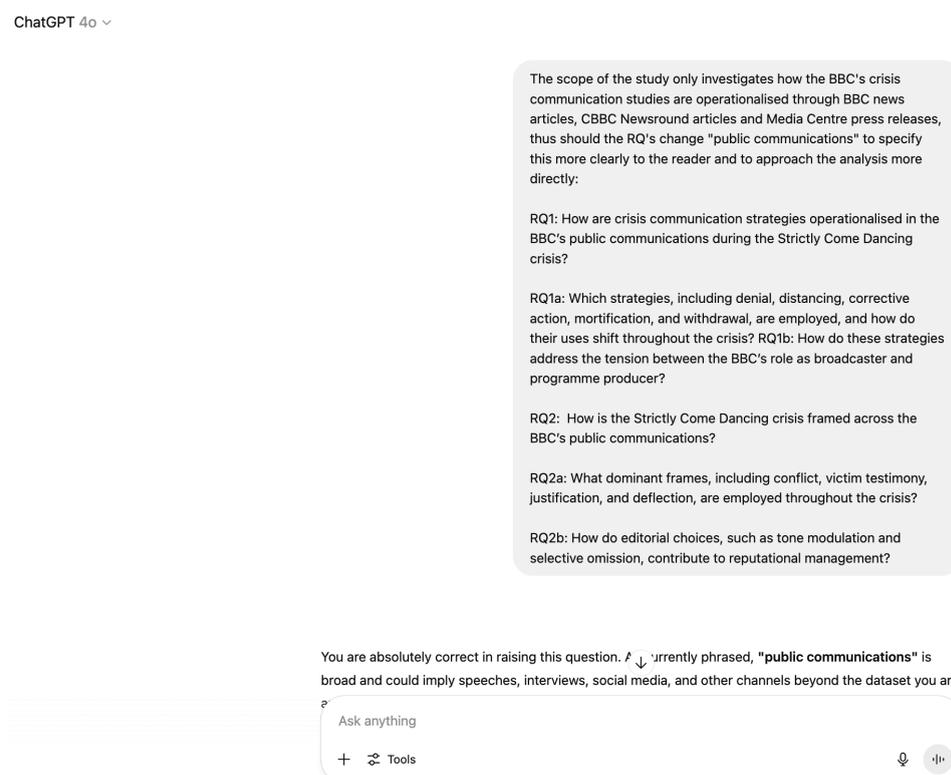


I did want to say something on Strictly, which is obviously in the headlines. Strictly is a wonderful show that brings a lot of joy to a lot of people and has done so for twenty years. To both those involved with the show itself and to millions of people at home, Hundreds of people, be they pros, contestants, or crew, have been part of it and had a brilliant experience. At the same time, if someone feels there was something wrong or they want to talk about their experience, then of course we want them to raise it that with us. And be in no doubt, we will take it seriously, listen, and deal with it as appropriately as appropriate.

And while I'm not going to talk about individuals, you can see evidence of that in recent weeks. So I hope that anyone who does want to talk to us feels they can. It is vital, of course, that we have the right protocols and structures in place for the show. We keep these under review, and as you know, we confirmed changes to these last week. It is essential these are right for everyone.

Of course, alongside the fun and entertainment, there will be a joy of competitiveness, hard work, and a will to do well. That's part of what makes this show. But there are limits, and the line should never be crossed. We will never tolerate unacceptable behavior of any kind. Meanwhile, we do have a brilliant lineup for this year who I'm sure are itching to get going, and you'll hear more about this in the coming weeks.

3. **Writing Support (B):** Portions of this thesis were refined with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT. This tool was used solely to support clarity in phrasing, improve structure, and enhance analytical focus. All analysis, interpretations, and intellectual contributions are entirely my own. ChatGPT was employed exclusively as a language refinement aid and did not generate any original content, arguments, or analytical insights. The image below provides an example of how ChatGPT was used to refine phrasing and improve clarity during the development of this thesis.



#### ◆ Media Studies Best Practice:

The stronger, safer, and more academically rigorous approach is to embed the scope explicitly in the Research Questions themselves.

This is especially important in **Media Studies**, where the media ecology is multi-modal (text, video, audio, social media). Reviewers, markers, and readers will expect absolute clarity about **which media forms are being analyzed**.

#### ⚠ Why "Public Communications" Alone Is Problematic:

- Sounds like it might include:
  - Broadcast television
  - Radio segments
  - Social media
  - Interviews, speeches, podcasts
- If you only mean **text-based, online written outputs**, it's vital to say so.