

Designing a Model for Developing a Strategic Public Relations and Crisis Communication Planning Document for the National Iranian Gas Company: A Qualitative Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to design a qualitative model for developing a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document tailored to the organizational conditions and communication requirements of the National Iranian Gas Company. This applied qualitative study was conducted with 21 participants, including senior managers and decision-makers of the National Iranian Gas Company, public relations and organizational communication specialists, crisis management experts, and university faculty members. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, and data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and supplementary analysis of relevant organizational documents. Interviews lasted approximately 50–90 minutes, were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. MAXQDA software was used to organize, code, compare, and categorize the data. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, audit-trail documentation, reflective memoing, and review of the preliminary model by subject-matter experts. Analysis of the data yielded 684 preliminary codes, which were reduced to 247 final open codes and organized into 49 subcategories, 15 main categories, and five overarching dimensions. The resulting dimensions were strategic foundations and environmental orientation, governance and organizational capacity, integrated stakeholder and media communication, crisis communication lifecycle management, and evaluation, learning, and strategic improvement. The findings indicated that effective crisis communication planning requires alignment between communication strategy and corporate mission, clear decision-making authority, executive sponsorship, interdepartmental coordination, stakeholder segmentation, integrated media and digital communication, scenario-based preparedness, unified messaging, rumor management, post-crisis reputation recovery, and continuous performance evaluation. The model further demonstrated that crisis communication should be embedded within routine public relations processes and supported by a cyclical feedback mechanism linking evaluation results to strategic revision, training, and resource allocation. The proposed model provides an integrated strategic and operational framework through which the National Iranian Gas Company can strengthen communication governance, crisis preparedness, stakeholder trust, media credibility, organizational coordination, and post-crisis learning.

Keywords: Strategic Public Relations; Crisis Communication; Strategic Planning; Communication Governance; Stakeholder Management; National Iranian Gas Company; Qualitative Research



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Introduction

Public relations has evolved from a primarily informational and promotional function into a strategic organizational capability concerned with environmental interpretation, stakeholder engagement, legitimacy, reputation, and the management of relationships under conditions of uncertainty. In contemporary organizations, particularly those operating in politically sensitive, technologically complex, and socially consequential sectors, public relations is expected to contribute not only to routine communication but also to organizational resilience, crisis preparedness, institutional coordination, and the protection of public trust. This transformation has made strategic planning indispensable because fragmented communication activities, uncoordinated media responses, and improvised crisis messages are increasingly incapable of addressing the speed, complexity, and interconnectedness of modern organizational risks. Research has accordingly emphasized that the effectiveness of public relations in crisis conditions depends on its institutional position, access to decision-making, professional competence, coordination with managerial units, and ability to translate organizational realities into credible and audience-appropriate communication (1-3).

Strategic planning provides a systematic framework through which organizations can define their communication mission, analyze internal and external conditions, establish objectives, allocate resources, clarify responsibilities, and evaluate outcomes. In crisis-prone environments, however, strategic planning must extend beyond conventional annual programs and incorporate crisis anticipation, scenario development, early-warning mechanisms, communication governance, stakeholder prioritization, spokesperson arrangements, message approval procedures, and post-crisis learning. Studies examining the relationship between strategic planning and crisis management suggest that organizations with formal planning processes are better positioned to interpret environmental signals, coordinate responses, maintain continuity, and adapt their strategies during turbulent conditions (4, 5). Strategic planning is therefore not merely a documentation exercise; it is an organizational process that links analysis, policy, capability development, implementation, monitoring, and learning.

Crisis communication constitutes one of the most important intersections between strategic management and public relations. A crisis can be understood as a disruptive event or process that threatens organizational operations, stakeholder welfare, reputation, legitimacy, or the continuity of essential services. Crisis communication refers to the purposeful exchange of information before, during, and after such events in order to reduce uncertainty, support protective action, coordinate organizational behavior, preserve trust, and facilitate recovery. Contemporary scholarship increasingly treats crisis communication as a lifecycle rather than a reactive media function. This lifecycle begins with risk monitoring and preparedness, continues through recognition, activation, response, and stakeholder engagement, and extends into recovery, evaluation, and organizational learning (6-8). Such a perspective requires public relations units to participate in risk assessment, simulation exercises, message preparation, stakeholder mapping, and institutional learning long before a crisis becomes publicly visible.

The centrality of preparedness has been demonstrated across public, private, nonprofit, health, transportation, hospitality, and educational settings. Research on nonprofit organizations has shown that crisis communication planning is often underdeveloped despite the severe reputational and operational consequences that crises may impose on organizations with limited resources and high stakeholder dependence (9). Similarly, studies of airlines, libraries, restaurants, universities, sports organizations, and transportation services indicate that the presence of pre-established procedures, trained spokespersons, reliable information flows, and adaptable messages can

significantly affect organizational credibility and continuity during disruptive events (10-15). Although these sectors differ in operational structure, their experiences demonstrate a common principle: crisis communication becomes more effective when it is embedded in organizational planning rather than assembled after the crisis has already escalated.

The growth of digital communication has further intensified the need for integrated strategic planning. Social media platforms, online news systems, messaging applications, citizen-generated content, and real-time commentary have substantially reduced the time available for organizations to verify information and formulate responses. At the same time, these technologies have created opportunities for direct stakeholder communication, rapid correction of misinformation, social listening, and continuous public engagement. Public relations units are therefore required to operate within a communication environment characterized by speed, visibility, participation, fragmentation, and contestation. Social media can support timely crisis communication, but it can also accelerate rumors, emotional reactions, fabricated claims, and reputational damage when organizations remain silent or issue inconsistent messages (16-18). Effective use of digital channels requires prior planning concerning platform responsibilities, approval procedures, monitoring systems, response thresholds, cybersecurity coordination, and the adaptation of technical information for diverse audiences.

Recent studies have consequently emphasized the importance of digital crisis communication management in government and public-sector institutions. Public organizations must communicate under conditions of legal accountability, political scrutiny, public-service obligations, and heightened expectations of transparency. Digital communication can improve accessibility and responsiveness, but it also exposes public institutions to immediate evaluation by citizens, journalists, employees, political actors, and online communities. Research on government agencies has shown that digital crisis communication requires institutional coordination, active media monitoring, message consistency, clear authority, and the capacity to respond rapidly to negative narratives and misinformation (19-21). Local-government research similarly indicates that unresolved employee claims, service complaints, and organizational grievances can develop into broader communication crises when stakeholders perceive delayed responses, insufficient empathy, or lack of accountability (22). These findings are particularly relevant to large public utilities, where operational incidents can quickly acquire social, political, and reputational dimensions.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the strategic importance of institutional communication and exposed substantial weaknesses in public-sector preparedness. Governments and public organizations were required to communicate uncertain scientific information, changing regulations, service disruptions, and protective instructions while facing widespread anxiety and declining institutional trust. Studies of government communication during the pandemic highlighted the need for coordinated digital messaging, credible spokespersons, decentralized operational capacity, rapid information sharing, and mechanisms for correcting false information (23-25). Broader assessments of public administration after the pandemic have likewise stressed resilience, adaptability, cross-organizational coordination, digital capacity, and institutional learning as essential components of effective governance (26, 27). The pandemic experience therefore reinforced the view that crisis communication should be incorporated into strategic documents, organizational structures, and routine administrative processes rather than treated as an exceptional or temporary activity.

Strategic crisis communication must also account for the emotional, interpretive, and relational dimensions of public response. Stakeholders do not evaluate crises solely on the basis of technical facts; they interpret events through prior experiences, perceived responsibility, media framing, trust in the organization, and the extent to which

communication appears empathetic, transparent, and responsive. Contingency-based approaches emphasize that organizations should avoid rigid, uniform responses and instead adapt their communication strategies to the nature of the crisis, the expectations of affected publics, and the intensity of public emotions (28). Communication accommodation likewise suggests that organizational messages should be adjusted to stakeholder language, concerns, informational needs, and cultural context, particularly when business continuity depends on maintaining cooperative relationships (15). These perspectives indicate that a strategic document should not merely prescribe message transmission but should guide the organization in selecting appropriate response positions, tones, channels, and degrees of openness.

Media framing represents another critical element of crisis communication. News organizations and digital platforms influence how events are defined, which causes and responsibilities are emphasized, and how audiences interpret organizational conduct. Under emergency conditions, incomplete information, competing sources, visual content, and repeated allegations can shape a dominant narrative before the organization has issued a formal explanation. Studies of enterprise crises have shown that media framing can amplify reputational threats and influence public judgments regarding organizational responsibility, competence, and integrity (29). Government agencies and other public institutions therefore require proactive media relations, rapid fact verification, prepared technical explanations, accessible spokespersons, and continuous analysis of emerging narratives. Without such capacities, the organization may lose control of the informational environment even when its operational response is technically adequate.

The threat posed by fake news and misinformation has further complicated this environment. False or manipulated information can produce reputational crises independently of an actual operational failure, while misleading interpretations of real events can intensify fear, anger, and distrust. Research on public relations responses to fake-news crises suggests that watchful monitoring, evidence-based correction, strategic timing, source credibility, and careful assessment of whether a false claim requires direct engagement are necessary to prevent unnecessary amplification (30). Crisis planning must therefore include protocols for identifying misinformation, evaluating its reach and potential harm, coordinating with legal and cybersecurity units, selecting authoritative messengers, and maintaining a visible source of verified information. These requirements are especially significant for national infrastructure organizations because false claims concerning service interruption, accidents, sabotage, pricing, or public safety may have consequences extending beyond organizational reputation.

The effectiveness of crisis communication also depends on internal coordination. Public relations cannot communicate accurately when operational, technical, legal, security, managerial, and regional units do not share verified information or disagree regarding authority. Studies across organizational contexts consistently identify communication quality, managerial coordination, and clearly defined roles as determinants of crisis-management effectiveness (31, 32). SWOT-based crisis analysis further demonstrates the importance of connecting external threats and opportunities with internal strengths and weaknesses, including leadership commitment, staff competence, technology, procedures, and organizational culture (32). Accordingly, a strategic public relations and crisis communication document should define both communication content and the internal governance arrangements through which information is gathered, approved, delivered, and revised.

Case-based research has also shown that crises often reveal gaps between formal policy and actual practice. Aviation disasters, service failures, reputational controversies, and public complaints demonstrate that the existence of general communication rules does not guarantee timely, coherent, and empathetic implementation. The analysis

of the Sriwijaya Air SJ182 crash, for example, underscores the importance of coordinated information, stakeholder sensitivity, media management, and continuity of communication in high-impact crises (33). Research on public relations responses to customers during the pandemic similarly indicates that credibility is strengthened through sustained communication, responsiveness, and adaptation to changing stakeholder concerns (23). These studies support the need for a strategic document that translates general principles into executable protocols, responsibilities, scenarios, indicators, and communication products.

Crisis planning must also be sufficiently flexible to address sector-specific risks. Environmental crises require the integration of technical knowledge, public safety communication, regulatory coordination, and long-term trust restoration (5). Business crises may involve market consequences, customer behavior, employee uncertainty, investor concerns, and cross-border communication challenges (2, 31). Public-health crises demand communication that supports protective behavior while accounting for uncertainty, misinformation, vulnerable populations, and rapidly changing evidence. Recent analytical work on social media communication in public-health emergencies emphasizes the importance of deliberate planning, platform selection, audience segmentation, implementation discipline, and evaluation rather than relying on ad hoc digital activity (34). Policy research also suggests that the declaration and formal recognition of a crisis can affect whether authorities mobilize resources, enact plans, and establish sustained institutional responses (35). These insights imply that strategic communication planning should define activation thresholds and levels of response according to crisis severity.

Within essential-service organizations, the stakes are particularly high. Energy companies operate large, geographically dispersed, technologically interconnected systems whose performance directly affects households, industries, public institutions, and national economic activity. An incident involving supply interruption, infrastructure failure, explosion, leakage, environmental damage, cybersecurity, extreme weather, or public dissatisfaction can rapidly generate technical, social, regulatory, and reputational consequences. Because the public often lacks access to specialized technical information, the organization's ability to explain the event, provide safety guidance, communicate restoration timelines, and demonstrate accountability becomes central to trust. Public relations in such organizations must therefore connect operational reality with stakeholder understanding while avoiding both premature claims and excessive delay.

The National Iranian Gas Company occupies a particularly significant position because of its nationwide service responsibilities, extensive infrastructure, diverse stakeholders, regional subsidiaries, and strategic role in energy provision. Its communication environment includes customers, employees, contractors, regulators, government institutions, local communities, emergency organizations, news media, social media users, industrial consumers, and international observers. These groups differ in informational needs, influence, vulnerability, and expectations. A centralized message may be necessary to preserve consistency, yet decentralized communication capacity is also required because crises frequently occur at provincial or local levels. Research on resilient public administrations and decentralized crisis responses suggests that effective systems combine clear central governance with local implementation capacity and horizontal coordination (24, 26, 27).

Despite the expansion of crisis communication scholarship, much of the existing research focuses on isolated incidents, specific organizational sectors, digital responses, or post-event evaluations. Studies have examined university public relations, public agencies, municipalities, transportation, hospitality, sports, nonprofit organizations, and customer communication (3, 9, 10, 13, 14, 18, 21). Other investigations have addressed public emotions, media framing, fake news, cyber public relations, and digital communication (17, 19, 28-30). Although these studies provide

valuable principles, they do not offer a comprehensive, context-sensitive model integrating strategic foundations, organizational governance, stakeholder relations, media and digital communication, crisis lifecycle management, evaluation, and institutional learning for a national gas company.

Moreover, the development of a strategic document requires contextual knowledge that cannot be derived solely from generic models. Organizational structure, decision-making authority, regulatory conditions, operational risks, public expectations, regional coordination, technological capabilities, and prior crisis experiences shape the feasibility and relevance of communication strategies. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for identifying these dimensions because it enables the systematic examination of expert experience, organizational meanings, implementation barriers, and relationships among strategic components. Research emphasizing organizational communication factors and public-relations capacity supports the use of contextually grounded analysis when designing crisis-management frameworks (1, 6). Such an approach can move beyond descriptive lists of best practices and generate an integrated model tailored to the institutional realities of the National Iranian Gas Company.

A comprehensive strategic public relations and crisis communication document should therefore perform several interrelated functions. It should establish communication mission, vision, values, and objectives; analyze environmental conditions and organizational capabilities; identify stakeholders and emerging issues; define governance, authority, and coordination; develop crisis scenarios and response protocols; integrate traditional media, digital platforms, and internal communication; specify resources and training needs; and establish measurable indicators for evaluation and improvement. It should also ensure that learning from routine communication and past crises is incorporated into subsequent planning. Evidence from strategic management, government communication, digital crisis response, and organizational resilience indicates that this integrated approach is more likely to support continuity, trust, legitimacy, and adaptive capacity than disconnected or purely reactive communication practices (4, 7, 8, 20).

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to design a qualitative model for developing the strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document of the National Iranian Gas Company.

Methods and Materials

This study employed an applied qualitative research design to develop a comprehensive model for formulating a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document for the National Iranian Gas Company. The qualitative approach was selected because the development of such a model required an in-depth understanding of organizational experiences, managerial perspectives, communication processes, crisis-related challenges, stakeholder expectations, and the institutional conditions affecting public relations activities within the gas industry. The study population consisted of senior managers, public relations executives, crisis management specialists, organizational communication experts, strategic planning professionals, and university faculty members with relevant academic or professional expertise in public relations, crisis communication, strategic management, media management, organizational communication, or the oil and gas industry. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with emphasis on identifying information-rich individuals who possessed direct knowledge of the organizational, operational, strategic, and communication requirements of the National Iranian Gas Company. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional experts whose professional experience could contribute to the conceptual completeness of the findings. A total of 21 participants took part in the study. The

participants included seven senior managers and decision-makers from the National Iranian Gas Company, six public relations and organizational communication managers or specialists, four crisis management and emergency communication experts, and four university faculty members specializing in strategic management, public relations, media studies, or crisis communication.

Eligibility for participation required a minimum of five years of relevant managerial, professional, research, or academic experience; familiarity with the structure and functions of public relations or crisis management in large public or energy-sector organizations; and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. Individuals who lacked direct experience in the study area, provided incomplete information, or were unable to participate in the full interview process were excluded. The participants' professional experience ranged from 7 to 28 years, enabling the study to incorporate both operational and strategic perspectives. Sampling and data collection continued concurrently until theoretical and thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation was considered to have occurred when successive interviews no longer produced substantively new concepts, categories, relationships, or dimensions relevant to the proposed model. Initial saturation was observed after the eighteenth interview; however, three additional interviews were conducted to ensure the stability, comprehensiveness, and conceptual adequacy of the extracted findings. Before data collection, the objectives and procedures of the study were explained to all participants, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured that their identities, organizational positions, and personal information would remain confidential and that the interview data would be used exclusively for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any professional or personal consequences.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented by a review of organizational and strategic documents related to public relations, crisis management, media relations, stakeholder communication, emergency response, organizational reputation, and strategic planning. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the purpose of the study, the conceptual domains of strategic public relations planning, and the requirements of crisis communication in large energy-sector organizations. The initial interview guide was reviewed by three experts in qualitative research, public relations, and strategic management to assess the clarity, relevance, logical sequence, and comprehensiveness of the questions. Minor revisions were subsequently made to eliminate overlapping questions, improve conceptual precision, and create a more coherent progression from general organizational issues to specific components of the proposed strategic document. The interviews began with broad questions concerning the current status, responsibilities, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and strategic priorities of public relations within the National Iranian Gas Company. Participants were then asked to describe the major communication risks and crisis scenarios faced by the company, the needs and expectations of internal and external stakeholders, the role of traditional and digital media during crises, the mechanisms required for coordination among organizational units, and the necessary components of a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document.

Additional questions explored the mission, vision, values, objectives, policies, implementation strategies, communication protocols, spokesperson arrangements, stakeholder segmentation, message development processes, media monitoring systems, early-warning mechanisms, rumor management procedures, digital communication capabilities, employee communication requirements, evaluation indicators, and organizational learning mechanisms that should be incorporated into the model. Probing questions such as "Could you explain this issue in greater detail?", "What factors have contributed to this situation?", "How should this process be

implemented?”, “Which organizational units should be involved?”, and “What consequences would arise if this component were neglected?” were used to obtain deeper and more detailed accounts. The flexible structure of the interviews allowed the researcher to explore emerging topics that had not been anticipated in the initial interview guide but were considered relevant to the development of the model. Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face in a quiet organizational or academic setting or through a secure online platform when direct attendance was not possible. With the participants’ permission, all interviews were digitally recorded. Field notes were also prepared during and immediately after each interview to document contextual information, nonverbal observations, preliminary interpretations, and potential areas requiring further exploration.

Document analysis was used to complement the interview data and improve the contextual understanding of the company’s communication and crisis management environment. The reviewed materials included available strategic plans, public relations policies, crisis management guidelines, organizational regulations, media procedures, communication reports, stakeholder-related documents, organizational mission and vision statements, and selected records of previous communication responses to organizational or industry-related crises. The documents were examined to identify formal priorities, existing communication structures, inconsistencies between official procedures and actual practices, and elements that could inform the proposed model. The interview and document review processes were conducted iteratively so that concepts identified in earlier interviews or documents could be examined more closely in subsequent interviews. Data collection continued until the researchers concluded that sufficient conceptual depth and variation had been obtained to explain the principal dimensions of strategic public relations and crisis communication planning in the National Iranian Gas Company.

The trustworthiness of the data was assessed according to the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, the inclusion of participants with diverse professional backgrounds, iterative interviewing, document analysis, and member checking. For member checking, summaries of the extracted concepts and preliminary interpretations were shared with eight participants, who were asked to comment on their accuracy and correspondence with their experiences. Their feedback was incorporated into the refinement of the categories and relationships among them. Dependability was strengthened by documenting the sampling procedures, interview process, analytical decisions, coding stages, category development, and model construction in an audit trail. Confirmability was supported by maintaining reflective notes and distinguishing participants’ statements from the researchers’ interpretations throughout the analytical process. Peer debriefing was also conducted with two qualitative researchers and one public relations specialist who independently reviewed portions of the coded data and discussed disagreements with the research team. Transferability was facilitated by providing a detailed description of the research context, participant characteristics, organizational setting, data collection procedures, and analytical process, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to comparable public, industrial, and energy-sector organizations.

The collected data were analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis process aimed at identifying the principal dimensions, components, processes, and relationships required for the development of a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document. Data analysis began concurrently with data collection, allowing the researchers to refine the interview questions, explore emerging themes in subsequent interviews, and determine the point of thematic saturation. Immediately after each interview, the audio recording was transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were repeatedly read alongside the corresponding field notes to promote immersion in

the data and to obtain a holistic understanding of each participant's perspective. MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software was used to organize the transcripts, assign codes, retrieve related segments, compare concepts across participants, prepare analytical memos, and facilitate the systematic development of categories and themes.

During the initial coding stage, meaningful words, sentences, and passages related to strategic public relations planning, crisis communication, organizational structures, stakeholder relations, media management, environmental analysis, communication technologies, implementation requirements, and performance evaluation were identified and assigned preliminary codes. Coding remained close to the participants' language whenever possible to preserve the meanings embedded in their professional experiences. Similar codes were continuously compared and merged, while conceptually distinct codes were retained separately. Through constant comparison, the researchers examined similarities and differences across interviews, professional groups, organizational levels, and documentary evidence. Codes that represented related ideas were grouped into subcategories, and the subcategories were subsequently organized into broader categories reflecting the major dimensions of the proposed strategic document.

In the next stage, relationships among the categories were examined to determine how environmental conditions, organizational capacities, strategic orientations, operational communication processes, crisis response mechanisms, implementation requirements, and evaluation systems interacted with one another. Particular attention was given to identifying causal conditions, contextual factors, facilitating or constraining conditions, strategic actions, implementation mechanisms, and expected organizational and communication outcomes. Analytical memos were written throughout this process to record conceptual insights, alternative interpretations, emerging relationships, and decisions concerning the boundaries of categories. Negative or contradictory cases were examined rather than excluded, as these cases helped clarify the conditions under which particular communication strategies or organizational arrangements might be effective or ineffective.

Following the formation of the main categories, the research team developed an initial conceptual model representing the proposed structure of the strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document. The model was designed to integrate the company's communication mission and vision, environmental assessment, stakeholder analysis, strategic objectives, governance arrangements, crisis preparedness mechanisms, media and digital communication strategies, operational protocols, human and technological resources, monitoring procedures, and performance evaluation indicators. The preliminary model was reviewed against the original interview transcripts and organizational documents to ensure that each component was supported by adequate empirical evidence. Redundant components were combined, ambiguous relationships were clarified, and categories with insufficient conceptual support were revised or removed.

To enhance analytical reliability, two members of the research team independently coded selected interview transcripts and compared their coding decisions. Differences were discussed until conceptual agreement was reached, and the resulting coding framework was applied consistently to the remaining data. In addition, the preliminary categories and model were presented to a panel of five experts who had not participated in the initial coding process but possessed relevant expertise in public relations, strategic management, crisis communication, or the gas industry. The experts assessed the model in terms of clarity, comprehensiveness, internal consistency, practical relevance, and compatibility with the organizational context of the National Iranian Gas Company. Their recommendations were used to refine the terminology, consolidate overlapping dimensions, clarify the sequence of strategic and operational processes, and strengthen the connections between preparedness, crisis response,

post-crisis learning, and performance evaluation. The final model was established after repeated comparison among the coded interview data, documentary evidence, expert feedback, and the study objectives. This analytical procedure ensured that the proposed model was empirically grounded, organizationally relevant, and sufficiently comprehensive to guide the formulation and implementation of a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document within the National Iranian Gas Company.

Findings and Results

A total of 21 experts participated in the study. The participants comprised seven senior managers and organizational decision-makers from the National Iranian Gas Company, six public relations and organizational communication managers or specialists, four crisis management and emergency communication experts, and four university faculty members with expertise in public relations, media studies, strategic management, organizational communication, or crisis communication. Fourteen participants were male and seven were female. The participants ranged in age from 35 to 59 years, with a mean age of 46.38 years. Their professional experience ranged from 7 to 28 years, with an average of 17.62 years. Five participants had between 7 and 10 years of professional experience, seven had between 11 and 15 years, five had between 16 and 20 years, and four had more than 20 years of relevant experience. Regarding educational qualifications, three participants held master's degrees and eighteen held doctoral degrees or were university faculty members with doctoral-level qualifications. Twelve participants had direct organizational experience in the National Iranian Gas Company or its affiliated provincial gas companies, while nine participants had advisory, academic, regulatory, media-related, or crisis-management experience relevant to the gas and energy sector. The diversity of the participants in terms of organizational position, disciplinary background, professional experience, and degree of involvement in public relations and crisis-management processes made it possible to examine the phenomenon from strategic, managerial, operational, technological, media, and academic perspectives.

The analysis of the interview transcripts and organizational documents initially generated 684 preliminary codes. Following repeated review, comparison, merging of conceptually similar codes, and removal of redundant or marginal codes, 247 final open codes were retained. These codes were organized into 49 subcategories, 15 main categories, and five overarching dimensions. The five dimensions were strategic foundations and environmental orientation, governance and organizational capacity, integrated stakeholder and media communication, crisis communication lifecycle management, and evaluation, learning, and strategic improvement. Together, these dimensions formed the basis of the proposed model for developing the strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document of the National Iranian Gas Company.

Table 1. Dimensions, Main Categories, and Subcategories of the Proposed Strategic Public Relations and Crisis Communication Planning Model

Overarching dimension	Main category	Principal subcategories
Strategic foundations and environmental orientation	Strategic identity and communication philosophy	Communication mission, strategic vision, organizational values, public responsibility, national interest orientation, transparency commitment, trust-building philosophy
Strategic foundations and environmental orientation	Environmental intelligence and situational analysis	Political and regulatory analysis, economic conditions, social expectations, technological developments, environmental concerns, energy-sector risks, media environment analysis, competitor and benchmark analysis
Strategic foundations and environmental orientation	Stakeholder and issue prioritization	Stakeholder identification, stakeholder segmentation, power–interest analysis, issue mapping, expectation analysis, vulnerable-group identification, priority publics, stakeholder risk assessment

Governance and organizational capacity	Communication governance and policy alignment	Communication policymaking authority, executive sponsorship, alignment with corporate strategy, relationship between headquarters and subsidiaries, decision-making hierarchy, accountability, policy coherence
Governance and organizational capacity	Organizational structure and interdepartmental coordination	Public relations structure, crisis communication committee, coordination with operations, legal affairs, security, emergency management, information technology, human resources, and provincial companies
Governance and organizational capacity	Human, technological, and financial capacity	Specialized personnel, continuous training, spokesperson training, digital infrastructure, media monitoring systems, data management, communication budget, logistical resources
Integrated stakeholder and media communication	Stakeholder engagement and internal communication	Employee communication, managerial communication, community relations, customer communication, contractor communication, government relations, internal information flow, feedback channels
Integrated stakeholder and media communication	Media relations and content governance	Media classification, journalist relations, content standards, message approval, press briefings, media response protocols, visual communication, spokesperson coordination
Integrated stakeholder and media communication	Digital communication and social media management	Official digital platforms, social listening, online engagement, social media protocols, misinformation detection, rapid digital response, data analytics, cybersecurity coordination
Crisis communication lifecycle management	Crisis prevention and communication preparedness	Communication risk identification, crisis scenario development, early-warning indicators, crisis communication manuals, simulation exercises, message templates, contact databases
Crisis communication lifecycle management	Crisis response and message coordination	Rapid verification, command structure, initial holding statement, unified messaging, spokesperson activation, media briefing, stakeholder notification, rumor control
Crisis communication lifecycle management	Post-crisis communication and reputation recovery	Public explanation, corrective communication, stakeholder reassurance, reputation restoration, compensation communication, documentation of lessons, long-term trust recovery
Evaluation, learning, and strategic improvement	Monitoring and performance measurement	Process indicators, output indicators, outcome indicators, trust measures, media analysis, digital sentiment analysis, stakeholder satisfaction, response-time indicators
Evaluation, learning, and strategic improvement	Organizational learning and knowledge management	Crisis documentation, lessons-learned sessions, best-practice repository, transfer of experience, updating protocols, interprovincial learning, institutional memory
Evaluation, learning, and strategic improvement	Strategic review and continuous improvement	Periodic strategic review, environmental rescanning, stakeholder reassessment, annual action-plan revision, resource reallocation, model adaptation, management reporting

As shown in Table 1, the proposed model was not limited to the preparation of a conventional public relations plan or a set of operational instructions for responding to media inquiries during emergencies. Instead, the findings indicated that an effective strategic document must connect the long-term communication orientation of the National Iranian Gas Company with its organizational governance, stakeholder relationships, media systems, crisis-management processes, technological capacities, and evaluation mechanisms. The first dimension, strategic foundations and environmental orientation, established the conceptual and analytical basis of the document. Participants repeatedly emphasized that public relations activities would remain fragmented and reactive unless the company clearly defined its communication mission, desired future position, values, stakeholder priorities, and environmental assumptions. In this dimension, strategic identity was closely linked to public accountability, national energy security, continuity of gas supply, social trust, and the company's responsibility to provide accurate and timely information. Environmental intelligence was also identified as essential because communication risks in the gas industry may emerge from political decisions, regulatory changes, supply interruptions, accidents, extreme weather conditions, environmental controversies, price-related concerns, cyber incidents, infrastructure failures, and rapidly evolving media narratives.

The second dimension concerned governance and organizational capacity. The participants explained that the effectiveness of the strategic document would depend on whether public relations was institutionally connected to senior decision-making rather than operating only as an executive or ceremonial unit. They highlighted the necessity

of clearly defining the authority of public relations, the role of senior executives, the responsibilities of headquarters and provincial subsidiaries, and the communication duties of operational, legal, security, emergency, and technical units. The third dimension focused on integrated stakeholder and media communication and reflected the view that communication should be designed around differentiated stakeholder groups rather than undifferentiated public audiences. Internal employees, customers, local communities, government institutions, regulators, contractors, media professionals, environmental groups, emergency organizations, and digital publics were identified as distinct groups requiring different messages, channels, levels of detail, and response procedures.

The fourth dimension represented the crisis communication lifecycle and included prevention, preparedness, response, and post-crisis recovery. The findings indicated that crisis communication should begin before a crisis occurs through risk identification, scenario planning, simulation, pre-approved message templates, updated media contact lists, spokesperson preparation, and establishment of warning indicators. During a crisis, rapid verification, unified command, message consistency, stakeholder prioritization, rumor control, and continuous updating were considered critical. After a crisis, the participants emphasized explanation, accountability, corrective communication, reputation restoration, and organizational learning. The fifth dimension concerned evaluation and improvement and demonstrated that the strategic document should contain measurable indicators and formal learning mechanisms. Participants stressed that the success of public relations could not be assessed solely through the number of news releases, media appearances, or social media posts. Instead, evaluation should include trust, stakeholder satisfaction, media accuracy, message reach, response speed, reputational impact, sentiment changes, coordination quality, and the extent to which lessons from previous crises were incorporated into revised procedures.

Table 2. Strategic Components of the Public Relations and Crisis Communication Planning Document

Strategic component	Required content	Expected organizational function
Communication mission	Definition of the fundamental purpose of public relations and crisis communication in relation to organizational mission, public service, national energy security, and stakeholder trust	Establishes a common communication purpose and prevents fragmented or contradictory activities
Communication vision	Description of the desired future position of the company in transparency, stakeholder engagement, media credibility, digital communication, and crisis preparedness	Provides long-term direction and defines the target state of the communication system
Communication values	Accuracy, timeliness, transparency, accountability, empathy, public responsibility, confidentiality, coordination, and respect for stakeholder rights	Guides communication decisions and establishes ethical boundaries
Environmental analysis	Assessment of political, economic, social, technological, legal, environmental, industrial, and media conditions	Identifies external opportunities, threats, emerging issues, and communication risks
Internal capability analysis	Assessment of structure, staffing, expertise, technology, budget, coordination, processes, and organizational culture	Identifies internal strengths, weaknesses, and implementation gaps
Stakeholder map	Classification of internal and external stakeholders according to influence, interest, vulnerability, information needs, and communication risk	Supports differentiated communication strategies and priority setting
Communication issue map	Identification of routine, sensitive, emerging, and crisis-prone issues affecting organizational reputation and stakeholder trust	Enables proactive issue management and prevents escalation
Strategic objectives	Measurable objectives related to trust, transparency, media credibility, employee alignment, stakeholder satisfaction, crisis readiness, and digital engagement	Converts broad strategic intentions into assessable results
Communication strategies	Proactive communication, stakeholder engagement, media partnership, digital communication, internal alignment, social responsibility communication, and reputation management	Determines the major courses of action required to achieve communication objectives
Crisis communication scenarios	Operational, technological, environmental, social, security, cyber, supply, reputational, and managerial crisis scenarios	Prepares the organization for different crisis conditions and communication demands

Governance structure	Roles of senior management, public relations, crisis management, operations, legal affairs, security, information technology, and spokespersons	Establishes authority, accountability, and coordination
Message architecture	Core messages, supporting messages, stakeholder-specific messages, holding statements, question-and-answer documents, and technical explanations	Ensures speed, consistency, accuracy, and audience appropriateness
Channel strategy	Television, radio, press, news agencies, websites, social media, internal platforms, telephone systems, community channels, and face-to-face communication	Matches communication channels with stakeholder needs and crisis conditions
Implementation plan	Activities, responsible units, timelines, required resources, communication products, training programs, and coordination procedures	Translates the strategic document into executable programs
Monitoring and evaluation system	Performance indicators, data sources, reporting intervals, responsible evaluators, stakeholder feedback, media analysis, and corrective actions	Measures effectiveness and supports continuous strategic improvement

Table 2 presents the major components that participants considered necessary for transforming the extracted qualitative model into a formal and usable strategic planning document. The findings demonstrated that the document should begin with a clear communication mission and vision aligned with the overall mission of the National Iranian Gas Company. Participants noted that the mission should explain why the organization communicates, whose interests it serves, and how public relations contributes to service continuity, public safety, national energy management, stakeholder confidence, and corporate legitimacy. The vision should describe the desired future position of the company as a credible, responsive, transparent, technologically capable, and crisis-ready organization. Communication values were viewed as operational principles rather than symbolic statements. Accuracy and speed were repeatedly identified as complementary requirements; however, participants cautioned that speed without verification could intensify a crisis, while excessive caution and delayed communication could create an information vacuum that would be filled by speculation and misinformation.

The environmental and internal analyses were identified as the diagnostic foundation of the strategic document. Participants emphasized that the gas industry operates within a highly sensitive environment characterized by extensive infrastructure, geographic dispersion, public dependence on uninterrupted service, seasonal demand fluctuations, industrial hazards, regulatory oversight, environmental concerns, and intense media attention during disruptions. Therefore, the document should incorporate regular assessment of both external conditions and internal capabilities. Stakeholder mapping was also considered essential because different groups possess different degrees of influence, exposure, vulnerability, and information needs. For example, employees require operational instructions and organizational reassurance; customers require clear information about service continuity and restoration times; local communities require safety information and evidence of organizational responsibility; government bodies require verified technical and managerial reports; and journalists require timely access to authorized facts and qualified spokespersons.

The findings also showed that strategic objectives should be measurable and directly associated with organizational outcomes. Suggested objectives included increasing public trust, improving the speed and accuracy of crisis communication, reducing contradictory messages, strengthening employee alignment, improving media relationships, increasing digital responsiveness, reducing rumor diffusion, and enhancing stakeholder satisfaction. Participants considered crisis scenarios to be among the most important components of the document. They argued that general communication policies would be insufficient unless they were converted into scenario-specific procedures for events such as pipeline explosions, gas leakage, service interruptions, extreme cold, cyberattacks,

environmental incidents, industrial accidents, infrastructure sabotage, price-related controversies, public protests, and reputational allegations.

The governance structure was another central component. The participants explained that the strategic document should precisely determine who has the authority to confirm information, approve messages, communicate with media, notify stakeholders, manage digital channels, and coordinate with external emergency organizations. Message architecture was identified as a mechanism for preventing inconsistency under pressure. Pre-prepared holding statements, stakeholder-specific messages, technical explanation formats, question-and-answer sheets, and frequently updated fact sheets were viewed as essential for accelerating communication without sacrificing accuracy. Finally, the implementation and evaluation sections were regarded as necessary for preventing the strategic document from becoming merely declarative. Each objective should be linked to specific activities, responsible units, schedules, resources, and indicators, and the results should be reported periodically to senior management.

Table 3. Crisis Communication Process, Operational Requirements, and Performance Indicators

Crisis communication phase	Principal actions	Responsible actors	Key performance indicators
Risk detection and early warning	Monitoring operational signals, media narratives, stakeholder complaints, social media discussions, regulatory developments, and environmental threats	Public relations monitoring unit, crisis management center, operations, information technology, security, provincial companies	Time required to detect emerging issues, number of validated warnings, percentage of high-risk issues escalated appropriately
Preparedness and scenario planning	Developing crisis scenarios, assigning responsibilities, preparing communication protocols, updating contact lists, producing message templates, and conducting exercises	Public relations, crisis management, senior management, operations, legal affairs, human resources, information technology	Number of completed scenarios, frequency of exercises, percentage of personnel trained, completeness of contact databases
Verification and crisis activation	Confirming the event, determining severity, activating the crisis communication team, identifying affected stakeholders, and initiating internal notification	Incident command, crisis management committee, technical units, public relations director, senior executives	Verification time, activation time, accuracy of initial assessment, speed of internal notification
Initial public response	Issuing a holding statement, acknowledging the event, communicating known facts, expressing concern, providing immediate safety guidance, and announcing the next update	Authorized spokesperson, public relations director, technical representative, senior management	Time to first official statement, accuracy of initial message, clarity of safety instructions, stakeholder reach
Ongoing communication and media management	Providing regular updates, organizing briefings, responding to journalists, correcting false information, coordinating digital content, and communicating restoration progress	Media relations unit, spokesperson, digital communication unit, technical experts, provincial public relations offices	Update frequency, media response time, percentage of inaccurate reports corrected, consistency across channels
Stakeholder-specific communication	Informing employees, customers, regulators, local communities, contractors, emergency services, and other affected groups through tailored messages	Internal communication unit, customer relations, government affairs, community relations, provincial companies	Stakeholder coverage, message appropriateness, complaint volume, stakeholder satisfaction, response accessibility
Rumor and misinformation management	Detecting rumors, assessing potential harm, publishing evidence-based corrections, engaging trusted intermediaries, and maintaining a visible official information source	Social media monitoring team, media relations, legal affairs, cybersecurity, spokesperson	Rumor detection time, correction time, reduction in misinformation circulation, engagement with corrective content
Recovery and reputation restoration	Explaining causes, reporting corrective measures, acknowledging impacts, communicating service restoration, engaging affected	Senior management, public relations, operations, legal affairs, corporate social responsibility unit	Change in stakeholder trust, sentiment recovery, media tone, satisfaction with corrective communication

	communities, and rebuilding confidence		
Post-crisis evaluation and learning	Conducting debriefing sessions, comparing performance with protocols, documenting failures and successful practices, revising plans, and updating training	Evaluation team, public relations, crisis management, senior management, all involved units	Completion of after-action review, number of identified lessons, percentage of corrective actions implemented, time required to update protocols

As indicated in Table 3, the crisis communication process was conceptualized as a continuous cycle beginning with risk detection and continuing through preparedness, activation, response, recovery, evaluation, and renewed preparedness. Participants strongly rejected the view that crisis communication begins only after an incident becomes public. They described monitoring and early warning as the first operational stage, during which technical events, stakeholder complaints, online discussions, media inquiries, regulatory developments, and changes in public sentiment should be systematically observed. The integration of operational monitoring with media and social listening was considered particularly important because some organizational crises may first appear as technical problems, while others may emerge initially as communication or reputational issues. A minor service disruption, for example, may develop into a major reputational crisis if official information is delayed, local concerns are ignored, or contradictory messages are issued by different units.

Preparedness involved much more than the existence of a written crisis manual. Participants emphasized the need for realistic scenario planning, periodic exercises, designated alternates for key communication roles, updated media and stakeholder databases, pre-approved communication formats, and training for spokespersons and provincial public relations personnel. Verification and activation were identified as the most sensitive transitional stage. The participants explained that the organization should establish a rapid process for confirming facts, determining the severity of the event, identifying affected areas and stakeholders, and activating the appropriate level of communication response. Delays in verification were viewed as a major cause of communication failure, but the participants also emphasized that unconfirmed technical claims should not be released merely to satisfy immediate media pressure.

The initial public response was expected to acknowledge the event, provide verified information, express concern for affected individuals, issue essential safety guidance, and indicate when the next update would be provided. Participants regarded silence as a potentially damaging response because it could be interpreted as confusion, concealment, or lack of accountability. Nevertheless, the first statement was not expected to provide a complete causal explanation when investigations were still underway. Instead, it should establish the organization as the primary and reliable source of information. During ongoing communication, update frequency, message consistency, accessibility of technical explanations, and active correction of false information were considered major performance criteria.

Stakeholder-specific communication was another prominent finding. Participants explained that a single public statement would not adequately address the needs of employees, customers, local residents, government officials, emergency agencies, contractors, and the media. Each group requires information adapted to its responsibilities, level of exposure, and decision-making needs. Rumor and misinformation management was also identified as a distinct operational function. The participants proposed continuous social monitoring, rapid verification of circulating claims, prioritization of harmful rumors, production of concise corrective content, and cooperation with credible media figures and local community representatives. In the recovery phase, the company should communicate not only the restoration of services but also the causes of the incident, corrective measures, preventive actions, and

organizational accountability. Post-crisis evaluation was considered essential for institutional learning. Each major event should result in a documented after-action review, revisions to protocols, identification of training needs, and monitoring of corrective actions until completion.

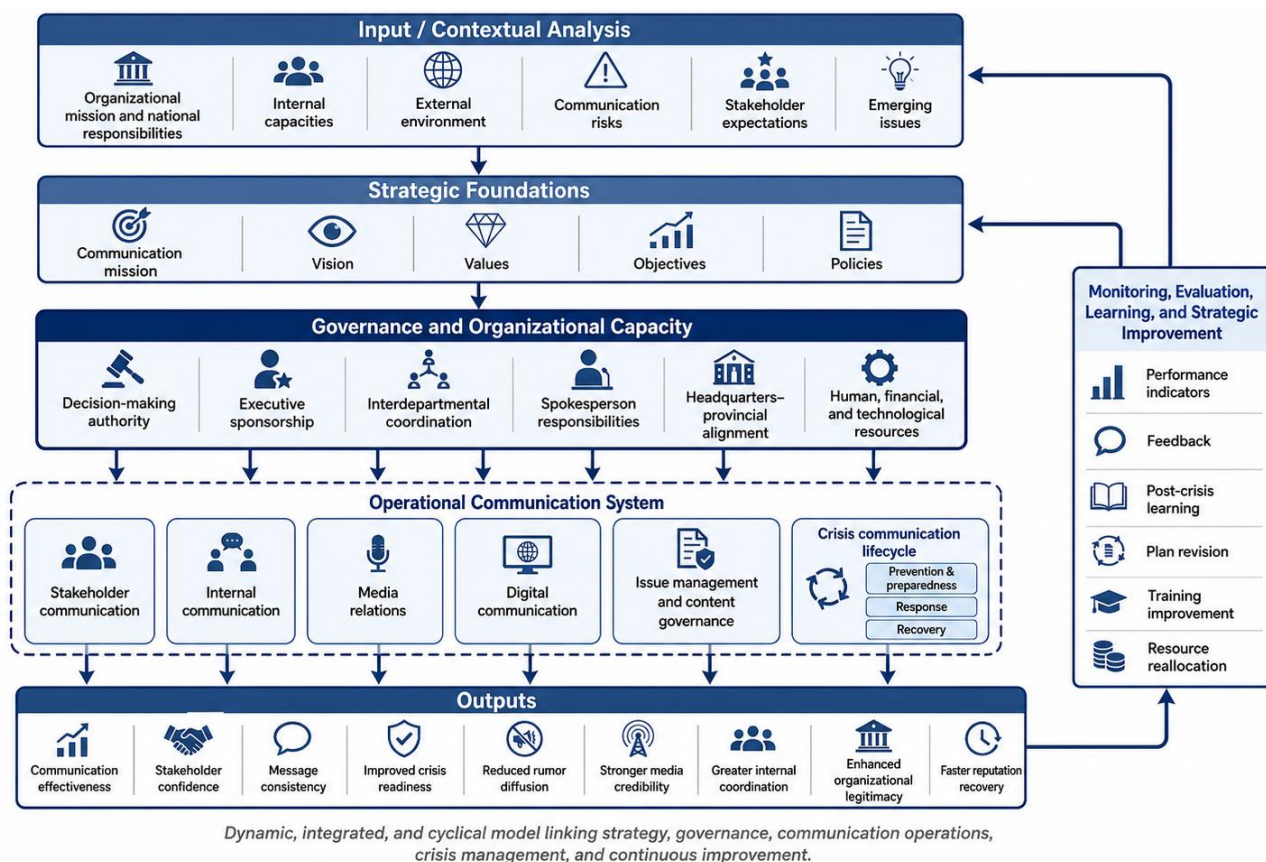


Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Developing the Strategic Public Relations and Crisis Communication Planning Document of the National Iranian Gas Company

The final conceptual model placed strategic communication governance at the center of an interconnected system composed of environmental intelligence, stakeholder orientation, organizational capacity, integrated communication, crisis lifecycle management, and evaluation and learning. At the input level, the model begins with analysis of the organization's mission, national responsibilities, internal capacities, external environment, communication risks, stakeholder expectations, and emerging issues. These inputs shape the strategic foundations of the document, including the communication mission, vision, values, objectives, and policies. The central governance layer establishes decision-making authority, interdepartmental coordination, executive sponsorship, spokesperson responsibilities, and the relationship between headquarters and provincial subsidiaries. This central layer connects strategic intentions to operational communication processes and ensures that communication decisions are consistent with technical, legal, security, and managerial requirements.

The operational layer of the model consists of stakeholder communication, internal communication, media relations, digital communication, content governance, issue management, and crisis communication. These components function continuously during normal organizational conditions and become more intensive during emergencies. Crisis communication is embedded within the broader public relations strategy rather than treated as a separate and temporary activity. Prevention and preparedness are connected to environmental monitoring and

issue management; response is connected to governance, message architecture, media relations, and stakeholder communication; and recovery is connected to accountability, reputation management, community relations, and organizational learning. The model therefore emphasizes continuity between routine communication and crisis communication.

The output layer includes communication effectiveness, stakeholder confidence, message consistency, improved crisis readiness, reduced rumor diffusion, stronger media credibility, greater internal coordination, enhanced organizational legitimacy, and faster reputation recovery. These outputs are assessed through a structured monitoring and evaluation system. Evaluation results are then returned to the strategic and operational components of the model through a feedback loop. This feedback mechanism allows the organization to revise objectives, update stakeholder maps, modify crisis scenarios, improve training, reallocate resources, and adapt its communication strategies to changing conditions. Accordingly, the proposed model is dynamic rather than static and requires periodic review at strategic, annual, and post-crisis intervals.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that the formulation of a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document for the National Iranian Gas Company requires the integration of corporate strategy, public responsibility, stakeholder analysis, communication governance, organizational preparedness, technological infrastructure, media and digital capabilities, scenario-based crisis planning, and measurable evaluation. The participants consistently emphasized that the principal weakness of traditional communication planning lies in the separation of strategic planning from operational realities and the separation of routine public relations from crisis communication. The proposed model addresses this weakness by establishing a unified framework in which routine communication activities contribute to crisis preparedness, and lessons derived from crises contribute to the continuous improvement of public relations strategy. The resulting model therefore provides both a strategic architecture for long-term communication management and an operational framework for coordinated action before, during, and after organizational crises.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted to design a qualitative model for developing a strategic public relations and crisis communication planning document for the National Iranian Gas Company. The findings resulted in a multidimensional model comprising five overarching dimensions: strategic foundations and environmental orientation, governance and organizational capacity, integrated stakeholder and media communication, crisis communication lifecycle management, and evaluation, learning, and strategic improvement. These dimensions were organized into 15 main categories and 49 subcategories and collectively demonstrated that effective public relations and crisis communication planning in a large national energy organization cannot be reduced to media activities, press releases, or temporary responses to emergencies. Rather, it requires an integrated strategic system that connects organizational mission, environmental analysis, stakeholder expectations, decision-making authority, interdepartmental coordination, human and technological resources, routine communication, crisis preparedness, operational response, post-crisis recovery, and continuous evaluation.

The first major finding concerned the importance of strategic foundations and environmental orientation. The participants emphasized that a strategic public relations and crisis communication document should begin with a clearly articulated communication mission, vision, values, objectives, and policies. They also considered environmental intelligence, stakeholder analysis, issue mapping, and continuous assessment of political, economic,

social, technological, legal, environmental, industrial, and media conditions to be essential. This finding suggests that public relations activities become fragmented and reactive when they are not guided by an explicit strategic identity and systematic understanding of the organizational environment. A clear communication philosophy establishes the purpose of public relations, determines its contribution to public service and organizational legitimacy, and provides a basis for prioritizing messages, audiences, and resources.

This result is consistent with studies that have identified strategic planning as a central prerequisite for effective crisis management. Bryson et al. showed that strategic planning enables organizations to define priorities, allocate resources, and adopt more coherent crisis-management styles under turbulent conditions (4). Hamza et al. similarly argued that environmental crisis management depends on structured planning, risk assessment, and alignment between strategic objectives and response mechanisms (5). The current finding also aligns with Awaloedin et al., who used SWOT analysis to demonstrate that the identification of internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats is essential for selecting appropriate communication strategies during organizational crises (32). Accordingly, the strategic document proposed in the present study should not be treated as a fixed administrative text but as a dynamic planning instrument that is periodically revised in response to environmental changes and emerging risks.

The emphasis on environmental intelligence and issue prioritization is also supported by research on media framing, public emotions, and misinformation. Lin and Liu demonstrated that media frameworks can influence the public interpretation of corporate emergencies and shape perceptions of responsibility, competence, and organizational credibility (29). Rose et al. emphasized that public emotions and crisis-specific conditions should determine the selection of communication strategies rather than reliance on standardized responses (28). Lambert et al. further showed that fake news and misleading narratives require watchful monitoring, strategic assessment, and evidence-based intervention (30). These findings support the present study's identification of media environment analysis, issue mapping, social listening, rumor detection, and stakeholder-risk assessment as foundational components of strategic communication planning.

The second major dimension was governance and organizational capacity. The findings indicated that the implementation of the proposed strategic document depends on clearly defined decision-making authority, executive sponsorship, interdepartmental coordination, spokesperson responsibilities, alignment between headquarters and provincial subsidiaries, and access to adequate human, financial, and technological resources. The participants repeatedly emphasized that public relations cannot perform a strategic or crisis-management role when it is positioned at the margins of organizational decision-making or receives incomplete and delayed information from technical and operational units. In a large and geographically dispersed organization such as the National Iranian Gas Company, communication governance must determine who verifies information, who authorizes messages, who communicates with stakeholders, and how central and provincial units coordinate their actions.

This finding is consistent with Muhammad et al., who identified managerial support, professional competence, organizational structure, access to information, and coordination as important factors influencing the role of public relations in crisis communication management (1). Rumman and Alzeyadat likewise found that public relations and media departments contribute more effectively to crisis management when they are institutionally connected to decision-making and supported by organizational leadership (3). Research in the business sector has also shown that the effectiveness of crisis management is strongly influenced by the institutional status of public relations,

coordination among organizational actors, and the integration of communication with broader managerial processes (2). The findings of the present study therefore reinforce the view that public relations should be recognized as a strategic management function rather than a merely ceremonial or publicity-oriented department.

The need for coordination between central and regional units also corresponds with studies of resilient and decentralized public administration. Plimakis showed that decentralized structures can improve crisis responsiveness when local actors possess sufficient authority and remain connected to central policy and coordination mechanisms (24). Salvador and Sancho similarly emphasized that robust governance in turbulent conditions requires a combination of institutional capacity, distributed operational competence, coordination, and adaptive decision-making (27). The OECD has also highlighted cross-organizational collaboration, digital capacity, flexibility, and institutional learning as critical features of resilient public administrations following the COVID-19 pandemic (26). In the context of the National Iranian Gas Company, this implies that headquarters should establish common policies, standards, and approval mechanisms, while provincial companies should possess sufficient operational capacity to communicate rapidly with local stakeholders within the boundaries of the central framework.

The third major dimension concerned integrated stakeholder and media communication. The findings showed that the strategic document should incorporate stakeholder segmentation, internal communication, community relations, customer communication, government relations, media relations, content governance, digital communication, and social media management. Participants rejected the assumption that all stakeholders can be addressed through a single general message. Instead, they emphasized that employees, customers, local communities, government institutions, emergency organizations, contractors, journalists, regulators, and digital publics differ in their informational needs, level of influence, exposure to risk, and expectations of the company. Consequently, the proposed model requires audience-specific messages, channels, timing, and levels of technical detail.

This result is aligned with contingency and accommodation approaches to crisis communication. Rose et al. argued that organizational responses should be adapted to stakeholder emotions, crisis conditions, and public interpretations (28). Kartikawangi demonstrated that communication accommodation can support business sustainability by adjusting messages and communicative behavior to the expectations and characteristics of affected publics (15). O'Neill and Kelley also showed that the communication of unfavorable or sensitive information requires clarity, empathy, timing, and attention to audience needs (11). These studies support the present finding that stakeholder communication should be differentiated while remaining consistent with the organization's central message architecture.

The importance of internal communication identified in the present study is particularly significant. Employees are not only recipients of organizational information but also potential sources of information for customers, families, local communities, and social media networks. If employees do not receive timely and accurate messages, contradictory accounts may circulate and undermine the credibility of official communication. Santoso et al. highlighted the role of public relations professionals in maintaining adaptive communication during the COVID-19 crisis, including the management of internal and external relationships under rapidly changing conditions (25). Kalogiannidis et al. likewise found that effective communication moderates the relationship between crisis conditions and organizational performance, especially when communication facilitates coordination and reduces uncertainty (31). Thus, the proposed document should treat employee communication as a core element of crisis preparedness and response rather than as a secondary administrative function.

The findings concerning media and digital communication are also supported by previous research. Babatunde showed that the integration of public relations and social media can strengthen crisis communication through rapid information dissemination, direct stakeholder interaction, and rumor management (16). Umar demonstrated that cyber public relations enables organizations to monitor online conversations and respond strategically through digital channels (17). Silva et al. found that social media can play a significant role in maintaining relationships and communicating during crises in the hospitality sector (18). Anagusti et al. similarly emphasized monitoring, message consistency, rapid response, and the strategic use of digital platforms in government crisis communication (19). These findings support the inclusion of social listening, digital-content protocols, misinformation detection, online engagement, and coordinated digital response in the present model.

The fourth major dimension was crisis communication lifecycle management. The findings indicated that crisis communication should include prevention and preparedness, crisis activation and response, stakeholder notification, media management, rumor control, recovery communication, reputation restoration, and post-crisis evaluation. The participants considered crisis communication to be a continuous cycle rather than an activity that begins only after an emergency becomes public. Risk detection, scenario planning, simulation exercises, spokesperson training, pre-approved messages, updated contact databases, and early-warning indicators were identified as essential pre-crisis requirements. During a crisis, rapid verification, an initial holding statement, unified messaging, regular updates, and tailored stakeholder communication were considered central. After the crisis, public explanation, corrective communication, accountability, reputation restoration, and documentation of lessons were required.

This lifecycle approach is consistent with Lin et al., who described crisis management and communication as interconnected processes involving preparedness, coordinated response, and recovery (6). Kodatska et al. similarly emphasized that crisis communication in the public space requires planning, management of information flows, stakeholder interaction, and continuous adaptation (7). Zimal and Aysar demonstrated that public relations strategies should connect anticipatory planning with operational crisis communication to protect organizational reputation and public confidence (8). Haupt and Azevedo also found that crisis communication planning improves the preparedness of nonprofit organizations by clarifying procedures, responsibilities, and communication resources before disruptive events occur (9).

The importance of scenario planning and preparedness is further supported by sector-specific studies. Salma showed that airlines operating in digital environments require preparation for worst-case scenarios, rapid response protocols, and clear communication authority (10). Pratiwi et al. demonstrated that aviation disasters demand coordinated messages, sensitivity to affected families, continuous media engagement, and accurate updates (33). Gkoumas found that organizational viability during the COVID-19 crisis depended partly on adaptive planning and the integration of operational and communication responses (12). Calilao et al. also identified preparation, responsiveness, media relations, and institutional credibility as important indicators of public relations effectiveness in university crisis management (13). Although these studies were conducted in different sectors, their conclusions reinforce the present finding that crisis communication protocols should be scenario-specific, operationally detailed, and supported by training and simulation.

The findings regarding the initial public response are also consistent with studies of government and customer communication. Amin et al. showed that delayed or inadequate communication regarding employee claims could intensify dissatisfaction and create a broader institutional crisis (22). Dini et al. found that organizations maintained

customer relationships during the COVID-19 crisis through responsive, continuous, and adaptive public relations strategies (23). Najib and Bahfiarti demonstrated that government public relations must respond rapidly to negative online news and establish itself as an authoritative information source (21). Febriani et al. similarly emphasized the importance of integrated digital communication, regular updates, and coordination in provincial government responses to a public-health crisis (20). These findings explain why the participants in the present study viewed communication silence, inconsistent updates, and delayed verification as major sources of reputational vulnerability.

The fifth dimension concerned monitoring, evaluation, organizational learning, and continuous improvement. The findings demonstrated that communication performance should not be evaluated only by counting media outputs, press releases, or social media posts. Instead, the strategic document should include process, output, and outcome indicators related to response time, message consistency, stakeholder reach, media accuracy, digital sentiment, rumor correction, satisfaction, trust, coordination, crisis readiness, and reputation recovery. Participants also emphasized the need for after-action reviews, documentation of lessons, protocol revision, training improvement, and resource reallocation.

This finding is consistent with Balogun et al., who emphasized that social media communication in a public-health crisis requires deliberate planning, implementation, and evaluation rather than improvised posting (34). Witkowski also showed that formal recognition, policy enactment, and planning influence the institutional capacity to respond to prolonged public crises (35). The OECD's analysis of post-pandemic public administration further emphasizes that resilient institutions learn from crisis experience, reassess procedures, and incorporate lessons into future planning (26). Accordingly, the feedback loop in the proposed model is a critical feature because it transforms the strategic document from a static plan into a learning system that evolves through experience, monitoring, and environmental reassessment.

Overall, the findings contribute to the literature by integrating dimensions that have often been examined separately. Previous studies have addressed strategic planning, public relations capacity, digital communication, stakeholder adaptation, media framing, misinformation, preparedness, and organizational resilience, but the present model brings these components together within a unified framework designed for a national energy organization. The model indicates that effective crisis communication depends on the interaction of strategy, governance, capacity, stakeholder orientation, operational protocols, and learning. The proposed framework is therefore both strategic and operational: it defines long-term direction while also specifying the organizational mechanisms needed before, during, and after crises. Its central implication is that communication resilience cannot be achieved solely through skilled media performance during emergencies; it must be built into the organization's structures, resources, routines, and decision-making processes.

This study had several limitations. First, the findings were derived from the experiences and interpretations of 21 experts and therefore reflected the institutional, professional, and contextual perspectives of the selected participants. Although purposive and snowball sampling facilitated access to information-rich individuals, some relevant perspectives may not have been represented, particularly those of customers, local residents, frontline operational employees, journalists, emergency responders, and vulnerable stakeholder groups. Second, the study focused on the National Iranian Gas Company, and the proposed model was shaped by the organizational structure, public-service responsibilities, regulatory context, and crisis profile of the gas industry. Therefore, direct transfer of the model to private companies, smaller organizations, or other industrial sectors should be undertaken cautiously. Third, the findings were based primarily on interviews and document analysis rather than observation of an actual

large-scale crisis or longitudinal assessment of model implementation. Consequently, the practical effectiveness of the components and the relationships among them were not tested under real-time crisis conditions. Finally, participants may have emphasized formally desirable practices rather than the full range of implementation barriers present in organizational routines.

Future studies should quantitatively validate the dimensions, categories, and relationships identified in the proposed model using larger samples of managers, public relations professionals, crisis-management experts, employees, media representatives, and external stakeholders. The model could be converted into a standardized measurement instrument and examined through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis or structural equation modeling. Comparative studies could investigate whether the model requires modification across provincial gas companies, other national energy organizations, electricity and water utilities, petrochemical companies, and transportation or infrastructure institutions. Longitudinal and action-research designs are also recommended to assess the model before, during, and after its organizational implementation. Scenario-based simulations could be used to evaluate response time, message consistency, coordination quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and rumor-control performance. Future research should additionally examine the role of organizational culture, leadership style, digital maturity, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and employee communication climate in facilitating or obstructing the implementation of strategic crisis communication plans.

The National Iranian Gas Company should formally adopt a unified strategic public relations and crisis communication document aligned with its corporate strategy and crisis-management system. A permanent communication governance structure should be established with clear authority for information verification, message approval, spokesperson activation, media coordination, and digital response. Headquarters and provincial companies should use common standards while maintaining sufficient local capacity for rapid stakeholder communication. The company should develop and periodically update crisis scenarios, stakeholder maps, contact databases, holding statements, question-and-answer documents, and channel-specific response protocols. Regular simulation exercises should involve public relations, technical operations, crisis management, legal affairs, security, information technology, human resources, customer services, and senior management. A centralized monitoring unit should integrate operational alerts, media monitoring, social listening, and stakeholder feedback. Finally, communication performance should be evaluated through measurable indicators, and every major crisis or simulation should result in an after-action review, revised procedures, targeted training, and documented organizational learning.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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