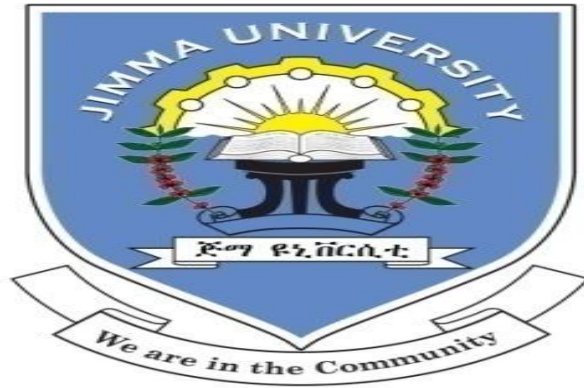


**An Investigation of PR Practitioners' Crisis Communication Strategies and  
Implementation: Wollega University Corporate Communication Director in  
Focus**



**College of Social Sciences and Humanities**

**Department of Media and Communication Studies**

**By**

**Anwar Nasir**

**A Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Master of  
Arts in Public Relations and Corporate Communication**

**December, 2020**

**Jimma, Ethiopia**

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## Declaration

I, under undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work, not presented for any degree in any universities, and that all the sources used in it are duly acknowledged.

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

## Confirmation and approval

This thesis has been submitted for examination with my approval as a thesis advisor.

### Principal advisor:

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Name	Signature	Date

### Co-advisor:

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

## Thesis evaluator

### External Examiner:

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Name	Signature	Date

### Internal Examiner:

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

## **Abstract**

Crisis events are appearing to be a frequent scenario on Wollega University that negatively affecting teaching-learning process. In recent times, most Ethiopian universities are also experiencing the hardship of crisis. Nonetheless, they seem not to endeavor scientific and strategic crisis communication efforts to manage crisis. The study aims to explore a crisis scenario occurred at Wollega university during 2018 -2019GC academic years. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to critically evaluate the crisis communication strategy and implementation of Wollega University during the crisis. Qualitative research approach was employed so as to collect and analyze data generated through in-depth interview with key informants selected through purposive sampling technique. The data generated through in-depth interview with seven key informants were thematically analyzed. The findings of the study revealed that the organization is not yet to follow a scientific way of strategic crisis communication to deal with crisis. For instance, regarding its pre-crisis activity the organization did not seem to have understanding and knowledge about key pre-crisis tasks such as preparing crisis management plan and using crisis communication plan, detecting signals, risk management and assigning a well-trained crisis time spokesperson. Nevertheless, the finding on the crisis response phase show that the crisis resolved with little damage. Traditional and social media employed for addressing different stakeholder; but particularly facebook played inevitable role in averting fake news spread, and the engagement of internal stakeholders also prominent in crisis communication. Concerning the post-crisis efforts, findings showed that the company neglected the key tasks such as evaluating the performance of crisis response. Lack of training, professional and experienced staffs and interference of the management was the challenges faced. On the other hand, working in team and engaging internal stakeholders in crisis communication are the best lesson acquired during the crisis. Finally, this thesis forwarded recommendations focusing on the three phases of crisis phases to have a strong crisis management and communication strategies to protect reputational damage and maintain a smooth relationship between the university and its stakeholders.

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## List of abbreviations

EC	Ethiopian calendar
FM	Frequency modulation
GC	Gregorian calendar
PR	public relations
RQ	research questions
SCCT	situational crisis communication theory
OBN	Oromia Broadcasting Network

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Back ground

Ethiopia is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the world. Ethnic-related issues have been a constant, prevalent issue of Ethiopian society. Cognizant of this, the current regime introduced an ethnic-based federal system to accommodate diversity and to improve equality among the different ethnic groups. Consequently, ethnicity became the basis for political and administrative organization. In the last three decades, the ethnic-based federal system and its embedded political strategy reinforced ethno-national sentiments and deepened divisions along ethnic lines. It is becoming more and more evident that many people's first allegiance is to their ethnic group, rather than their country. (Abraham Yirga, 2019)

Universities are a microcosm of the country where students from diverse ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds come together to live and study. Historically Ethiopian university students have participated in and contributed to political and social change of the country. They are often known to have voiced questions and concerns of the broader society, even in the face of repressive government measures. However, these days, instead of becoming a strong force to address major societal problems and contributing to peace and national unity, university students are aggravating the politicization of ethnicity. They have been vulnerable to ethnic extremism and becoming instruments for various political agendas, even at the expense of the lives of their classmates.

In recent years, public universities have seen escalating ethnic tensions resulting in damage to property, interruption of the teaching-learning process and, sadly, risk to a student's life. During 2018-19 academic years, campuses were temporarily closed, many students left universities and some students were killed.

On May 26, 2019, Seare Abraham, a graduating student of economics was killed in Debremarkos University. On June 5, 2019, Yohannes Masresha a second-year mechanical engineering student was violently killed in the campus grounds of Aksum University. On June 7, 2019, Debre Berhan University experienced ethnic-based violence. It was a fight between a few students during

graduating class final soccer game that escalated to a full-scale ethnic-violence, resulted for the killing of one student. On November 13, 2019 two students at Woldia University and one student at Dembi Dollo University died in days of unrest largely along ethnic lines. On December 6, 2019, a student is reportedly killed at Gondar University, near students' toilet on the fourth floor. In December 27, 2019 armed men abducted 27 students from Dembi Dollo University in the Oromiya region. Generally, from May, 2019- December, 2019, clashes on campus have killed 12 students resulted for abduction of 27 students and played a role in the decision of 35,000 students to drop out of university. (Reuters, Feb.1, 2020)

As (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998) defined crisis as a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals". The situation in Ethiopian higher institutions is considered as acute crisis, as it demonstrate increasing conflicts over the extent of political as well as ethnic conflicting issues which threaten the teaching and learning process and interrupted the working environment of universities. Thus, higher institutions are in a very serious trouble and these problems are not something that can be solved quickly, without serious implementation of the way that the crisis management system works.

Communication is the essence of crisis management. A crisis or the threat of crisis creates a need for information. Through communication, the information is collected, processed into knowledge, and shared with others. Communication is critical throughout the entire crisis management process. Each phase of the crisis management process has its own demand for creating and sharing knowledge – the need to collect and interpret information (W.T. Coombs, & SJ Holladay, 2001)

An example of a crisis considered in this study is university student's chaos related to political and ethnic conflicts. The crisis in higher institution serves as the focus for the present study, as it offers an important case for viewing public relations crisis communication strategy in action. Therefore, this study assesses the crisis communication strategies employed by Wollega University to manage its crisis.

## 1.2. Statement of the problem

Currently Ethiopian universities becoming a place where political and ethnic-based violence are being rooted. Politically charged ethnic tension has extensively created educational, humanitarian crisis and security problems in many universities. Farther, universities have seen escalating ethnic tensions resulting in damage to property, interruption of teaching-learning process, campuses were temporarily closed, many students left and some were killed. However, many universities have not capable of resolving this crisis on their own campuses. Even though, universities are communicating their crisis using different media, no better change have been seen so far.

S. B. Hussain (2014) Management at higher education institutions can avoid or be better prepared to handle crises, if they have a crisis communication plan in place and if they communicate effectively during these uncertain periods of time. Apart from having a crisis communications plan, public relations practitioners need to develop communication strategies and processes to influence the cause of conflicts to the benefit of the organizations many stakeholders. Too often, companies and organizations make the mistake of waiting for crisis to happen and then responding to it. No matter how much damage control a company does, it's hard to overcome an embarrassing clip from a movie or TV show that will be permanently stamped in the minds of millions of viewers. A better approach is "crisis prevention" (Gabrowski Mark, 2010). In effective handling of a crisis, preparation and anticipation are key considerations. Of course, sometimes crises will occur even when all possible preparations have been made. So, every organization needs a plan to enable it to handle a crisis quickly and effectively if the need arises (Ellie, 2010).

The University of Cape Town (2008) reported that during crisis situations communication needs to be expanded as it plays a vital role in reducing anxiety, managing expectations, demonstrating concern, and building trust during crisis situations. The above implies that universities are recognizing that communication is pivotal during crisis situations. Therefore, the issue of communication at higher education institutions during crisis needs to be further probed.

Although research in crisis communication has largely increased, scholars still see a need for research in terms of cultural influence, applicability of communication strategies, and stakeholder consideration. The global trend in crisis communication research reveals that the

number of researches in crisis communication has shown progress, but the number of researches in communication strategies and stakeholder consideration is minimal (Coombs & Heath, 2010)

Many studies have been conducted in the past years on crisis communication. This study is to therefore to critically evaluate the existing practices of crisis communication strategy at higher education institutions, particularly at Wollega University and make suggestions for improving the planning and management of crises communication.

Even though, there is a chaos in almost all universities in Ethiopia and there is respective corporate communication office to mitigate the crisis. But, still the crisis is spreading and continued to take innocent students lives. Wollega University is also experiencing such crisis at its three campuses. Since, 2017GC starting from the killing of two Tigrian students on ethnic based conflicts; Wollega University could not able to keep sustainable peace at the three campuses. During 2018-2019GC academic year, like, Woldia, Debremarkos, Debre Berhan, Gonder, axum, Dembi Dollo and Dire Dewa university, Wollega university was also in acute crisis of students conflict which resulted to critical injury for 11 students and damage for teaching classes and students' cafes. This conflict also opens chance for spread of fake news on social media about the killing of two students at Nekemt and Gimbi campus which threatened the reputation of the university. Therefore, this study is focused to investigate crisis communication preparation, and implementation of the university; the existence of crisis planning and what strategies in place to combat in different phases of the crisis, what types of media were used to address publics, stakeholder engagement in crisis communication and also tried to explore effectiveness of the crisis communication, and the challenges faced.

### **1.3. Research Objectives.**

#### **1.3.1. General Objective**

The main objective of this research is to critically evaluate the crisis communication strategy and implementation of Wollega University.

#### **1.3.2. Specific Objectives**

- ❖ To evaluate crisis preparedness efforts of Wollega university.
- ❖ To examine the crisis response strategies of Wollega university.

- ❖ To assess the post-crisis communication strategy and its implementation efforts of Wollega University.

## 1.4 Research Questions

- ❖ What kind of crisis prevention and preparedness efforts are made during a crisis?
- ❖ What crisis response strategies were employed during a crisis?
- ❖ What efforts do the university makes during post crisis phase?

## 1.5 Significance of the study

It is undeniable that globalization has brought several advantages, and corporate companies are the one to have immense benefits from the legacy of technological advancement. In spite of the advantages and opportunities results from the information technology, it poses several risks and challenges. As stated in the statement of the problem, Ethiopian universities also seem to face similar challenges. The absence of sufficient research-based knowledge about crisis communication can exaggerate the problem. Farther, Universities public relations activities are rarely succcessfull in putting the most of effort on crisis communication. The massive organizational crisis communication inefficiency is also there in Wollega universities.

As there is no study conducted in crisis communication and management in Wollega unversaity, this study may serve as a foundation for further studies in crisis communication and management. The study will also serve as a guiding material for researchers to conduct further study. It will also provides a basis on making or improving crisis communication and management, thereby develop preparedness and resilience to mitigate damages that a crisis can potentially inflict on teaching and learning process of the university.

Finally, this study will be used as a reference for PR and Communication experts and organizations in strategic communication.

## 1.6 Delimitation of the Study

**1.6.1 Geographically:** Even though, there are about 45 Universities in Ethiopia, which are many of them currently experiencing crisis, this research will going to be limited geographically only to Wollega universities.

**1.6.2 Thematically:** Crisis management in general believed to have several set of functions. Among these functions, the communication part received much attention by many scholars.

Thus, the scope or the theme of this study is focused on investigating the crisis communication strategies and implementation during the crisis event. Therefore, the study depend to particular section of crisis management called ‘crisis communication’.

### **1.7. Limitations of the study**

Among main troubles to be mentioned as a limitation of this study is availability of archive documents; like crisis management and crisis communication strategy and other relevant information released during the crisis response period. Particularly, the poor documentation made the effort of finding relevant documents for analysis so difficult. Therefore, this problem obliged the researcher to depend on only interview sources.

### **1.8 Organization of the thesis**

This thesis is organized in five chapters. The first chapter presents the background of the study including, statement of the problem, objective, limitation and delimitation of the research and thesis organization. The second chapter dedicated to review literatures to highlight conceptual, theoretical and empirical studies that are directly related with the study. Chapter three presents the research methodology to show the research approach and method of the study. Chapter four presents the findings of the study and discusses them by connecting with the scholarly concepts which are explained in the literature review chapter. The final chapter summarizes the main finding of the study, concluding the research. Finally, based on the results of the research, the recommendations forwarded.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **2. Review of Related Literature**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews essential literatures to the organizational crisis communication studies and tries to show how the field of crisis communication has evolved over time due to multiple factors. The chapter thematically reviews crisis management and related concepts which are inseparably linked with crisis communication, thereby provides a good foundation for the exploration of this particular study. The review then progresses to the organizational crisis communication concept which is what this research spins on and how it is evolved from just through the traditional media to the inclusion of social media as part of the crisis communication strategy. The review then finishes off by looking at theoretical framework of the study.

#### **2.2. CRISIS**

A crisis, by definition, is an event, revelation, allegation, or set of circumstances which threatens the integrity, reputation, or survival of an individual or organization. It challenges the public's sense of safety, values, or appropriateness. The actual potential damage to the organization is considerable and the organization cannot, on its own, put an immediate end to it (Sapriel, 2003)

A crisis may be defined as any situation that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt business, damage reputation or negatively impact share value.

(Bernstein, 2010)

A specific, unexpected and non-routine event or series of events that creates high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high priority goals (Ulmer et al., 2007)

S. B. Hussain (2014) Crises can happen anywhere, at any time and often occur when they are least expected. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for planning, therefore advance preparation is essential.

Communication is the essence of crisis management. A crisis or the threat of crisis creates a need for information. Through communication, the information is collected, processed into knowledge, and shared with others. Communication is critical throughout the entire crisis management process. Each phase of the crisis management process has its own demand for creating and sharing knowledge – the need to collect and interpret information. W.T. Coombs (2010)

**2.1.2. Strategic Conflict Management:** Zhuldz, Onaichan, Surugiu and Mina (2013) claim that an organizations capability to solve conflicting situations is considered to be at the same level and sometimes even more important than planning, communicating, motivating and decision making. Plowman (2005) purports that the public relations practitioner has the ability to fulfill a creative and technical staff role, yet there is a growing demand that it should assume a more strategic management role in an organization. The influence of public relations on the cause of conflict involves reducing the conflict as soon as possible (Wilcox and Cameron 2009). Therefore it can be said that, the public relations practitioner is responsible for determining the stance an organization will take in dealing with the conflict situation and this includes monitoring for threats, assessing them, determining a strategy for the organization and thereafter begin its communication efforts. Wilcox and Cameron (2009) have devised a conflict management lifecycle which is divided into four phases which are the proactive phase, strategic phase, reactive phase and recovery phase.

**2.1.3 Issues Management:** Skinner and Mersham (2002) explain that the central challenge is for organizations to identify future issues and respond with timely strategies and programs. Therefore issues management can be defined as a proactive early warning process that enables management to be better informed of changes that may take place in an environment that may affect them and it can assists in avoiding “surprises” which cost money and time and puts the organizations reputation at risk. They further state that effective issues management requires two-way communication, formal environmental scanning and active sense-making strategies.

Noteworthy therefore, is the fact that a crisis management plan for any institution is a “must have” and should as a result be comprehensive, have clarity in leadership assignments; this

should include an assessment component supported by training and coordination among all departments within the institution. It is through these learned experiences elicited from previous responses to crises that leadership learns how to anticipate as well plan for the next crisis event.

**2.1.4. Crisis Planning:** The Institute for Crisis Management (ICM) (in Center, Jackson, Smith and Stansberry 2008) defines a crisis as a signified business disruption that stimulates extensive news media coverage. The resulting public scrutiny will affect the organizations normal operations and could also have a political, legal, financial and governmental impact on the organization.

Schultz, Utz and Goritz (2011) posit that a crisis not only disrupts the social order of an organization but may cause damage to an organizations reputation and legitimacy. These authors further indicate that reputation is regarded as a valuable intangible asset to the organization and therefore a lack of a crisis response strategy may affect the organizations internal and external stakeholders as well as damage its long-term response strategies.

Tench and Yeoman (2006) state that, the key to crisis management is “preparedness”, therefore it is imperative that organizations devise a crisis plan which will assist them in successfully managing crisis situations. The development of communication strategies and processes to influence the course of conflicts could benefit the higher education institutions and their many constituents. For example recurring strikes continually disrupt the academic program during each semester.

MacGregor, (2009) reports that Universities open for the academic year in January or February, often to the prospect of students protesting about academic exclusions, registration fees, financial difficulties or other problems such as lack of accommodation. Universities should rather be proactive and conduct activities and thought processes that can prevent a conflict from arising or from getting out of hand.

**2.1.5 Crisis Communication Plan:** The successful existence of organizations depends on how well it has prepared for a crisis therefore it is vital that management set up a crisis communication plan.

Borodzicz (2005) statements which reveal that, by having a crisis plan as an organization will have taken the first step in anticipating, containing and responding to the most likely threats facing it. Borodzicz (2005) elaborates that the crisis plan should outline roles, responsibilities

and protocols which will be used to guide the organization in sharing information with the internal and external stakeholders by outlining.

Borodzicz (2005) explains that by successfully executing such a plan it can be regarded as an acid test of an organizations commitment to building, sustaining and reinforcing the community of trust. The University of Toronto (2009) has maintained that when developing the crisis plan, key objectives should include To remove harmful/dangerous threats, to minimize the disruption to teaching and research as well as the physical and financial damage, to ensure prompt, open and honest communication with the internal and external stakeholders, to restore normal operations rapidly and effectively and prevent a recurrence of the incident and improve future responses. By developing such objectives, a base can be formulated for the development of a completed crisis management plan. In conjunction with these objectives the following are key considerations which should be reflected upon:

- Does our organization have a policy on crisis preparedness or response strategies?
- What is a crisis and what are the different types of crisis that could affect our organization?
- Who are the possible members to form part of the crisis team what roles and responsibilities should be delegated to them?
- What key resources do we possess, and how will we disseminate information about the crisis to key stakeholders?
- What methods are used for post-evaluation of a crisis?

It is obvious therefore, in order for management in institutions of higher learning to be in a better position to counter and or avoid these types of crisis they must have in existence a crisis management plan to effectively communicate during crisis episodes. It is also noteworthy that the many forms of communication, traditional and new, ought to be employed due to the rising number of people who rely on modern technology to access news. Hence for effective implementation of this, there is need to have a communication policy in place.

S. B. Hussain (2014) Crises can happen anywhere, at any time and often occur when they are least expected. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for planning, therefore advance preparation is essential.

All Africa (2013) reports that Walter Sisulu University has been plagued with various challenges since its formation in 2005. In November 2011, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande placed Walter Sisulu University under administration in an effort to fix the financial woes and governance issues the institution was facing. Over the years there have been protests from staff and students alike for issues pertaining to salary increases and exam results.

The above implies that this is an emerging issue which requires concentrated action. Higher education institutions could use the public relations team to:

- Monitor for potential threats/conflicts
- Assess threats/conflicts
- Develop a position the institution on the identified threats
- Develop a communications plan to address potential threats
- Begin communication efforts based on the identified position by management and its public relations department.

Lubbe and Puth (2000) posit that once the issue of imminent conflict reaches a critical level of impact on the organization, the public relations practitioner must react to events in the external communication environment as they unfold. Only through participation and co-operation can top management successfully implement the crisis plan. It is also important for the organization to stay focused and motivated so that they may survive the crisis. Kanel (2008) explains that this is the phase in which tough decisions have to be made and made fast and therefore it is essential that an organization have a dedicated group of individuals to manage the crisis. These individuals make up the crisis management team of an organization. S. B. Hussain (2014)

The management of crisis communication in both private and public institutions has thus not been without challenge. This has led to negative publicity in some instances leading to the bad image institutions have had to suffer. It is therefore, evident that, ineffective crisis communication is a critical management challenge that faces many institutions of higher learning. Therefore it is of essence, that the crisis communication team in any institution be aware of the communication flow in the event of crisis.

**2.1.6 Crisis Communication:** Crisis situations are often regarded as newsworthy events and have the ability to generate media interest. The media will expect press statements and

explanations regarding the cause and effects of the crisis. Organizations that do not provide information to its stakeholders during a crisis force its employees, the community and the media to turn to other, less credible sources for information. The Berkley University of California (2012) highlights that it is imperative to communicate to key stakeholders and communication methods need to also be identified. Other communication instruments that may be used are, “WarnMe” text messages, voicemail messages, a crisis webpage and bulk e-mails. Schultz et al. (2011),

Donyale et al. (2013) assert that, during a crisis, communication to key stakeholders is vital. The media is used as a tool to communicate to these key stakeholders. With the rise of social media, the public considers the internet to be the most reliable source for news. This is seen as an ideal method for generating timely communication, unique information and interactive conversations. By organizations not communicating frequently, key stakeholders may believe rumors which will circulate during the crisis, therefore constant communication will be perceived as a form of reassurance by stakeholders. The University of Cape Town (2008) reported that during crisis situations communication needs to be expanded as it plays a vital role in reducing anxiety, managing expectations, demonstrating concern, and building trust during crisis situations. The above implies that universities are recognizing that communication is pivotal during crisis situations. Therefore, the issue of communication at higher education institutions during crisis needs to be further probed.

Holladay (2009) used content analysis to examine how effective crisis managers were at getting their side of the story out via the news media. She examined crises that involved chemical accidents and the immediate news coverage of those accidents. Her results found that organizational messages were not appearing in the news coverage. In fact, the news stories rarely used an organizational member as a source for this story. The problem could be a failure to provide information to the news media in a timely fashion and/or the news media ignoring crisis response efforts from organizations. Whatever the case, organizations are failing to have their side of the story represented in the news media. The results are problematic for crisis managers because getting out “your side” of the story has long been a central recommendation for crisis communication (Lerbinger 1997; Ogrizek & Guillery 1999). The study yielded insights into how poor crisis managers were at becoming part of the crisis news coverage. Stephens and Malone (Stephens & Malone 2009; Stephens, Malone, & Bailey 2005) extended crisis response strategies to include technical translation. They not only examined the crisis response strategies identified

in earlier research, but also examined how technical information was explained in crisis responses – what they term technical translation. The technical translations could be direct (no explanation), elucidating, quasi-scientific, and transformational. Press releases, media coverage, websites, and blogs were used as data for their analyses. Their research has extended crisis response strategies beyond their traditional focus with the inclusion of technical translation. Technical information is often a vital concern given the technical nature of many crises. W.T. Coombs (2010)

Taylor and her colleagues (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu 2009; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel 2003; Taylor & Perry 2005) have been the strongest force pushing for the inclusion of the Internet in crisis communication. This line of research examines whether or not and how organizations use their websites for crisis communication. Perry et al. (2003) established the method of reviewing corporate websites for crisis information within the first 24 hours after a news story appeared about the crisis. W.T. Coombs (2010)

Taylor and Perry (2005) refined the new media tactics and used a new label, innovative media tactics. The innovative media tactics include dialogic communication, connecting links, real-time monitoring, multimedia effects, and online chat. The same method was used for examining websites within 24 hours of a crisis news story appearing. The websites were coded for the use of traditional and innovative media tactics. The research revealed a heavy reliance on traditional media tactics. Caldiero et al. (2009) applied the analysis of crisis messages on the Internet to fraud cases. The focus was on the news releases presented during a fraud crisis and their effect on media coverage. They found that quotations and background information from the news releases were appearing in news stories. The Internet-based news releases were acting as an information subsidy and allowing the organization to tell its side of the story. W.T. Coombs (2010)

Formal research shares the desire to describe and to understand a topic with informal and transition research. But formal research goes further in a quest for prediction and control (Stacks 2002). Formal crisis communication research is designed to establish relationships between variables and to develop the predictive ability of crisis communication theory. Another significant difference with formal research in crisis communication is the shift in focus from sender to audience. As Lee (2004) noted, there was a need for crisis communication research to take this turn toward the audience. The informal and transition research examine the messages the crisis managers (senders) create and seek to infer effects on the audience. The formal crisis

communication research is more audience-oriented. The emphasis is on how the receivers/audience react to crisis events and crisis response strategies. W.T. Coombs (2010)

It is also noteworthy, that a communication policy provides a basis on how best to execute a communication plan during crises. This study will therefore examine the critical role communication plays during crisis management; as well as the pivotal role played by different spokespersons in institutions of higher learning and how effective communication acts as a guide to the rolling out of a crisis strategy and success of the same in the shortest time possible.

As in any relationship, communication is crucial this is according to Wamae (2011). Therefore the need to keep the channels of communication open and accessible with the institutions publics as well as business partners cannot be overemphasized. A relationship can only stay alive if the parties involved maintain an open line of communication. There is need therefore, for higher educational institutions to embrace crisis management communication plans. Many scholars agree on the importance of a crisis communication plan and strategy, however, they do not look at the critical role effective communication plays in crisis management and execution of the same as it involves the message type, timing of the message, clarity, precision and understanding each other. The message communicated during a crisis episode should and must be clearly understood in order for the right cause of action to be taken. It is vital therefore, to underscore the need for a communication policy as a reference tool for effective implementation of a crisis communication plan.

## **2.2 Crisis management stages**

Many theories have been developed to explain crises. Staged approaches that divide crises into stages are some of the most acknowledged and used theories about crisis management. The benefit of these models is that they allow crisis managers to evaluate and plan their crisis communication needs in advance. (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013) Two of these models are the three stage model by Coombs and Steven Fink's four-stage model. (Coombs, 2007a) identifies three stages of crisis management. The first stage is called pre-crisis, the second stage is crisis response and the third stage is post-crisis. This three-stage crisis model is widely used to analyze crises as well as in theories of crisis communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013).

The researcher examines the crisis based on Coomb's three-stage model in view of the fact that the three- stage model offers a simplistic analysis of crisis. However, Fink's four-stage model has expendable and lengthy phases which can be incorporated together. During the prodromal



stage, Fink (1986) argues that, crisis managers are acquainted with the probability of a crisis. However, Seeger and Sellnow (2013) assert the opposite that pre-crisis stage can only be recognized after the occurrence of a crisis. The three-stage model by Coombs offers a simplified approach to the analysis of crisis integrates acute and chronic stages of a crisis.

The other rationale behind the selection of the three-stage model over the four-stage model is that Fink's model entails crisis elements that emerge into indefinitely elongated stage with pending issues even after the recovery phases of chronic and resolution stages. Coomb's model, conversely, reaches organizational learning relatively quickly with a comprehensive evaluation of the crisis management.

**2.2.1 The pre-crisis** stage focuses on preventing crises. In order to be able to prevent a crisis from happening, known risks are identified and efforts are taken to diminish those risks. During this phase, a crisis management plan is formed and a crisis management team is established. In addition to this, spokesperson training is given and pre-draft messages are planned. Also, communication channels are identified or established. The purpose of making a crisis management plan is to have some guidelines and references to what should be done in a crisis situation. It can include necessary forms or contact information for example. The crisis management team comprises of representatives from different departments and fields. For example, the team may include a legal counselor, an HR representative and a person responsible for public relations. The team members are assigned to different tasks depending on the crisis management plan. (Coombs, 2007a) highlights that both the crisis management plan and the crisis management team should be regularly tested and evaluated, in order for them to work accordingly in time of crisis. The pre-crisis stage also includes the training of members of an organization on how to deal with media. Spokesperson training is required for the representatives of the organization to be able to answer question related to the crisis, without worsening the situation.

Creating pre-draft messages that can be used in the case of a crisis is another step that can be taken during the pre-crisis phase. Creating pre-draft messages, or templates, that can be filled according to the nature of a crisis save time in amidst a crisis. The pre-drafts can be formed by the cooperation of public relations and a legal counselor, of which the latter approves of them.

Appropriate communication channels are chosen during the pre-crisis phase. A communication channel can be, for example, an Intranet or the organization's public website. Choosing which

kind of communication channels to use depends on the nature of the crisis and the decision of who should know and what should they know?

This is a stage where an organization normally carries out its activities while dealing with recognizable and unrecognizable threats. An organization assumes the possibility of a crisis and the level of threats. Organizations, should be kin in the development of a crisis management plan, the formation of a crisis management team and the provision of spokesperson trainings are included in this stage.

**2.2.2 Crisis response:** stage of crisis management is which comprises of the initial response and of the reputation repair and behavioral intentions. This stage focuses on action taken when an organization faces a crisis and includes the strong involvement of public relations. The initial response to a crisis is advised to be quick, accurate and consistent. (Coombs, 2007a) The pre-crisis stage and the plans made during that stage can help the organization to respond quickly. It is important for the organization to respond to the crisis immediately, especially when considering the media. If the organization does not come forward and provide information, the news media or other people outside the organization will usually fill the void. The other benefit of reacting quickly to a crisis is that it creates an image of control and trustworthiness. Accuracy and consistency during the initial response go hand in hand. Giving incorrect information requires correcting it, which then can lead to an image of inconsistency and incompetence. If false information is given, it must be corrected. When a crisis happens, it is unlikely that only one person has to answer questions regarding the crisis, and that is why training a spokesperson beforehand is highly important for the organization. In case the crisis threatens the public and public safety, accuracy and a fast respond are even more important, as well as communicating with the public.

There is also one additional step which is suggested to be included in the guidelines of initial response to a crisis. (Coombs, 2007a) It concerns addressing the victims of the crisis. Victims may include employees, their families or the public, and may have suffered financial losses or physical trauma. Addressing the victims and their families may help in trying to save the organization's reputation. In incidents, where the injuries are serious or even deadly, offering counseling and support for the victims and their families is also part of crisis management. A crisis usually always has an impact on the reputation of an organization, and thus, reputation repair and the strategies to do that are important for crisis management. Reputation repair can be

part of both crisis response and the post-crisis stage, however, in some cases it might not be needed if crisis response has been conducted successfully.

**2.2.3 The post-crisis:** stage, the crisis has passed or at least it is mostly over. The post-crisis stage may include reputation repair or it may not. The post-crisis stage usually still involves communication with the media, employees or customers. How to keep those involved up-to-date about what is being done to recover from the crisis will depend on the type of the crisis and the type of the organization, as well as the crisis management plan and strategy. (Coombs, 2007a) According to (Coombs, 2007a) the post-crisis stage is also important for the organization itself as well as for the theory of crisis management. It is important for the crisis manager and the crisis management team to review how the crisis was handled, what was done right and what could be improved.

Fernandez and Merzer (2005) who maintain that post crisis evaluation assists an organization in evaluative its effectiveness and abilities to manage a crisis. Additionally, if a crisis is effectively managed, it can be seen as an opportunity. Therefore, messages that management sends out to the media should be positive and media reports should be used as tool in conducting post crisis evaluation. Wilcox and Cameron (2009), who assert that proactive and systematic planning can be effectively used to predict problems, anticipate threats, minimizes surprises, resolve issues and prevent crises.

Organizational learning: A common statement in crisis management writings is that crises are a perfect learning experience. After the initial focus on managing the crisis, people realize there is a problem and a need for change (KovoorMisra & Nathan 2000). A crisis provides an opportunity to evaluate what an organization has been doing, including what led to the crisis and the crisis management effort. Crisis expert Ian Mitroff has emphasized the need to learn from crises (e.g., Mitroff, Pearson, & Harrington 1996). However, the problem is that organizations are reluctant to learn from crises (Roux-Dufort 2000).

Crisis managers pursue staged approach to crisis to integrate plans with crisis communication needs (Seeger&Sellnow,2013). Thus, the most prominent models namely the three-stage model by Coombs and Fink's four-stage model are discussed below.

Coombs (as cited in Bloch, 2013) divides crisis into three macro stages. These stages are the pre crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages. Therefore, in this paper the crisis communication strategies of both universities will be analyzed using the three crisis stage of coomb's theory.

### **2.3. The four Fink's crisis management stage**

The second approach to crisis management is developed by Fink (1986) and divides crisis stages into four. These stages are:

**2.3.1 The Prodromal Stage**-according to Fink (1986), the prodromal stage is considered as a pre-crisis stage where an organization experiences warnings. The anticipation and understanding of crisis alerts crisis managers for the acute crisis.

**2.3.2 Acute Crisis Stage**- this is the shortest phase with high level of uncertainty and intensity in the wake of an actual crisis. At this stage, an organization communicates with the public to gain control over the crisis.

**2.3.3 Chronic Crisis Stage**-During this stage, an organization recovers from a crisis and analyses the overall management of a crisis. An organization is assumed to resolve a crisis after the acute stage (Seeger& Sellnow,2013). The chronic stage may last for years or decades (Fink, 1986), and an organization can protect a crisis from lingering indefinitely with a strong crisis management plan.

**2.3.4 The Crisis Resolution Stage**- an organization translates the turning point emerged in the prodromal stage into an opportunity. As soon as the prodrome is identified, crisis managers need to envision the resolution stage shortly. Fernandez and Merzer (2005) who maintain that post crisis evaluation assists an organization in evaluative its effectiveness and abilities to manage a crisis. Additionally, if a crisis is effectively managed, it can be seen as an opportunity. Therefore, messages that management sends out to the media should be positive and media reports should be used as tool in conducting post crisis evaluation. Wilcox and Cameron (2009), who assert that proactive and systematic planning can be effectively used to predict problems, anticipate threats, minimizes surprises, resolve issues and prevent crises.

It is important, that a communication policy provides a basis on how best to execute a communication plan during crises. This study will therefore examine the critical role communication plays during crisis management; as well as the crucial role played by different spokespersons in institutions public relations and how effective communication acts as a guide to the rolling out of a crisis strategy and success of the same in the shortest time possible.

## 2.4. Theoretical Frame Work

W.T. Coombs (2010) states, the audience effects crisis communication research seeks to understand (1) how stakeholders perceive and react to crises and (2) how crisis response strategies affect those perceptions and reactions. The audience effects crisis communication research is dominated by two perspectives: (1) attribution theory and (2) contingency theory.

**2.4.1. Attribution theory overview:** As W.T. Coombs (2010), attribution theory is a social-psychological theory that attempts to explain how people make sense of events. The idea is that when an event happens, especially a negative event, people try to determine why the event occurred. People will make attributions of responsibility for events based on limited evidence. The general attribution is that responsibility lies with the person involved in the event (internal) or environmental factors (external). For instance, a car skids off the road and hits a tree. The cause might be driver error (internal) or ice on the road (external). According to Bernard Weiner (1986), one of the main proponents of attribution theory (AT), attributions of internal or external responsibility shape affective and behavioral responses to the person involved in the event. It is logical to extend AT to crisis communication. Stakeholders will make attributions of crisis responsibility – was it the organization or environmental factors? The need to understand the factors that shape people’s attributions and reactions to crises is what makes AT approaches audience-oriented. Those attributions will shape affect and behaviors directed toward the organization in crisis (Coombs 1995, 2007a). The AT-based crisis research is audience-centered because it attempts to understand how various factors in the crisis situation shape the crisis attributions stakeholders might make about the crisis.

This study draws from Heider the founder of the attribution theory, who posits that generally people tend to infer causes in terms of how they perceive a situation and how the factors related to the event they are faced with impact on the individuals being. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

Thus, the attribution theory is relevant to this study in that the experiences that the institution encounters during a crisis determine what cause of action is necessary to take. The plan of action and steps of implementation during crises resolution will be based on individual dispositions experienced during particular situations. Hence the reason the attribution theory is ideal for this study.

**2.4.2. Situational crisis communication theory:** Coombs and his colleagues began the development of SCCT in 1995. The premise was very simple: crises are negative events, stakeholders will make attributions about crisis responsibility, and those attributions will affect how stakeholders interact with the organization in crisis (Coombs 1995; Coombs & Holladay 1996; Schwarz 2008). SCCT is audience oriented because it seeks to illuminate how people perceive crises, their reactions to crisis response strategies, and audience reactions to the organization in crisis. The nature of the crisis situation shapes audience perceptions and attributions. Hence, efforts to understand how people perceive crisis situations are audience centered. The idea is to understand how people make attributions about crises and the effects of those attributions on their attitudes and behavioral intentions. The core of SCCT is crisis responsibility. Attributions of crisis responsibility have a significant effect on how people perceive the reputation of an organization in crisis and their affective and behavioral responses to that organization following a crisis. A crisis is a threat to an organization’s reputation (Barton 2001; Dowling 2002). Reputation matters because it is an important intangible resource for an organization (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper 2003; Fombrun & van Riel 2004). Moreover, crises can generate negative affect and behavioral intentions toward an organization. Crisis responsibility is a major factor in determining the threat posed by a crisis.

Whenever, communicating with the public, it is important to read their body and emotional response. Whatever the reaction, it will inform the researcher as to how effective they are in communication; as well as form the basis through which the public will react during a crisis to counter the effects. Since this study will explore the effective role crisis communication plays during crisis it will seek to establish how and why it is important during a crisis. Even if there exists a good crisis communication plan in the institution; it must be rolled out, and the public must be aware about its existence and informed and as a result they need to know what strategies, channels or platforms are in place and how they can be used in the event of a crisis.

### **2.4.3 Response Strategies of the SCCT**

According to the SCCT, once the crisis type and the reputational threats have been identified, an organization will proceed with the below response strategies.

<b>Response strategy type</b>	<b>Response strategy sub type</b>
Denial strategy	Attack the accuser, deny crisis exists or scapegoat
Diminishment strategy	Provide excuse for the situation and provide justification

Rebuilding Strategy	Compensate and apology the victim and accept responsibility
Bolstering strategy	Remind stake holders of past good deeds, ingratiation, claim victim status

Table 1. SCCT Response Strategy Types; Adopted from Coombs & Holladay (2010)

When using denial strategy, an organization tries to disassociate itself from a crisis. Whereas, with a diminishing strategy, an organization tries to control damages that a crisis poses on it by providing excuses. The rebuilding strategy helps an organization to recover its image and protect its reputation by taking on responsibilities. Implementing a bolstering Strategy can help an organization to take advantage of its past performance and reputation to keep its image intact.

**2.4.4. Image Restoration Theory (Repair Theory)**

Benoit’s image restoration theory (as cited in Swart,2010) focuses on messages that an organization develops to restore its image. The theory places great emphasis on the post-crisis strategies designed to restore organizational image.

The main shortcomings of the theory include the lack of relationship building with stakeholders and its unsymmetrical features (Dozier, Grunig& Grunig, 2002). Central to the argument is that through two-way symmetrical approach, an organization optimizes the power of PR to facilitate dialogue as well as build, maintain and enhance its relationship and manage conflict. However, Benoit (1997) conversely recommends preventive and restorative approach to crisis responses to maintain the safety of an organization. Emphasizing on the stakeholders’ perception and level of responsibility, Benoit (1997) claims that the image of an organization would be preserved provided that its salient stakeholders do not consider it to be responsible.

**2.4.5 Typology of Image Restoration Theory**

The Image Restoration Theory focuses on message options that an organization uses when faced with a crisis (Benoit, 1997). Accordingly, Benoit (1997) categories image restoration strategies into five.

**2.2.5.1 Denial**

According to Benoit, the denial approach brings with it two variants. The first approach used to repair image by denying the occurrence of an act or the harm the act inflicts. Another approach

that can be used to repair image is blame shifting, an approach in which an organization shifts the responsibility to another organization.

#### **2.4.5.2 Evasion of Responsibility**

This general image repair strategy comes in different ways (Benoit,1997). An organization justifies its action to prevent other's offensive act from damaging its image or repairs its image justifying that the lack of information control led to the situation. The third approach tries to repair the image of an organization by claiming that the offensive action happened accidentally. Fourth, an organization claims that the offensive act was performed with the noble intention of bringing positive outcome.

#### **2.4.5.3 Reduce Offensiveness**

The image repair strategy tries to reduce the offensiveness of the act that an organization is accused of doing. This image repair strategy has six variations (Benoit, 1997).

First, in order to offset the negativity linked with the act, an organization may use bolstering to maintain the positive feelings of the audience with the emphasis of positive things they have carried out in the past.

Second, an organization minimizes the volume and extent of the harm by diluting negative feelings of the audience associated with the act.

Third, an organization can employ differentiation by outlining the elements that distinguish the act from offenses of different sorts.

Fourth, an organization puts the act on a positive light with glorification of its positive elements.

Fifth, an organization counter-attacks its accusers to restore its image during crisis.

Sixth, an organization considers compensation to victims to reduce offensiveness.

#### **2.4.5.4. Corrective Action**

Benoit's image restoration strategy suggests corrective action to avoid the reoccurrence of an act.

#### **2.2.5.5. Mortification**

An organization confesses and asks victims' forgiveness to the act. Benoit (1997) suggests that an organization needs to anticipate potential crisis and develop crisis contingency plans before a



crisis, understand the nature of the crisis and the pertinent audiences and understand the rhetoric nature of image restoration.

#### **2.4.5.6. Renewal Theory**

Renewal theory uses an approach which emphasizes on organizational renewal to tackle a crisis (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007). There are four major characteristics of renewal theory. The renewal theory highlights on the role of leaders in optimizing renewal. The renewal approach emphasizes on the characteristics of a leader and the way they try to inspire and serve as a bridge in utilizing communication for renewal. According to Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) leaders with an executive presence easily influence the opinion of stakeholders.

The renewal theory is all about providing rapid and natural response to an incident. Renewal Theory differs from other theories in a way that it only encourages progression than repairing image and protecting the reputation of an organization. Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) states that the renewal theory focuses on how the incident can be eliminated with new approaches, instead of justifying the reason for the occurrence of a crisis.

#### **2.4.5.7. Chaos Theory**

Seeger and Sellnow (2013) contend that organizations become more prone to crisis, provided that their system has interdependence and complexity. Central to Chaos theory is the Butterfly Effect, which highlights on the overarching effects that minor differences can pose on an organization and its crisis. Murphy (1996) states that Chaos theory focuses on unpredictable systems.

Seeger and Sellnow (2013) argue that an organization cannot foresee the outcome of a crisis, but can weather crisis with re-structuring and self-organization. The power of communication has to forms in the Chaos theory (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013). Thus, a communication can help bring lasting systemic changes and that in turn helps manage crisis by renewing the organization and fostering positive relationship with stakeholders.

Putting in consideration the situational crisis communication theory the researcher will try to critically evaluate what crisis response strategy employed by respective universities.

**2.4.5.8 Contingency theory and crisis communication:** Contingency theory is a grand theory of public relations that explains the degree to which an organization uses an advocacy or accommodative response to conflicts with stakeholders (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, &

Motrook 1997; Cameron, Pang, & Jin 2008). Contingency theory is associated most strongly with Glen Cameron and is a very complex conceptualization of public relations. As a grand theory, contingency theory seeks to explain how public relations as a whole operates. More specifically, it helps us to understand what guides policy-level decisions an organization makes about goals, alignments, ethics, and relationships with publics and other forces in its environment (Botan 2006). Historically, grand theories try to explain an entire discipline and can be adapted to specific areas of the discipline.

It is important that the crisis management team know the internal and external audiences it intends to reach out to during a crisis. There are divergent audiences that will expect information during the crisis and whose need for the information is varied. Therefore what needs to be done is identify the specific audiences, establish their need and decide who in the team of experts is best suited to disseminate the information required. Coherence and consistency in information dissemination is critical. Different supervisors could at times give varied, conflicting messages on important issues. This can lead to confusion and even mistrust amongst employees. Another challenge that could arise is the flow of information not reaching the desired publics when it is required. Thus, this research tries to, how messages delivered effective to audiences, the content and timing of message, and responsibility sharing during communication will be analyzed using theoretical frame works.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Introduction

This section of the study deals with the overall methods of the research, which aims to achieve the objective of the research. Accordingly, Research approach, sampling design, population of the study, sample size, data gathering instruments, data analysis techniques and procedures and ethical considerations are to be covered.

#### 3.2. Description of the study area

Ethiopian universities are becoming a place where ethnic-based violence are being entrenched, a rising ethnic-based violence subjected to various harassment including being denied access to education and continued to claim lives of innocent students. This crisis is escalating from time to time. Therefore, this research tries to critically evaluate the communication strategies that Wollega University employed in resolving the outreached problem, smoothing the progress to peace and creating fertile ground for the teaching and learning process.

#### 3.3. Research approach

This particular study is designed to scrutinize the communication strategies and its practice in Wollega University during a crisis. The researcher selected a single case related to crisis that the university is facing during 2018-2019GC academic year. Therefore, this study will adopt qualitative research approach and case study research design to provide an in-depth analysis of the crisis. As Yin (2003) stated, Case study design allows researchers to examine a phenomenon in-depth using various kinds of evidence obtained from interviews or analysis of documents and artifacts.

#### 3.4. Population of the study

Even though, almost all public universities experiencing ethnic-based and political driven violence in Ethiopia, Populations of this study will not comprise them all. There are about forty five (45) public universities in the country which few of them like: Woldia university, Axum, Bahirdar university, Gonder university, mekele university, Dire dawa university, Arba minch university, Dembi Dollo, and Wollega university are experiencing acute crisis. Among these universities the researcher conducted the study only on Wollega University.

### **3.4. Sampling Technique**

Sample design is a definite plan, technique or procedure to select a sample from a given population. In this regard, researchers can use either the probability sampling or non probability sampling techniques to determine their representation basis. As Kothary (2004) noted, “With probability samples, each element has a known probability of being included in the sample but the non-probability samples do not allow the researcher to determine this probability”.

Purposive sampling is one of sampling technique which is applied. Since most research cannot reach all members of a population, it is mandatory for the researcher to draw a representative sample. In qualitative research, the samples are likely chose in a deliberate manner, which is defined as purposive sampling. Purposive sampling can be very useful for situations where we need to reach a targeted sample quickly and where sampling for proportionality is not the primary concern. Selecting purposive sampling helps to obtain multiple ranges of information and different views on the subject (Yin, 2011).

Non-probability sampling technique is typically serving the qualitative type of research to identify and select the information-rich sources purposefully (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). For this study, therefore the selection of respondents for the in-depth interview was intentional or purposeful to generate reliable and valid data from the knowledgeable and appropriate sources.

### **3.5. Sampling Size**

For this study, the sample was picked purposively with the criteria of involvement in crisis communication and based on the position they held in the corporate communication office of Wollega University, as the position determine their role in managing the crisis. Based on this, from the management, director of the office and other six experts are used as a source of data.

### **3.6. Data Collection Method**

#### **3.6.1 Sources of Data**

There are two types of Data, Primary and secondary. The former is a type of data obtained through direct communication with the concerned bodies or informants through in-depth interview and critical observation. Secondary data, on the other hand, is to gather relevant inputs from existing records, such as books, researches, reports, conference proceedings, magazines, newspapers, archives etc. (Kumar, 2011). This research tried to use both primary and secondary sources of data.

In order to gather the primary data, in-depth interview with interviewee was held. In other way, “In a modern society, documents kept in a form of written scripts are serving as a witness or pieces of evidence for events or facts. Such documents can be found in several formats as “notes, case reports, contacts, drafts, death certificates, remarks, diaries, statistics, annual reports, judgments, letters or expert opinions” (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke,2004). Reviewing such documents is, therefore, an important way of generating data through accessible documents. Therefore, besides the primary data sources, this research also tried to review relevant data from secondary sources, which is crisis management and communication plan.

### **3.6.2 In-depth interview**

Holloway (2002) describes interview as a preferable form of data collection to public relations and marketing communication research. Likewise, Driscoll (2011) also noted that interviews are the best data gathering technique especially when detailed information from a few specific people and experts is needed.

In research methodology, two types of interviewing methods have been identified; Structured interviews, in which a carefully worded questionnaire is administered, and unstructured interview that enable to conduct in-depth interviews, by which the interviewer does not follow a rigid form (Kothary, 2004). Therefore, due to the nature of the study and with the aim of accomplishing a deeper understanding from knowledgeable informants, structured in-depth interview was used to collect primary data.

### **3.6.3 Interview Procedure**

The researcher used structured in-depth interviews with target respondents to collect data on the pre-crisis, while crisis and post-crisis communications strategies of the office. The researcher also used 45-60 minute for each interview and collect data via open-ended questions and also posed follow up questions. The interview also conducted face-to- face using notebook and voice recording tape, for who were volunteer for voice recording.

### **3.6.4. Document Analysis**

Bowen (2009,) defines document analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents-both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” that uses of data “to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.” Document is ideal for a study in every case study research (Yin, 2009). Merriam (1988) points out, “documents of any type can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding,

and discover insights relevant to the research problem.” Therefore, the researcher was tried collect crisis communication policies, strategic plan, crisis management and communication plan. But the researcher could not find any tangible document related to crisis management and communication plan.

### **3.7. Analysis and Interpretation of Data**

The data analysis of the study occurs in two phases. First, the interview transcripts and organizational crisis responses of the respective each interviewee were repeatedly reviewed. The researcher emphasized on the phrases and quotes from the interviews. The researcher then categorizes the phrases and quotes, coded the data in relation to the research questions. Second, the researcher cross-check the coded data against the original data from the interview transcripts. Finally, the researchers compile the categorized data and analysis it accordingly.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Ethics is a much needed activity in the research. There are some ethical considerations that the researcher should have while the research is conducted. In any social research, ethical considerations like confidentiality and avoidance of deception are important. The researcher is expected to be strict to protect the privacy of participants and respondents. Taking or using other researcher’s works without giving recognition should be considered as academic crime (Victoria, 2014). Therefore:

- ❖ The target population received relevant information about the purpose of the research.
- ❖ During the in-depth interview the researcher was requested willingness for audio records and assured of confidentiality.
- ❖ In order to ensure anonymity, the key informants’ name is not mentioned.
- ❖ Any documents collected from source is not used for other than this particular research paper

## Chapter Four

### Results and Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the data collected from in-depth interview and document analysis. The analysis provides the general overview on crisis communication preparedness, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication strategies, communication opportunities, challenges and lessons acquired during the crisis.

For an in-depth and critical analysis of crisis preparedness, response and resolution strategy of Wollega University, the researcher conducted one-to-one in-depth interviews with seven public relations practitioners and director of the office.

#### 4.1. The pre- crisis period/preparation

Generally, a pre-crisis phase is a period of crisis prevention and preparation. At this phase, organizations are expected to pay attention to prepare ahead for crisis situations. This may include; preparing crisis communication plan, assigning spokesperson for crisis time, detecting signals and enhancing the recalling capacities are some of the principal pre-crisis phase activities or tasks to minimize risks and prevent issues as early as possible. Therefore, this section discusses these key tasks at Wollega University in particular focus on the case ethnic and political based conflict among students happened 2018-2019GC academic year.

##### 4.1.1. Organizational Crisis and crisis communication experience

Regarding the issue of crisis history, major scenario that was told by (PR1, PR2, PR3 and PR4,) during the in-depth interview was the crisis scenario occurred in 2005.EC related to ethnic and political related problem which led to the death of one student, 2007.EC the national election and 2009.EC popular protest against the ruling party and the new Addis Abeba master plan, resulted the killing of two innocent students. These three major causes lead to distractive ethnic, religious and political disputes among students in the University. As all informants, agreed all the time Minor disputes between individuals escalate into a big fight involving students aligned along ethnic lines (ethnic polarization) and political rivalry. Regarding to crisis communication experience, all respondents agreed they never had either crisis management or communication plan, which prepared ahead of time anticipating possible crisis situations. However, to form crisis team, organizations have to have crisis plan or guidelines. If not, crisis team was formed without any guidelines and difficult to manage it. As Tench and Yeomans (2009) said a well-

prepared manual can serve as a guide for many tasks, such as activating the crisis team and facilities, and allows more time for the crisis team to focus on the more critical issues.

#### 4.1.2 Crisis communication strategies of Wollega University

Crisis management and communication plan entail the cautious development of strategies and proactive reactions which control a crisis from escalation and inflicting harm on the organization (Seeger& Sellnow, 2013). Based on this the researcher asked a question. What is your crisis management and crisis communication strategy as PR office?

*PR2 said, "Since crisis is not predictable event we are unable to communicate it proactively rather communicating after the crisis seized its position. Crisis communication plan is one of the strategies of crisis management that organizations advised to have. But we never prepared a crisis communication plan" (PR2, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*PR3 claimed, "Even though, we experienced a lot of crisis before, we do not have a clearly written and prepared crisis communication plan in hand. As a crisis happened we all struggle to resolve the situation with any possible solution that we have in mind at that moment" (PR3, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*"It is true that preparing a crisis management and crisis communication plan ahead of crisis is vital. It also helps to analyze and control a crisis before it happens, despite the fact, we have no either crisis management or crisis communication plan so far. As a staff, we see there are key obstacles to craft these tools in our office. These are; negligence, absence of skilled professional in crisis communication, lack of training, and less attention of the university management to our office are of the bottle neck" (PR4, PR5 & PR6, personal interview, November24-25, 2020).*

*"I believe each activity needs prior planning and crisis management and communication also too. But, even if we are facing similar crisis all the time, we did not learn to prepare ahead of it. I think skill gap and negligence are the main reason" (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

Regarding whether the office has a clear written document of Crisis Communication or crisis management plan, this researcher could find out that the office has a corporate PR activity strategic document prepared with clear procedures and action plan that can serve as a guideline to the overall activities of the office. The plan even begins with defining public relations meaning and activities that will be implemented by the office including. Nevertheless, there is a proactive overall strategic plan, the office has no well emphasis and detailed crisis management and crisis communication plan so far.



According to PR3, *“Even though, we experienced a lot of crisis before....”* Wollega University passed through different crisis situations. In 2001EC the university was in conflict with the farmer of nearby community regarding to land ownership, 2005EC ethnic and political based conflict among students which led to the death of one student, 2007EC the national election and the new Addis Abeba master plan related chaos and 2009EC popular protest against the ruling party, resulted the killing of two innocent students are the major crisis situations. Passing through, such numerous crises history could help to get a lot of experience for prior preparation, however the university did not learn and prepared crisis management and communication plan.

According to PR2, *“we start to manage and communicate the crisis after it seized its position....”* This is completely wrong and unprofessional. As many scholars believes organizations that integrate thoughtful, proactive crisis management and communication strategies into their plans can more successfully sustain business, stakeholder trust and loyalty to protect and preserve their reputation.

As PR7 said *“.....negligence, absence of skilled professional in crisis communication, lack of training and negligence are bottle neck for not preparing crisis communication and management plan.”* Public relations experts are responsible for handling all aspects of PR activities, to do this effectively public relations experts need to have basic concepts of PR, should attend at least degree in a field that stresses communication skills, and the ability to establish business and other professional relationships. On the other hand, the university, did not Empower its PR employees with a variety of crisis management trainings, so that they will be prepared to handle the situation. Thus, As PR scholars suggest, it is advisable to provide relevant training to PR staffs to help them in gaining a practical understanding of the elements of crisis management, enabling them to construct, deploy and validate relevant crisis management and communication plans.

Communication scholars assert the importance of crisis communication plan for a company or organization. It is obvious having a crisis communication plan in advance of a crisis helps in reducing misinformation, assures an effective communication flow, and increases the timeliness of messaging. However, the above explanation revealed that all Wollega university corporate communication office staffs believed the necessity and importance of crisis communication plan. Even though, they are facing crisis repeatedly, they are not making a preparation through crisis management and communication plan.

#### 4.1.3 The university Management in crisis management strategy

Public relations as a management function. This is an essential aspect in that without the active engagement of the executive management, the program in any organization cannot be developed successfully (Steinberg, 1975). Moreover, viewing the Public relations practitioner as part of the management allows him to participate, at the managerial level, in the information policies of an organization while carrying out the other public relations strategies and tasks.

Based on this the researcher asked the respondents. Does your office work with the university management in developing the overall crisis management strategy and strategic plan?

*“We have never sat together with the university management to prepare any strategic planning. Even though, we are playing inevitable role in promoting the university, managing and resolving crisis, and facilitating mutual communication with internal and external public, the management even notice our presence while they need us for their own business. We have tried a lot to engage the university managements including the president, in all PR activities, but, they undermine it. We are planning to organize events, seminars and training that will promote the role of PR” (PR1, PR3 & PR6, personal interview, November24&25, 2020).*

*“we had different meeting with the management regarding the crisis response and evaluation during different crisis time, we also worked collaboratively during crisis response, but since we haven't a crisis management and communication plan, there is no way to engage them in planning. However, regarding on the development of work plan, we have no experience in engaging other staffs” (PR2, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“The management remembers us while they need us only, they did not attend any meeting or training that we invited them, they perceive us as a mouth piece of the university nothing more. Though, we are not engaging them in any planning” (PR4, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*(PR5) claimed, “It would be good If we able to engage the management in the planning activities, it would also open an opportunity to work together, but we never planned together” (PR5, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between the organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tools

What all this means is that, since the public relations practitioner work to keep mutual communication and understanding between the organization management and its public, the management must be able to participate and engage in development of PR strategic plan, crisis management and communication plan.

According to PR2, “.....we had different meeting with the management regarding the crisis response and evaluation during different crisis time, we also worked collaboratively during crisis response.....” Wollega university management was closely working with the public relations office in responding during different episode of crisis; like conducting consultative meeting with internal stakeholders to make sure everyone at the university is well informed about emergency situations, giving an interview on crisis issue, following and mentoring the crisis management process and took quick decisions whenever needed for action. This shows the management was proactively engaged in PR activity but never engaged in crisis communication and plan development. This indicates the slothfulness of the PR office. Engaging and inviting the management to participate in planning was the responsibility of them, but it seems they let the initiative to the management which is completely wrong.

On contrary, PR4 said “.....the management remembers us while they need us only, they did not attend any meeting or training that we invited them, they perceive us as a mouth piece of the university nothing more.....” the management belittle the role of PR office, only they need PR experts to convey what they need to tell to the stakeholders. They do not take PR activities as a management function. As this point, the failure is completely belongs to the PR office, the very activity of PR office is maintaining mutual relationship and communication between the university and its stake holder, and preserving the reputation. The one who could not maintain its own relationship and communication with the management, how would able to maintain others to communicate. The one who could not able to promote its endeavors and efforts how would able to preserve the reputation.

Based on the above clarifications, Wollega university management works with corporate communication office in crisis response and evaluation activities, and holds different meetings during the crisis episode, however, the management never participated in preparation of crisis management, crisis communication plan and strategic plan. This is contrary to the views of (Harlow, 1976) and (Steinberg, 1975) which argue, the Public relations practitioner as part of the management allows him to participate, at the managerial level, and in the development of information policies of an organization.

## 4.2. Crisis communication strategy used during the crisis

According to Yousef & Lawrence (2017) there are five stages that organizations might functioned while crisis occurred is communicated. Detection or prediction, prevention/preparation, containment/control, recovery/mending and learning/ evaluation are stages that the universities perceived to use while they tried to hold crisis occurred in 2018-2019GC. The researcher discussed how universities communicate the crisis in line with five stages of crisis communication.

*“One Nekemte resident student who is ceased from Bahirdar University, come to mobilize student at Nekemte campus awakened us and we noticed that point as a visible signal which possibly leads to crisis.” Even though, we had got the crisis signal, we do nothing and the crisis takes its position immediately” (PR1, PR2, &PR5 personal interview, November24&25, 2020).*

*“There was instability on different university of the country; university of Gonder,Bahirdar, axum, Debreberhan etc..This was a warning sign that the problem would be spread to our university, even if we are relatively on peace situation. As the distinct behavior of crisis is unexpectedness, suddenly a student who is dismissed from Bahirdar university came to our university to instigate the conflict between students from that point we started to mobilize our staffs and concerned bodies for crisis response” (PR6, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“we should have to be conscious to the conflict in other universities would be eventually come to us, we somewhat did some pre crisis activities like communicating through community radio to students to abstain from any negative group activities and noticed any one who found to be in any individual and group violence will be incur to complete dismissal.” (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

Key respondent’s word indicated that, before the crisis manifested in the universities there were hazardous warnings which could make the universities to get ready in preparation of preventive mechanisms which could capable them to defend it.

At the first stage of crisis communication, public relation practitioners believed to seek out warning signs, hazard signals then approaching crisis preventative measures. The warning signals assist organizations to get ready with preventive mechanisms. In this regard, during 2018-2019GC academic years, there was ethnic based conflicts and violence which was started in some universities like; Bullehora, Gonder, Bahirdar and Diredewa universities, and a student dismissed from Bahirdar university tried to mobilize conflict in Nekemte campus. This was hazard indications which crisis is estimated to happen in Wollega University too. The PR experts also expected the same conflict will be happen at their university, Thus this finding agrees with the view of, Kash and Darling (1998) a crisis communication is about issues analysis which

includes recognizing potential causes of crises. This is especially important in light of the observation that a crisis is always preceded by a series of early warning signals (Mitroff,1988.)

With appropriate signal detection mechanisms in place crisis signals can be picked up in time and then, the crisis can be averted before it happens. Most participants admitted that they found a signal that indicate the crisis to be happen, especially, PR7 stressed “.....we should have to be conscious to the conflict in other universities would be eventually come to us...” however they got a signal which indicates the crisis they were unable to stop it from happening.

At the second stage of crisis communication, the public relation practitioners believed to identify and recognize techniques to reduce the crisis consequence and end it up.

*“Even though, preparing crisis communication plan and forming crisis management team was a prior activity, while crisis strike, the first thing they did is forming a crisis management team which comprises eight members from students dean office, president of students and corporate communication office staffs. (PR1, PR3 & PR7, personal interview, November24-25, 2020).*

*(PR4)added, while the crisis stroked we formed crisis response team and role and responsibilities shared among them and spokesperson was also assigned, the assigned spokes person is selected deliberately with the criteria of eloquence, persuasive and fluency of three language: Oromiffa; Amharic and English.” (PR4, personal interview, November 25, 2020).*

As respondents indicated the crisis management team established after the crisis hit the organization. This team is charged with the responsibility of dealing with crisis issues. It was also evident that when faced with a crisis the office is able to mobilize a team to deal with the crisis. This team comprises PR office director, president of students, internal relation expert, external relation expert, student dean, information and public opinion desk expert, media relation expert and representative from the management.

In this position, the spokes person have reported to the town polices and regional special forces. Regional security forces took apart in minimizing and stabilizing the situation, after some destructive measures had taken by students. In fact, involvement of polices when the crisis escalated have got its own indispensable role in reducing the crisis occurred. The spokes person also provided a crisis communication massages through Wollega university community FM radio, Fana Nekemte FM, telegram and facebook channels.

At the third stage of crisis communication, the aim of crisis management team was controlling and limiting the spread of the crisis occurred. To stabilize and Limit the spread of the crisis the internal relation expert facilitated a two days open discussion (consultative meeting) between the university management and students which finally reached on mutual understanding of the crisis

situation and reach on consensus. The point of the consensus was, the university promised to fulfill all claims of students which are particularly related to the teaching-learning process, in counter the students advised and agreed not to participate in any violence activities. If any student is found to be proactive or violent specially related to ethnic and politics, the charge will be a complete dismissal.

At the fourth stage of crisis communication, the team worked strongly in making the hazardous situation normal or Recovering the infected environment of universities safe and sound. Therefore, to make the contaminated academic environment harmonious as well as normal, the universities investigated and dismissed three students who are induced the crisis and repaired the broken windows, doors, cafeteria and all lost infrastructures.

### **4.3. Timeliness and telling the real situation during crisis**

According to (Fink, 2002), an organization's promptness to real-time information delivery determines the way its crisis develops and perceived by its stakeholders. Based on this the researcher asked, Do you think that your office communicated the real situation?

*“During the crisis time, the university instantaneously posted a notice on visible notice boards, explained the real situation on official facebook and twitters pages and sent a press release for Wollega university community radio, EBC, and FBC, after collecting relevant information about the crisis and injured students during the violence.” (PR1 &PR2, personal interview, November24-25, 2020).*

*“The acting spokesperson also speaks frequently for media during the crisis, on behalf of the organization to explain situation and to plead with the report of death of two students is fake news on social media.” (PR3, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*“For sure we are argued and released falsifying message to different media on the reported death of two students, but we did not include the real problem that we are facing for example; we did not explain the real situation and damages happened.” (PR4&PR5, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“We do not tell all what is happening to the media and the audience, because telling all problems will fuel the crisis more” (PR6, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

As PR1, PR2 & PR3, described, during the crisis time the university was telling the real situation happening in the university through official face book page, posting on notice board, and providing news release for different media in real time. When the organization is confronted by a crisis, they need to firstly confirm they are dealing with a genuine crisis as opposed to some sensationalist news coverage or a passing social media storm. From a communication perspective, they then need to consider who is most important to reach and what to say to them.

As PR3 said“.....*the acting spokesperson also speaks frequently for media during the crisis....*”Refusing to comment or merely issuing a written statement does not constitute communicating and raises doubts about the credibility and competency of the crisis management team. It also causes your stakeholders to wonder what the organization is hiding or whether the crisis is worse than was thought. Thus communicating the real situation to the audience helps to easily manage the crisis with simple or no causality.

On the other hand, PR4, argued”...*we did not explain the real situation and damages.....*” the university was telling, there is no death reported during the crisis and it is all about a fake news on social media , it is true but they should also have to tell what is happening and what damage and losses are there. The audience need to know what is really going on and they have also the right to know as well. But the university hides to tell the truth fearing the conflict could explode more. Telling the truth is an absolute necessity if the organization is caught up in a crisis. Often cover-up becomes worse than the original crisis.

On the other side, except PR1 and PR3 all respondents agreed the university did not communicate the real situation at the real time. This seems to disagree with Shelton, who argues, if companies are not willing to tell quickly the real situation, “the press will fill that vacuum with information, comments or opinion, which does more to sell their story and less to protect your business (Shelton, 2008).

Regarding communicating quickly to the public:

Question: Do you think that your office communicated the crisis timely?

*“The university response was quick enough, though it seems a bit late due to responding to the fake news spreader on social media.” (PR1, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*“We quickly respond on each point of the crisis” (PR3, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

Contrary to (PR1 & PR3, PR6 and PR7) said the following:

*“Our response was not quick enough. If we communicated what is happening timely and consistently, our social media audience would not be fraud by fake news and would not gave an opportunity for the fake news to spread out easily, the response for fake news was provided after a week of its release”.* (PR6, personal interview, November25, 2020).

*“I don’t believe that we are communicated timely and consistently. I heard that some students family is considering the abduction of 26 female student*

*in Dembidollo is in Wollega University, this indicates our communication gaps and lack of telling the real situation” (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

At the initial crisis response, besides accuracy, consistency of messages, crisis communication researchers also emphasize on the matter of how likely organizations are quick to give their response for media to address their stakeholders. In this respect, organizations advised to respond quickly before the crisis exacerbated.

However, according to PR6 “...the response for fake news was provided after a week of its release...” Wollega University did not give an immediate response for fake news spread on social media. The news was a killing of two students during the conflict among different ethnic groups in the university; this was serious issue that needs immediate response from the university before the stakeholders are getting confused. The crisis management team should know what is happening around. But neglected the fake news in the initial stage and became a major concern later. While in crisis, Problems must be attended immediately and should not ignore even minor issues or wait for someone else to take the initiative. Any issue left unattended might lead to crisis and major unrest later. This is what happened in Wollega University, they ignore to respond to the fake news and the more it spreads. They took about a week to respond. Except PR3, all respondents agreed that the university did not respond quickly. This seems to disagree with Coombs, who argues the communication should be within 72 hours (Coombs, 2007).

#### **4.4. Stakeholder consideration and engagement during a crisis**

As presented on chapter two, situational crisis communication theory considers stakeholders as decisive actors in the crisis response efforts. Therefore, knowing how engage stakeholders the crisis would enable to understand how stakeholders attribute the crisis. In doing so, this section is to analyze the engagement of stakeholders in crisis communication and management during the crisis episode.

One of the main and important parts of managing crisis is to identify stakeholders and ranking them based on their impact toward the crisis situation. According to Anthonissen (2008) identifying the targets would help to have an effective communication and sort the information that is required by each stakeholder at the crisis response phase.

In this section, the categorization of the stakeholders into primary and secondary groups is made based on the criteria of Clarkson depending on the priority given by the organization and what the crisis situation itself demands (Clarkson, 1995). Accordingly, the primary stakeholders on table 02 are depicted with the assumption to have a direct impact or significance on the crisis



situation. Similarly, the secondary stakeholders are sorted with the view of having an indirect impact on the crisis compared with the primary stakeholders.

No.	Category	
1	Primary stakeholder	Students Staffs
2	Secondary stake holder	Media Students family Other universities

Table 02 takeholders of Wollega University during crisis

There are also some reasons that enable to categorize the internal stakeholders of organization under the lists of primary stakeholder. In particular, from others, crisis situations of a given organization are, believed to affect internal stakeholder directly. This is therefore; internal stakeholders are also expected to exert much effort in crisis response activities. On the other hand, organizations in crisis may also prefer to involve its internal stakeholders for an effective result in their crisis response effort. In this respect, findings reveal the direct involvement of internal stakeholders of Wollega University that enable this research to categorize them as a primary stakeholder.

Concerning involvement of internal stakeholders in crisis communication, (PR1) said the following:

*“Once we became certain that the fake news spread about the killing of two students during the crisis was targeting to blackmail our reputation, we just let every internal stakeholder; staffs and students to work on revealing the truth on social media. Farther, we let students to tell their families not to be panic with fake news and explain the real situation.” (PR1, personal interview, November 24, 2020).*

Similarly, (PR3, and PR6) also reflected the role of the internal stakeholder as follows:

*“During the crisis time, particularly journalism and communication students played vital role, they were consistently communicating the real situation on their social media group, they were producing news and reports for Wollega university community radio, organized literature night and the teaching staffs also played a great role in disproving the fake news using their own social networking. (PR6) I can say that the effort of the internal stakeholders had a critical role in averting the crisis and minimizing reputational damage.” (PR3 & PR6, personal interview, November 24-25, 2020).*

*“Every stake holder students, some teaching staffs and Nekemt town people were also rumoring looking the report of social media about the death of two students during the violence; to this extent no one gives response, the silence of the university about the fake news gives an opportunity for the spread of the rumor. What we did at this point is, organizing consultative meeting and telling the truth to internal stakeholders and lobby them to defend the fake news using their personal accounts and relationships. In doing so we could able to defend the consequence of fake news.” (PR4, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“The internal stakeholders had a persistent effort specially in using their Facebook account to counter messages, which damage the reputation of the university, particularly, in responding to fake news spread on social medial which tell the death of two students during violence.” (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

During the crisis hit the university particularly the fake news spread on social media about the killing of two innocent students the university was unable to respond quickly. However, the fake news spread more and took an attention of external stake holder. At this point the university holds a consultative meeting with the internal stakeholder to clarify the issue and to create common understanding on the issue. The university also lobbies the internal stake holder to defend the reputation of the university, through defending the fake news and revealing the truth on social media. The internal stakeholder; the student and teaching staffs played a significant role in addressing the external stakeholder about the fake news through, personal facebook page and groups, community radio and using their social relationship; like students told their family to not panic with false news.

Particularly journalism and communication department graduate candidate students and the staffs were collecting relevant information, organizing and broadcasting through wollega university community radio. And they also organized a literature night to students, to compete with the agenda of peace and harmony.

As shown in the above, the involvement of internal stakeholders in crisis response endeavor has been prevailed at Wollega University. Internal stakeholder; students and staffs were proactively participated in communicating against fake news spreads on social media. These findings actually support the argument of Fearn Banks, which consider internal stakeholders as an asset for companies in crisis time to respond to crisis without charging any payment (Fearn Banks, 2007).

#### 4.5. Post-crisis period

In the post-crisis phase, the organization is returning to business as usual. The crisis is no longer, but the complete recovery from the crisis still requires some attention. As noted earlier, reputation repair may be continued or initiated during this phase. There is important follow-up communication that is required. First, it is important to certain that the crisis is completely resolved. A researcher asked if the crisis is completely resolved.

(PR1) replied, *“The crisis was completely resolved with a little damage of class rooms, student cafe and minor damage on 11 students. It is a little damage compared to other universities at that time.”* (PR1, personal interview, November24, 2020).

*“Though, the crisis seems got an end, I think we need an evaluation and assessment to confidently say the crisis is completely over. However, I don’t think it will happen again soon, because the university imposed a new regulation, who ever involved in any violence will be punished to a complete dismissal.”* (PR2, personal interview, November25, 2020).

*“The crisis is over not because of our intervention but because, we let go students to home as a result of COVID-19 epidemic global outbreak. In any ways, the crisis is already over.”* (PR3, personal interview, November24, 2020).

*“Yes, the crisis is already gone”* (PR4 & PR6, personal interview, November24-25, 2020).

*“The crisis is already resolved with collaborative efforts of our office, the management and internal stake holders.”* (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020).

All respondents agreed the crisis is already resolved. But, they are different on how the crisis is resolved. According to PR3 *“.....the crisis got over because of COVID-19 epidemic global outbreak...”* Similar to other parts of the world, Ethiopia is affected by the multifaceted impact of the corona virus pandemic. Higher education is one of the sectors that have been significantly affected by the impacts. The government closed schools across the country immediately after the announcement of the first five COVID-19 cases. Even if, there were still some tension of crisis left, the outbreak of corona virus let universities to close and end the crisis concurrently.

On the other hand, PR2 said, *“..... I think we need an evaluation and assessment to confidently say the crisis is completely over....”* Honestly speaking post crisis evaluation is important in understanding whether the crisis is end or not, how effective the crisis management is, provide the university management with a unique opportunity to identify the organization’s strengths that should be sustained or built upon and weaknesses that require improvement. But according to

PR2 the university neglect to take the critical next steps or post crisis assessment to learn from the organization's successes and failures after a crisis

Generally, PR7 believes the crisis is over in collaborative efforts of PR office, the university management and the internal stakeholder. On the other hand, PR3 believes, the crisis is got over because of the outbreak of COVID-19 as a global epidemic, which leads them to release students. PR2 also supposes, though, the crisis seem over, it needs to conduct a post crisis assessment to be evident. But all respondents agree the crisis is already resolved.

#### **4.6. The role of PR office in crisis resolution**

In any organizations, commercial or public sector preparing for a crisis started from conducting research in the form of crisis audits, preparing a crisis manual and conducting crisis simulations or training (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). The role of public relations practitioners or departments was related with such kind of activities to minimize the negative impact of any crisis situation and use as opportunities for next steps in the organizations. This kind of activities starts from research and planning. So, to analyze the role of corporate communication office of Wollega University in relation to crisis communication, the researcher asked, the role of their PR office in crisis resolution?

*“Even though, we are not prepared well ahead assuming crisis will be happen, we are able to manage the crisis with a little damage. Our role was irreplaceable in crisis management. We were releasing relevant information to audience, we arranged two days consultative meeting for students and the university management, and we were proactive in protecting organizational image and reputation damage through responding to fake news on social and conventional media“ (PR1 & PR2, personal interview, November24-25, 2020).*

*“ we were fortunate in resolving this crisis before extended to all campuses of the university, as we observed in other university the violence among students was very devastating which lead to the loss of many students life, even if, we were not well prepared and equipped before the crisis, our office played vital role in managing the crisis. We were collecting, checking and sharing important information timely on traditional and social media” (PR3, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*“Role and responsibilities shared among staffs based on our respective job descriptions, all staffs were proactive in their respective area; we maintained the relation between student and the university management, we released information, and message to our internal and external stakeholders, we organized meeting and trainings, and we also worked in feeding the information need of the management and we also conducted daily review meeting on daily activities. (PR4, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

According to PR1 and PR2, the PR office was not prepared for a crisis through developing a document that describes the processes that an organization should use to respond to a critical situation that could adversely affect before it happens. However, they able to manage the crisis with little damage of class rooms, cafe and injury of some student. This is because, they able to communicate the internal stakeholders on consultative meeting, communicating factual and important messages to the public and effective response to the fake news on social media.

On the other hand as PR3, said “.....*were fortunate in resolving this crisis before extended to all campuses of the university, as we observed in other university the violence among students was very devastating which lead to the loss of many students life...*” while Wollega university was in crisis, most of Ethiopian university were also in acute crisis, for example; one student at Debremarkos , one student at Aksum , one student at Debre Berhan, two students at Woldia, one student at Dembi Dollo, one student at Gondar University were killed brutally and 27 female students from Dembi Dollo were abducted by armed men. However, Wollega University was able to control its crisis before it reaches its peak and transferred to the three campus of the university. PR3 believes this result is not because of their pre crisis preparation effort, it is all about the fortune they got. But during the crisis period the office was able to disseminate relevant information, message and precautions to its audience.

PR4, claimed, “.....*Role and responsibilities shared among staffs based on our respective job descriptions....*” During the crisis hit the university, all PR technical and experts took specific responsibility based on their job assignment. The internal relation expert facilitated consultative meeting for the university management and students, news and media relation expert collected, organized and distributed news release to media, produced articles for website and social media audience and external relation expert was worked as a spokes person. Each day before close of business the crisis management team conducted a daily review meeting to evaluate the efforts of crisis management and communication.

As Public relations are often considered an integral part of the crisis management process, and it is must to have a plan wollega university PR experts did not do that, which suffered them a lot during a crisis.

Based on respondents’ response, As Public relations are often considered an integral part of the crisis management process, and it is must to have a plan, wollega university PR experts did not do that, which suffered them a lot during a crisis. However, the role of PR staffs played during

crisis management and communication is enviable; they shared role and responsibilities to their respective duties, they were proactive in collecting, checking and sharing information and messages to their internal and external audiences, they maintained mutual relationship between students and the management through organizing consultative meeting.

The researcher posed a question on how do they evaluate the effectiveness of your crisis communication strategy after the crisis resolved.

Many Scholars advice crisis managers not to feel that they have completed their work when the crisis assumed resolved. At the post-crisis phase, organization is expected to perform some major tasks after the crisis had been resolved. Evaluating the crisis response effort, monitoring about the crisis situations and fulfilling the promises given for stakeholders are some of the principal duties for companies at the post-crisis phase (Coombs, 2007). In this respect, the main objective of this section is to look at the post-crisis efforts of Wollega University. Taking a step back and assess and evaluate the post-crisis situation was the question raised by the researcher.

*“The main lesson we learned from the crisis was the need to strengthen our capacity of prevention and responding to a crisis. Immediately after we recovered from the crisis, a meeting was held with all top-level management staffs to discuss what we can do in the future to strengthen our crisis prevention capacity and enhancing the office capacity. Finally, we established an ad-hoc committee to identify core problems of the office. The committee collected relevant information and reported to the management, based on the report the management decided to split the office in to corporate communication office and international relations office which will be leaded by their separate directorates. On the other hand, the management decided to completely change the staff with professional PR experts.” (PR1 & PR3, personal interview, November24-25, 2020).*

*“After the crisis got an end, we immediately get on meeting with management to discuss on way forward. We and the management also conducted a meeting with teaching staffs on the agenda of keeping student busy with routine assignments and quiz test to divert their attention.” (PR2, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“After the crisis end the team investigated who initiated violence among students, there were three students found to be guilty on spreading hate speeches against Amhara and Tigrai students, this three student found on distributing flying paper which escalates the crisis, thus the crisis management team identified and reported this students for the management, and the management dismissed them. On the other hand, the crisis management team repaired broken rooms and café and cleaned the environment to make it safe for usual business” (PR4 & PR6, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“After the crisis is over, we tried to reach students with cautious messages posting on notice wall, we did not conduct any post crisis assessment or*

*evaluation, what we know all about is the crisis is resolved and controlled. We also never do any formal post crisis assessments for any crisis before this'' (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

As respondents explained, during the post crisis period, the corporate communication team holds a meeting, with the management of the university to discuss on strengthening the capacity of crisis prevention and response and the management decided to split the office in to international relations and corporate communication directorate and to deploy PR professionals in the office. On the other hand the crisis management team investigated students initiated the crisis and let them punished. Regarding the performance evaluation, findings indicated that the organization did not exert effort to evaluate the crisis response activities, which actually could help the organization to learn for the future. In this regard, the findings do not agree with scholars like Mitroff and Coomb who believe the post-crisis evaluation should target on evaluating the performances of the crisis response activity including assessment of the crisis team (Coomb, 2007) and (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001).

#### **4.7. Media relation**

In the age of information, mass media are considered one of the most important means of communication. This creates an important role for mass media in creating national unity and remodeling of public opinions due to the widespread access to the mass media. Crisis in all its forms are an inseparable part of mankind's life and their diversity is increasing over time. Mass media play a special role in providing information and making people aware of the situation during crisis situations. The media can calm the populace and encourage them to do positive actions, and vice versa, (comb, 2007).

In this respect, the researcher posed a question, which kind of media utilized during the crisis communication? And what was the relative importance of the different media employed?

*“Wollega University had employed different media platform to communicate their crisis for the internal and external publics. Electronics media like university; community radio, Fana FM radio, OBN, Ethiopian Television, university’s official website, official facebook page , Twitter, and print media like brochure and news letter.” (PR1, personal interview, November24, 2020).*

*“Especially during and after the crisis episode Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, Oromia Television, and Walta Television, were used as crisis communication media through news release to tell*

*external stakeholder the end of the crisis and to show that the university backed to its routine activities.” (PR2, personal interview November25, 2020).*

*“Using different media plat form benefited us to control the crisis. Particularly social media were significant..” (PR3 & PR4 personal interview November24-25, 2020).*

*“We used all available media to communicate the crisis situation. But particular to the fake news, social media was relatively important in averting the fake news” (PR5, personal interview November24, 2020).*

*“We used both conventional media and social media during and after the crisis. However, while we engage the internal stake holders in crisis response of fake news, face book played inevitable role.” (PR6, personal interview, November25, 2020).*

*“In my opinion using social media helped us more than traditional media in controlling and managing the crisis. This is therefore, our very first stakeholders are students, and these groups of people prefer to use social media than mainstream media.” (PR7, personal interview, November24, 2020)*

According to the respondents, response, during a crisis communication period Wollega University used different media to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. The University used community radio, Fana FM radio, OBN, Ethiopian Television, university’s official website, official facebook page, Twitter, and print media like brochure and news letter.

Especially during and after the crisis episode Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, Oromia Television, and Walta Television, were used as crisis communication media through news release to tell external stakeholder about the end of the crisis and to show that the university backed to its routine activities.

Fake news was released while the crisis occurred; worst stories are posted about the killing of one student deliberately to shock the audiences and to fuel up the conflict. Truly speaking, there was a conflict among our university students, but face book escalated as it is a complete violence against Amhara student. Since, the fake news was spread on facebook, the university was also obliged to use facebook to falsify the news Thus, and the use of face book was relatively important in averting false news on social media.



So, it can therefore be deduced that the respondents used different both traditional media and new media platform during and after crisis. However, a good majority were in agreement that the Facebook was an effective communication tool and can reach a larger population in real time. Based on the above clarifications, the researcher argued that social media primarily Facebook possibly considered as effective tool of crisis communication in the Universities. Similarly it helped to disseminate and exchange of information timely and accurately.

#### **4.8. Challenges during communicating the crisis**

The study sought to investigate the various challenges that the PR office confronted before, while and after the crisis. It also sought to get an in depth understanding of respondents on how best these can be addressed by the management of the institution.

*“Absence of training could be seen as main problem that affects the practice of crisis communication negatively. Since the profession is a new phenomenon the professionals who are working at the position of public relations and communication ought to get training which could build their capacity.” (PR1, personal interview, November24, 2020)*

*“Crisis becomes to be common in the universities, especially when there is instability at the national level. We have not trained about the principle of crisis communication. Most of us are not specialized with public relations profession. I am working as Public Relations expert, but graduated with foreign language and literature, which is completely contrary. I got a little concept of crisis communication after I became public relations expert but I never prepared crisis management and communication plan. I never trained on PR concepts; I am just working it for living, with no concept about it.” (PR4, personal interview, November25, 2020)*

*“There are some individuals who have conceptual skill towards crisis communication; however they could not be acting as professional. The higher officials interfere in to the activities of the public relation practitioners, officials always pressed experts to practice activities in the way they like rather the practitioners exercise their own professional experience based on standard. Without the interest of the university officials something could never be done in the department of public relation. That is why the information and communication*

*strategic teams do not work professionally.” (PR2, personal interview, November25, 2020)*

*”Wollega university has never given a capacity building training to PR experts and could not assign communication specialists who are quite familiar with the profession and its activities.” (PR5, personal interview, November24, 2020)*

*“Much of PR activities need expertise effort and profession based experience, I am gradated by business and marketing, know working as PR planning and evaluation expert. On this point as you asked me earlier preparing crisis management and communication plan was my duty, but I don’t have any exposure or take any training regarding it, if I get some inductive training I can do better.” (PR6, personal interview, November25, 2020)*

According to the respondents, the challenges mentioned were like; lack of training, absence of professional staff, and interference of management in PR activities are professional or operational related challenges.

As PR1 described, “.....Absence of training is a main problem...” wollega university did not provide or facilitate inductive training for PR staffs which will help them to understand about the key elements of crisis management, how to formulate a crisis management plan and how to relate the plan to other continuity plans. Practical matters including how and when to put a crisis management plan into action and determine when a crisis is over.

As PR4 described, “.....Most of us are not specialized with public relations profession...”public relations positions need at least to have a degree in a field that stresses communication skills, and the ability to establish effective professional and other relationships. But in Wollga University most of PR experts are from other educational back ground.

Based on the data obtained from the key respondents most of public Relations staffs do not have conceptual skill and knowledge about crisis communication. Even though, some of them have clue about the principle of crisis communication, they could not be able to develop crisis management and communication plan, due to lack of inductive training. All Most all of the experts are with Oromiffa, Foreign Language and literature educational background. This implies all activities of public relations and crisis communication in Wollega university are not been practiced by professionals.

## 4.9 Organizational Learning after Crisis

The post-crisis stage begins once the crisis and its effects have ended and an organization learns from the crisis in order to apply the knowledge acquired to future crisis preparation. Each interviewee explained that the crisis that the university faced during 2018-2019 academic year allowed the university to prepare for future crisis.

*“The main lesson we learned from this crisis was the need to strengthen our capacity of prevention and responding to a crisis. All staffs need to take inductive training on crisis management.” (PR1 & PR6, personal interview, November25, 2020)*

*“what I learn is working in team and consistent communication has inevitable role in crisis management, on the other hand, I learnt the office the needs of professional staffs and or the existing staffs should get capacity building training” (PR3 & PR5, personal interview, November24, 2020)*

*“A meeting was held immediately to discuss about our crisis management effort and in the future to strengthen our crisis prevention capacity. The good lesson I have got is working in team.” (PR7 personal interview, November24, 2020)*

The majority of the interviewees highlighted on the knowledge they received on crisis preparedness, working in team during crisis response, and stakeholder engagement and reputation management.

Regarding the pre-crisis stage, the stage characterized by the proactive steps taken as crisis preparation of an organization, the majority of the interviewees raised the issue of training on crisis communication and management and revealed that the university lacked one of its critical elements for preparedness by overlooking the provision of trainings to corporate public relations practitioners. The interviewees stressed on the need for a comprehensive training on crisis communication in order to prepare the University for Future Crisis, which it inevitably faces any time in operation.

Concerning the crisis stage, a phase characterized by the crisis event and its effect until the crisis ends, the interviewees, all interviewees agreed that the response strategies employed during the crisis followed the crisis communication team and the spokes person prepared crisis event based acceleration plan and guideline which enable and smooth the provision of factual, quick, open and transparent information to internal and external stakeholders. Generally, all respondents highlighted on the effectiveness of the crisis communication management employed by the university which enables immediate resolution. However, we were lucky in effective management of the crisis with no prior preparation and well-equipped staffing.

Generally, the findings revealed that the post-crisis learning of the crisis has created an opportunity for public relations practitioners to reconsider crisis communication and management as an integral aspect of corporate communication functions. This also become a lesson for an organizational learning with the majority of lessons taken on the importance of crisis preparedness for crisis management.

#### **4.10 Content analysis on crisis communication plan.**

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research that uses a systematic procedure to analyze documentary evidence and answer specific research questions. Document analysis is often used to triangulate findings gathered from another data source (e.g., interview or focus group discussions, observation, surveys). When used in triangulation, documents can corroborate or disprove, clarify, or expand on findings across other data sources.

Though, the researcher tried to analysis the crisis management and communication strategy of the university, using four main indicating questions:

- Does the organization have a policy on crisis communication and management strategies?
- Does the crisis communication and management plan emphasis what are different types of possible crisis that could affect the organization?
- Does the crisis communication and management plan indicates, who are the possible members to form part of the crisis team what roles and responsibilities should be delegated to them?
- Does the crisis communication and management plan included what key resources do they possess, and how will they disseminate information about the crisis to key stakeholders?

However the researcher could not find any tangible document that could help to collect document based data. So based on this the researcher understood, Wollega university corporate communication office does not have a crisis management and communication strategy and plan, and every crisis management activities are not scientific based.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

#### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter demonstrates the summary of findings, the conclusions and the recommendations. The study attempted to examine crisis communication strategies and implementation of Wollega university corporate communication director.

#### 5.2. Summary of findings

As the researcher has identified, there was no research conducted in crisis communication in Wollega University before this study has been progressed. Thus, the researcher became inspired to conduct a study on “crisis communication strategies and implementation of Wollega university corporate communication directorate. To do so, the practices of crisis communication, in pre, while and post crisis stages, stake holder engagement in crisis communication, media relations, challenges and lessons of crisis communication in Wollega University summarized under this section.

Wollega university passed through different crisis history, however, major scenario that impacted the university are student chaos occurred in 2005 EC based on ethnic and political related problem which leads to the death of one student, 2007 EC the national election related students conflict and 2009 EC popular protest against the ruling party. Since, 2010 GC starting from the killing of two Tigrian students on ethnic based conflicts; Wollega University could not able to keep sustainable peace at its three campuses. On 2011-2012 EC the university faced new crisis of conflict among students which resulted to critical injury for 11 students and damage for teaching classes and students' cafes.

While the crisis hits the university, the corporate communication office was not well prepared in crisis management and crisis communication. After they noticed the crisis, crisis response team established and role and responsibilities shared among the members and spokesperson was also assigned. The assigned spokesperson was selected with the criteria of eloquence, persuasive and fluency of different language, but experience and professionalism was not considered. The spokesperson reported to the town polices and regional special forces. Regional security forces took part in minimizing and stabilizing the situation, after some destructive measures had taken

by students. The spokes person also provided a crisis communication messages through Wollega university community FM radio, Fana Nekemte FM, telegram and facebook channels. However, the university did not communicate the real situation on the real time.

On the other hand, the university was successful in engaging internal stakeholder in crisis communication. Internal stakeholder; students and staffs were proactively participated in communicating against fake news spreads on social media.

The role of PR staffs played during crisis management and communication is also enviable; they shared role and responsibilities based on their respective duties, they were proactively collecting, checking and sharing information and messages to their internal and external audiences. They also maintained mutual relationship between students and the management through organizing consultative meeting.

The crisis management team employed both traditional and social media during and post crisis. Social media, particularly facebook was possibly considered as effective tool during crisis communication, which enables to disseminate information in real time.

lack of training, absence of professional staff, and interference of management in PR activities are considered as professional or operational related challenges that the corporate communication office is facing. Whereas, Uncertainty, contradicting messages, inadequate resources, and frequent network break down, unpreparedness, lack of professional staff, distorted messages and poor timing of communication is also challenges faced during crisis communication period.

Finally, crisis preparedness, working in team and stakeholder engagement in crisis management are the best lessons acquired from the crisis communication period.

Though, I have tried to conduct document based analysis on the crisis management and communication strategy of the university, however, the researcher could not find any tangible document of crisis management and communication plan that could help to collect document based data. So based on this the researcher understood, Wollega university corporate communication office does not have a crisis management and communication strategy and plan, and every crisis management activities are not scientific based.

### 5.3. Conclusion

As explained in the previous chapters, when a crisis hit an organization it could threaten its several aspects, and sometimes it could even challenge its sustainability. Currently, it is observable that the Ethiopian universities are also passing through a recurring crisis situations. This particularly tends to increase with the coming of new technologies, specially the social media and other many information technology platforms. As it is mentioned in the statement of the problem in chapter one, ethno-political based problem among students and a round of negative messages on such platforms appearing to challenge universities, affect teaching-learning process and inflict the reputational asset.

. In examining, the crisis communication strata and implementation of Wollega university, an actual case of ethno-political based crisis among students during 2018-2019GC academic years was selected to conduct this research. This university is among the most Ethiopian universities to get in crisis during this period. Hence, taking this university, and the recent crisis as a case, the research strives to give highlight about the implementation of crisis communication during the crisis situations.

With the assumption of crisis communication efforts to start at the pre-crisis phase and to proceed even after the crisis assumed to be solved, the following three research questions were designed to address the three phases of crisis: (RQ1) what kind of crisis prevention and preparedness efforts are made before a crisis? ; (RQ2) what crisis response strategies were employed during a crisis? And (RQ3) what efforts do the university makes during post crisis phase?

In order to examine the questions, various literatures were critically reviewed to look the data within the lens of what scholars and researches demonstrate. Besides, while the study was approached qualitatively, in-depth interview with key informants was employed with the aim of generating data.

In this regard, to address the crisis prevention and preparation endeavors, the study attempted to assess the presence of major pre-crisis tasks at the organization. Hence, the availability of crisis communication plan, the effort of detecting signals, the engagement of organizations' management in crisis communication and crisis management experience of the university were assessed and analyzed. In this respect, the overall findings revealed that the crisis prevention and the preparation of the university is yet needs further works.

For instance, regarding the availability of crisis communication plan, the study finds out that though the university has a clear overall activity plan, it was not give a due emphasis on crisis communication . Moreover, regarding the issue of forming crisis management team and selecting crisis time spokesperson and other related works, it appears to disagree with literature and scholars' recommendations. For instance, while scholars believe crisis time spokesperson should receive special media training, the organization did not appear with such specialized spokesperson, rather eloquence, persuasive and fluency personality were the criteria to select crisis time spokesperson. On the other hand, since public relations are a management activity, the management of the organization did not participate in the planning and implementation strategic plan. Even though, the organization had similar prior crisis experience, they were no take a lesson and prepared earlier to crisis. Therefore, in general, the findings and analysis revealed that the organization is not following the standard and scientific approaches for prevention and preparation of crisis events.

Regarding the crisis response efforts, though, the organization is not well prepared and planned for crisis management and communication before the crisis hit, it is actually possible to argue that the organization did manage the crisis effectively. The organization employed different mechanisms to control and resolve. For example internal stake holders like student and staffs engaged in crisis communication against fake news distributed through social media, internal relations experts host consultative meeting between students and the university management that enabled to discuss and reach on consensus on crisis resolution. Additionally, there was consistence information sharing to stakeholders and good media monitoring system. And however, in the future, if crisis with maximum attribution of responsibility is to happen, the university might not be able to handle the crisis with such traditional approach.

In this study, some key tasks of post-crisis activities were also assessed to examine the effectiveness of the post-crisis phase of the organization in the aftermath of the crisis. Hence, the research attempt to explore whether the organization evaluated its crisis response efforts and continue investigating the crisis through monitoring activities. However, similar to that of the pre-crisis efforts findings showed that such activities were disregarded by the organization that could actually be concluded as unable to learn from the event.

Finally there are challenges confronted and lesson learnt from crisis episode. The corporate communication office of the university has no qualified and well trained staffs on Public relations, crisis management and communication activities; this resulted for unprofessional crisis



response strategies. The best lesson learned is how important is engaging stakeholders in crisis communication and the need of preparing prior crisis management and communication plan.

#### **5.4. Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are forwarded.

- Overall, as the findings of the study revealed, crisis prevention and preparation activities of the organization is poor and does not seem to agree with the scientific approaches. The organization is not yet exercises the main pre-crisis tasks to have a strong preparation and prevention for a crisis. Thus, clear knowledge and understanding about key pre-crisis activities such as crisis communication plan, crisis team formation, detecting signals and other related duties should be grasped for what benefit they stand for.
- As the research revealed, though the organization has a clear and tangible activity plan, the organization, however, fail to have a separate crisis management and communication plan during the crisis time. Thus, the crisis management and communication plan has to be in place as a guideline for effective crisis activities.
- While public relations activities are a part of management activities, the organization management must give due consideration to participate in development of overall PR strategic plans and should give due attention to the Pr office, since the office is responsible to protect the organization from image and reputational damage.
- From the findings, it is possible to conclude that establishing a crisis team after the crisis hit the organization is not fair and correct. Hence, the organization or the corporate communication office should establish a legitimate crisis management team prior to a crisis, who would be responsible to deal with crisis time activities.
- Within the crisis management team, a spokesperson should be assigned to serve as a principal media contact and facilitator and this person should have good media literacy and get relevant training.
- During the time of the research, findings revealed that the organization is splitting the PR office in to corporate communication directorate and international relation directorate. Hence, it is recommendable to exploit this opportunity as a means to put experienced

professional on the position of crisis management and communication activities. And all PR experts should get relevant training on crisis management and communication

- After crisis resolved, the organization did not carry out relevant post-crisis activities like post crisis evaluation and assessment. Thus, for the future, the organization needs to develop organizational learning strategies by evaluating the consequence, result and impact of crisis management and communication of any accident during the crisis cycle and align the lessons with its organizational culture.



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## Appendix A

### **Interview guiding questions for wollega University corporate communication directorate staffs.**

#### **A. Pre-Crisis Period /Preparation**

- I. Has your organization ever experienced crisis?
- II. What is your crisis communication strategy as PR office?
- III. Does your office work with organization management in developing the overall crisis management strategy?
- IV. What was your experience in managing crisis prior to the violence?

#### **B. Crisis response stage**



- I. What crisis response strategies employed in order to manage the crisis and to protect organization's reputational break?
- II. How do you identify signals that indicate the crisis to be happening?
- III. Do you think that your communicated the crisis timely?
- IV. Do you think that your office communicated the real situation?
- V. How did you act during the crisis as a PR professional?
- VI. How do you engage and communicate with stakeholders in a crisis??
- VII. Are the stakeholders always informed of what is happening during a crisis?

**C. Post-Crisis Period**

- i. Do you think the crisis is resolved?
  - ii. What was your office role in crisis resolution?
  - iii. What did the university do after the crisis had been assumed resolved?
  - iv. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your crisis communication strategy after the crisis resolved?
- I. What communication strategies were used different during crisis phases?

**D. Media Relation**

- I. How do you communicate with the media during crisis?
- II. Which kind of media (platform) utilized to communicate the crisis for both internal and external stake holders?
- III. What was the relative importance of the different media employed?

**E. Crisis Communication lesson**

- I. What communication challenges were there in managing the crisis?
- II. What crisis communication lessons did you take from the crisis to maintain better preparedness for the future?

**Content analysis**

**F. Content analysis on crisis communication plan.**

- 1.1. Does the organization have a policy on crisis preparedness or response strategies?
- 1.2. Does the crisis communication plan emphasis what are different types of possible crisis that could affect the organization?

1.3 Does the crisis communication plan indicates, who are the possible members to form part of the crisis team what roles and responsibilities should be delegated to them?

1.4. Does the crisis communication plan included what key resources do they possess, and how will they disseminate information about the crisis to key stakeholders?

## Appendix B

### Profile of interviewee

No.	name	code	Profession	Date of interview
1	Interviewee 1	PR1	Director	Nov.24,2020
2	Interviewee 2	PR 2	News and media relation expert	Nov. 25, 2020
3	Interviewee 3	PR 3	Internal relation expert	Nov. 24, 2020
4	Interviewee 4	PR 4	External relation expert	Nov. 25, 2020
5	Interviewee 5	PR 5	Information and public opinion desk expert	Nov. 24, 2020
6	Interviewee 6	PR 6	Planning, monitoring and evaluation expert	Nov. 25, 2020
7	Interviewee 7	PR 7	Print and audio-visual	Nov. 24, 2020

			expert	
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*Table 01*









