

CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC SECURITY INSTITUTIONS: A THEORETICAL EVALUATION

Adem BEŞLİ¹
Gülsüm ÇALIŞIR²

Research Article

Submit Date: 02.02.2026

Accepted Date: 17.09.2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines crisis communication in public security institutions in Türkiye through a qualitative case study and discourse-oriented analysis. The main research question of the study is: How do public security institutions in Türkiye construct crisis communication discourses in relation to timing, transparency, empathy, trust, and institutional reputation? In line with this question, the study aims to evaluate the crisis communication practices of the Gendarmerie, the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD within the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory. The study is based on a literature-supported qualitative design. Institutional crisis discourses are discussed through selected examples and evaluated in relation to key communication elements such as timely information sharing, transparency, empathy-based language, public trust, and reputation management. The analysis shows that crisis communication in public security institutions functions not only as a means of public information but also as a strategic tool for protecting institutional legitimacy, strengthening public trust, and supporting social cohesion. In this respect, the study contributes to crisis communication literature by connecting major public relations theories with the Türkiye-specific context of public security institutions and by offering practical implications for institutional communication strategies.

Keywords: Crisis communication, discourse analysis, perception management, public relations, public security.

KAMU GÜVENLİĞİ KURUMLARINDA KRİZ İLETİŞİMİ: TEORİK BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’deki kamu güvenliği kurumlarında kriz iletişimini nitel bir vaka çalışması ve söylem odaklı analiz çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel araştırma sorusu şudur: Türkiye’de faaliyet gösteren kamu güvenliği kurumları kriz iletişimi söylemlerini zamanlama, şeffaflık, empati, güven ve kurumsal itibar bağlamında nasıl inşa etmektedir? Bu soru doğrultusunda çalışmanın amacı; Jandarma, Emniyet, Sahil Güvenlik ve AFAD gibi kamu güvenliği kurumlarının kriz iletişimi pratiklerini Durumsal Kriz İletişimi Teorisi, İmaj Onarma Teorisi ve Mükemmellik Teorisi çerçevesinde değerlendirmektir. Çalışma, literatürle desteklenen nitel bir araştırma tasarımına dayanmaktadır. Kurumların kriz dönemlerinde kullandıkları söylemler seçili örnekler üzerinden ele

1 Bağımsız Araştırmacı, Gümüşhane, Türkiye, adembeslii@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-1756-4123.

2 Prof. Dr., Gümüşhane Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Bölümü, Gümüşhane, Türkiye, gulsumcalisir@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-3631-6819.

alınmış; zamanında bilgilendirme, şeffaflık, empati temelli dil, kamu güveni ve itibar yönetimi gibi temel iletişim unsurları bağlamında değerlendirilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda, kamu güvenliği kurumlarında kriz iletişiminin yalnızca kamuoyunu bilgilendirme aracı olarak değil, aynı zamanda kurumsal meşruiyeti koruyan, kamu güvenliğini güçlendiren ve toplumsal uyumu destekleyen stratejik bir iletişim aracı olarak işlev gördüğü sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bu yönüyle çalışma, temel halkla ilişkiler teorilerini Türkiye'deki kamu güvenliği kurumları bağlamıyla ilişkilendirerek kriz iletişimi literatürüne katkı sunmakta ve kurumsal iletişim stratejilerine yönelik uygulamaya dönük çıkarımlar sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Algı yönetimi, halkla ilişkiler, kamu güvenliği, kriz iletişimi, söylem analizi.

INTRODUCTION

Public institutions have a central role in maintaining social order, ensuring public security, and sustaining public services. Among these institutions, public security organizations have a particularly important responsibility not only in routine administrative processes but also during crisis situations. In cases such as natural disasters, terrorist incidents, large-scale accidents, epidemics, or social unrest, communication between public security institutions and the public becomes important not only for informing citizens but also for guiding society psychologically, building a sense of trust, and restoring social order (Geray, 2006, p. 44). Communication activities carried out during crisis periods have multiple functions, such as protecting institutional legitimacy, managing public perception, and accelerating post-crisis recovery. In this sense, crisis communication can be considered a specific and strategic field within the discipline of public relations (Gökçe, 2019, p. 86). The widespread use of digital platforms, especially social media, both facilitates and complicates crisis communication. This transformation directly affects the quality of the relationship established with the public during crisis periods (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021, p. 74).

The communication approach adopted by public institutions during crisis periods contributes not only to informing citizens about the event but also to increasing their involvement in the process and strengthening their sense of trust. In this respect, crisis communication can be understood as a strategic instrument for rebuilding public trust rather than merely as a technical act of information transfer (Grunig, 2001, p. 12). Crisis communication is thus not only a subfield of public relations, but also an important factor in the effectiveness of public policy and in the quality of the relationship between the state and citizens (Boin et al., 2009, p. 82). For public security institutions, sharing accurate information, using empathetic language, ensuring

consistency, and emphasizing accountability during crisis moments are important for managing public reactions and building trust (Coombs, 2007b, pp. 163–176). Today, crises do not occur only in physical spaces; they also develop and spread through digital media. False information, disinformation campaigns, and manipulative content circulated on social media may expand the scope of a crisis and increase the communication challenges faced by public institutions. Therefore, crisis communication involves not only message production but also monitoring, verification, and strategic response processes (Veil et al., 2011, pp. 110–122). The language used by institutions, the communication channels they prefer, and the form of interaction they establish with their target audiences directly affect both crisis management and the level of public trust in the institution (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, pp. 43–55). The communication models used by public institutions during crisis periods also affect post-crisis reconstruction and the protection of administrative legitimacy. In particular, the two-way symmetrical model, which has an important place in public relations theory, emphasizes that public institutions should not merely transmit messages, but should also listen to public opinion, receive feedback, and establish interaction with their stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 19–45). This approach forms the basis of proactive and accountable communication strategies in crisis communication. Communication activities carried out in line with principles such as transparency, open communication, and trust during crisis periods contribute not only to immediate crisis management but also to institutional continuity and long-term success in public relations (Coombs, 2007a, p. 164). Theoretical models developed in the field of crisis communication provide a useful framework for understanding which strategies public institutions may adopt during crisis periods. Situational Crisis Communication Theory, in particular, suggests that institutions should determine their communication strategies according to the type of crisis, the level of responsibility attributed to the institution, and the expectations of the public (Coombs, 2007b, pp. 163–176).

Image Repair Theory, on the other hand, focuses on the strategies that institutions may use to restore their reputation after a crisis. These strategies include denial, shifting responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and apology.

In this respect, the theory provides an important framework for analyzing how institutions respond to reputational threats and how they attempt to rebuild public trust after crisis situations (Benoit, 1995, pp. 70–90). Since crisis communication includes not only response during the crisis but also preparation before the crisis and recovery after the crisis, it should be considered a continuous and strategic communication process rather than a momentary institutional reaction (Ulmer et al., 2011, pp. 1–18). This study aims to examine crisis communication in public security institutions in Türkiye through a qualitative case study and discourse-oriented analysis. The main research question of the study is: How do public security institutions in Türkiye construct crisis communication discourses in relation to timing, transparency, empathy, trust, and institutional reputation? In line with this research question, the study evaluates the crisis communication practices of the Gendarmerie, the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD within the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory. In this respect, the study combines a literature-supported theoretical discussion with a qualitative discourse-oriented case study approach. The study also contributes to the crisis communication literature by connecting major public relations theories with the Türkiye-specific context of public security institutions and by offering practical implications for institutional communication strategies.

1. Institutional Approaches to Crisis Communication in the Context of Public Security

1.1. Crisis Concept and Types of Crisis

The concept of crisis is discussed in different ways in the social sciences and is generally used to describe extraordinary situations that disrupt the routine functioning of an organization or society and require urgent intervention. Such situations usually involve uncertainty, time pressure, and a serious threat. For institutions, a crisis is not only an administrative problem; it is also a situation that should be evaluated in terms of social trust, perception management, and psychological effects (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021, p. 15). In public institutions, crisis does not only refer to an internal process. It also represents a communication problem that directly affects public trust and institutional reputation. Especially for institutions operating in the field of public security, a crisis may require the reconstruction of

public relations processes (Austin et al., 2012, pp. 188–207). Therefore, defining the concept of crisis clearly and classifying crisis types systematically helps institutions develop more effective strategies (Pearson & Clair, 1998, pp. 59–76).

Crises are generally classified into three groups according to their causes: natural crises, technological crises, and human-induced crises. Natural crises arise from events such as earthquakes, floods, and fires, and they usually occur beyond the direct control of institutions (Akdağ & Arklan, 2013, pp. 33–55). Technological crises result from technical problems such as system failures, infrastructure breakdowns, or technological malfunctions. Human-induced crises, on the other hand, generally emerge as a result of negligence, error, misconduct, or mismanagement (Mitroff, 2004, pp. 45–60). Another important distinction concerns the way crises emerge. Sudden crises occur unexpectedly and force institutions to respond quickly. In contrast, gradual crises usually begin with early warning signals, develop over a longer period, and may grow because of neglected problems or delayed responses (Bundy et al., 2017, pp. 1661–1692). Weaknesses in internal communication, problems in information flow, and inadequacies in public relations processes may also increase the impact of a crisis (Augustine, 1995, pp. 147–158). The type and development pattern of a crisis directly affect the communication strategy that institutions should adopt. For example, in crises caused by human error, institutions are expected to act transparently, assume responsibility when necessary, and take steps aimed at image repair. In natural disasters, however, timely information sharing, empathy, and reassurance become more prominent. Therefore, it is necessary not only to identify the type of crisis but also to adopt a theoretical perspective on how communication should be constructed during the crisis process (Selçuk, 2024, pp. 994–1014).

1.2. Crisis Communication Theories

Crisis communication is a specific field of public relations that focuses on the communication processes established by organizations with the public during unexpected and critical situations. Its importance derives from its strategic functions such as information sharing, public perception management, trust-building, and the protection of institutional reputation. Especially for public security institutions, crisis communication is not only an administrative process carried out by public relations

units; it is also an organizational responsibility that affects the institution as a whole (Seeger, 2006, pp. 232–244). These models provide guidance on what kind of communication language institutions should use, which strategies they should adopt, and how they should respond to public expectations during crisis situations (Coombs, 2015b, pp. 141–148). In public relations literature, three main theories are frequently used in the analysis of crisis communication: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair Theory (IRT), and Excellence Theory (ET). Each of these theories approaches the crisis process from a different perspective and offers institutions different ways to develop communication strategies (Fearn-Banks, 2017, pp. 35–62).

While SCCT emphasizes the need to determine communication strategy according to the characteristics and responsibility level of the crisis, IRT focuses on how institutions can respond when their reputation is damaged. ET, on the other hand, approaches crisis communication from a more structural perspective and evaluates institutional communication in terms of two-way interaction, transparency, and public-oriented communication. These theories are not only conceptual frameworks; they also provide strategic guidance for practitioners working in the field of public relations and crisis communication (Avery et al., 2010, pp. 190–192). Therefore, crisis communication is concerned not only with what is said, but also with how, when, in which context, and to whom it is said.

1.2.1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by William Timothy Coombs, is one of the most widely used theoretical models in the field of crisis communication. The theory argues that not all crises can be managed through the same communication strategy. Instead, crisis response should be shaped according to the type of crisis, the level of responsibility attributed to the institution, and the possible threat to institutional reputation (Coombs, 2007a, p. 164). In this respect, SCCT provides a contextual framework that helps institutions match crisis types with appropriate response strategies.

There are three basic elements at the center of SCCT: crisis type, crisis history, and reputational threat. Crisis type refers to the source and nature of the event. For

example, a natural disaster caused by external factors and a crisis resulting from an institutional mistake cannot be evaluated within the same category. Crisis history refers to whether the institution has experienced similar crises before and whether the public already has a negative perception about the institution. Reputational threat, on the other hand, concerns the extent to which the crisis damages institutional credibility and public trust (Coombs, 2007b, pp. 163–176).

Within the framework of SCCT, crises are generally classified into three main groups: victim crises, accidental crises, and preventable or intentional crises. In victim crises, the institution is also affected by the crisis and is not perceived as the main responsible actor. Natural disasters, sabotage, or external attacks can be evaluated within this category. In accidental crises, the institution may have some level of responsibility, but there is no deliberate intention. In preventable or intentional crises, the crisis is associated with institutional misconduct, negligence, unethical behavior, or a wrong decision (Coombs, 2015a, p. 42). This classification is important because it guides institutions in choosing an appropriate communication strategy. In victim-based crises, information sharing, empathy, and reassurance generally come to the forefront. In accidental crises, explanation, partial responsibility, and corrective action may be needed. In preventable or intentional crises, accepting responsibility, apology, compensation, and strong corrective measures become more important. Therefore, the communication strategy of an institution should be shaped according to the crisis type and the public's perception of institutional responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, pp. 165–186). In crisis situations involving public security operations, accidents, disasters, or social incidents, the language used by the institution may shape how the public interprets the event. For this reason, using a discourse that provides information, shows responsibility, and offers solutions may create a more constructive public perception than a purely defensive or self-justifying language (Steele & Blau, 2023, pp. 520–544).

Another important contribution of SCCT is that it does not explain all crisis situations through a single and fixed model. On the contrary, it emphasizes contextual factors and encourages institutions to evaluate the specific conditions of each crisis.

This point also creates a connection with Image Repair Theory, which focuses more directly on reputation restoration and post-crisis perception management.

1.2.2. Image Repair Theory (IRT)

Image Repair Theory (IRT), developed by William L. Benoit, focuses on the communication strategies that individuals and institutions use when their image or reputation is damaged after a crisis. According to Benoit, image is an important social asset for both individuals and organizations. When this image is threatened, institutions need to engage in a communication process in order to regain public trust and protect their legitimacy (Benoit, 1995, pp. 1–31). The theory offers different strategic responses according to the nature of the crisis, the expectations of the public, and the institution's relationship with the event. These strategies are generally grouped under five main categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and apology. In the denial strategy, the institution rejects the claim or argues that it is not responsible for the incident. Evasion of responsibility refers to attempts to reduce the level of responsibility attributed to the institution. Reducing offensiveness includes explanations that aim to lessen the negative perception of the action or event. Apology involves accepting responsibility and asking for public understanding, while corrective action refers to concrete steps taken to repair the damage and prevent similar problems in the future (Çalışır, 2019a, pp. 1533–1548).

IRT is important not only for private sector organizations but also for public institutions, especially those operating in the field of public security. These institutions are closely associated with trust, authority, and legitimacy; therefore, a crisis may seriously damage their public image. In crises involving law enforcement officers or public security operations, it is usually not sufficient for the institution to make a formal statement. The emotional expectations of the public, the need for transparency, and the demand for accountability should also be taken into consideration. In such cases, strategies such as apology, explanation, and corrective action may help the institution rebuild social legitimacy and public trust (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, pp. 165–186). For public security institutions, image repair strategies are particularly important in the post-crisis period. An unclear statement, delayed information sharing, or a defensive communication style may cause greater damage to public trust than the

crisis itself. Therefore, institutions should not only react to a crisis but also develop a strategic image repair approach.

1.2.3. Excellence Theory (ET)

Excellence Theory (ET), developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, is one of the most influential approaches in public relations literature. According to this approach, the communication established between institutions and their publics becomes effective when it is integrated into administrative processes and when it supports mutual understanding (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 15). One of the most important contributions of Excellence Theory is its emphasis on the two-way symmetrical model. In this framework, public relations units should not be limited to producing news, preparing press releases, or reducing the effects of crises after they occur. Instead, they should take part in strategic decision-making processes and contribute to transparent, participatory, and public-oriented communication (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 106). This approach is particularly important during crisis periods. In crisis situations, institutions need not only to defend themselves or explain the event, but also to understand public reactions, concerns, and expectations. Therefore, the communication process should include openness, feedback, empathy, and interaction. In this sense, symmetrical and interactive communication during crisis periods can strengthen the relationship between the institution and the public (Olsson, 2014, pp. 113–125). In Türkiye, the full institutionalization of this model in public institutions is still developing. In many public institutions, communication units may still function mainly as operational units responsible for issuing press statements and managing information flow during crises. However, Excellence Theory suggests that public relations should be organized at a level that can provide strategic guidance before, during, and after crises. Integrating communication units with senior management may help institutions produce more coherent, timely, and public-sensitive crisis communication strategies (Türkal & Taşcıoğlu, 2018, pp. 37–58). Within the context of crisis communication, Excellence Theory offers a balanced framework between institutional discourse and social expectations. This perspective strengthens participation, transparency, trust, and accountability in public relations practices. Therefore, Excellence Theory contributes to understanding how crisis communication

can be structured as a strategic, two-way, and public-oriented process in public security institutions.

1.3. The Function of Crisis Communication in Public Security Institutions

Public security institutions are among the most visible actors in the relationship between the state and citizens. The communication style adopted by these institutions during crisis periods is not limited to providing information. It also has multidimensional functions such as rebuilding public trust in the state, protecting social legitimacy, and maintaining institutional reputation. For this reason, crisis communication is both a technical process and a strategic communication tool for institutions operating in the field of public security. Institutions such as the Gendarmerie, the Turkish National Police, and the Coast Guard Command have direct contact with the public. Therefore, their communication performance during crisis moments has a significant effect on social perception. A poorly worded statement, delayed response, or unclear message may damage institutional trust regardless of the nature of the event itself. In this respect, success in crisis communication depends not only on the content of the message, but also on its timing, language, tone, and communication channel (Jungblut et al., 2024, pp. 4647–4668). Crisis communication has three main functions in public security institutions. The first is to inform the public accurately and in a timely manner during the crisis. The second is to manage public perception and respond to criticism directed toward the institution. The third is to rebuild trust and institutional reputation after the crisis. These functions become even more important in digital communication environments where information pollution and disinformation can spread rapidly (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, pp. 408–412).

In institutions where communication experts are not positioned strategically, reactions during crisis periods may remain fragmented, reactive, and inconsistent. However, in public security institutions, crisis communication should not be concerned only with “what is said.” It should also consider who says it, how it is said, through which channel it is delivered, and in what context it is received. Factors such as institutional hierarchy, media relations, the capacity of public relations units, and coordination between field units and central communication structures are therefore critical. The discourses used by public security institutions during crisis periods also

affect the emotional state of society. Institutions that use calming, empathetic, and unifying language instead of panic-producing or accusatory expressions can manage crisis communication more effectively. The main challenge in this process is to explain the situation clearly while protecting public trust and institutional legitimacy. In this sense, crisis communication is not only a short-term reaction to an event; it is also an important component of long-term institutional image management (Seeger, 2006, pp. 232–244).

1.4. Institutional Language and Discourse Strategies Used in Crisis Periods

During crisis periods, not only what an institution says but also how it says it is important. Institutional language shapes public perception and functions as a strategic tool for protecting institutional legitimacy. This is particularly important for public security institutions, which operate with high authority and social sensitivity. The language used by these institutions may directly influence public reactions and the level of public trust (Fearn-Banks, 2017, pp. 35–62). Crisis discourses usually take shape around certain strategic choices. These may include accepting responsibility, apologizing, reducing the perceived effects of the crisis, identifying another responsible actor, or remaining silent. For example, in statements that deny direct responsibility but aim to calm the public, expressions such as “regret over the incident” or “necessary examinations have been initiated” are often used. Such statements may function as discourse strategies that show empathy without necessarily accepting full responsibility (Benoit, 1997, pp. 177–186). The language used by public security institutions should also reflect institutional authority and the capacity to manage the situation. These institutions are not only parties to crisis-related events; they are also actors responsible for maintaining public order and managing the consequences of the event. Therefore, institutional statements often include references to legal responsibilities, social order, and public information. However, transforming this language into a more explanatory, participatory, and public-sensitive discourse rather than a cold or authoritarian tone is important for the success of crisis communication (Çelebi & Sezer, 2017, pp. 116–134).

The tone of institutional discourse directly affects public crisis perception. For example, formal expressions such as “necessary steps will be taken” after an improper

intervention during a security operation may sometimes be perceived as insufficient by the public. However, when the same situation is communicated with a clearer acknowledgement of responsibility and with expressions indicating corrective intent, public perception may differ. In this respect, the tone and wording of institutional statements are central to the management of public trust (Çelebi, 2021, pp. 92–106). The content of institutional language is as important as its form. Long and complex explanations may create confusion during crisis periods, whereas simple, understandable, and direct messages are usually more effective. In addition, word choices such as “unfortunate incident,” “accident,” “omission,” or “technical error” reflect how the institution positions responsibility. Therefore, institutional crisis statements should be shaped not only by legal considerations but also by communication expertise (Seeger, 2006, pp. 232–244). The rise of social media has made the transformation of institutional language unavoidable. Statements made through traditional media usually pass through certain filters, while social media requires faster, more flexible, and more direct interaction. This situation pushes institutions to develop a clearer, more responsive, and more human-centered tone in crisis communication. Especially for public security institutions, social media statements should not only be formal and authoritative; they should also create a communicative structure open to public sensitivity, mutual interaction, and post-crisis dialogue (Kent, 2010, pp. 643–656). In conclusion, institutional language and discourse used during crisis periods are not only tools for delivering information but also instruments of strategic perception management. In this context, public relations experts should plan both the content and the form of crisis discourse by considering the social effects of each statement. Accordingly, the following section explains the methodological basis of the study and clarifies how the institutional evaluation was conducted.

2. Method: Qualitative Case Study and Discourse Analysis

This study was conducted within a qualitative research design and structured as a case study supported by discourse analysis. The main purpose of the study is to examine how crisis communication is constructed by public security institutions in Türkiye through institutional statements, selected crisis discourses, and theoretical

literature. In this respect, the study does not aim to produce statistical generalizations; rather, it seeks to interpret the meanings, emphases, and communication strategies embedded in institutional crisis discourse. This methodological orientation is consistent with qualitative research, which enables the researcher to examine social meanings and communication practices in their own context (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, p. 45). The cases considered in the study are the Gendarmerie, the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD. These institutions were selected because they operate directly in the field of public security and maintain visible communication with the public during crisis situations. Their crisis-related statements and communication practices provide a suitable case context for evaluating the relationship between public security, public trust, institutional reputation, and crisis communication. In this framework, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory were used as the main theoretical lenses, since these approaches are widely accepted in public relations and crisis communication literature and provide explanatory tools for evaluating institutional responses during crises (Coombs, 2007a, pp. 29–41). The study is based on publicly accessible institutional discourses, official statements, examples of crisis communication on social media, and academic literature on crisis communication. Domestic and international sources were used together in order to build a balanced theoretical background. During the review process, academic works, articles, books, institutional texts, and crisis communication studies relevant to the topic were considered; sources that did not directly serve the conceptual and methodological focus of the study were excluded. Attention was also paid to the academic reliability of the sources, their relevance to the subject, and their contribution to the crisis communication framework (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, p. 45).

In the analysis process, the selected institutional discourses were examined through five main categories: timely information sharing, transparency, empathy-based language, trust-building, and institutional reputation. These categories were derived from both the theoretical framework and the recurring themes in crisis communication literature. The statements of the selected institutions were not evaluated as isolated texts; instead, they were interpreted in relation to the broader

public security context, public expectations during crises, and the strategic functions of institutional communication.

Within this framework, the study combines theoretical discussion with case-based discourse analysis. The literature provides the conceptual ground, while the selected institutional discourses make it possible to evaluate how crisis communication principles are reflected in practice. Therefore, the method section should be read as a qualitative and interpretive design rather than a purely descriptive literature review. This approach enables the study to address both the theoretical and practical dimensions of crisis communication in public security institutions (Grunig, 2001, pp. 11–30). As a limitation, the study does not include interviews, surveys, or field observations. The analysis is limited to publicly accessible institutional discourse examples and literature-supported theoretical evaluation. For this reason, the findings are not presented as statistically generalizable results; instead, they offer a conceptual and interpretive assessment of crisis communication practices in selected public security institutions in Türkiye.

3. Findings and Institutional Evaluation

3.1. Compatibility of Crisis Communication Practices with Institutional Models

When the selected institutional crisis discourses are evaluated within the framework of crisis communication theories, it is possible to observe that public security institutions in Türkiye tend to use communication practices that correspond to several established theoretical models. In this respect, the institutional statements examined in the study should not be considered merely as operational announcements. They also reflect strategic communication choices related to public trust, institutional legitimacy, and reputation management. This indicates that crisis communication in public security institutions has gradually become a more planned and institutionalized communication practice (Seeger, 2006, pp. 232–244). From the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the selected examples show that the communication language used by institutions may vary depending on the type and sensitivity of the crisis. In cases related to public safety, disasters, search and rescue activities, or social incidents, institutions tend to construct their statements around information sharing, empathy, reassurance, and responsibility. This approach is

especially visible in the communication practices of institutions such as the Gendarmerie, the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD. The use of different tones and emphases according to the nature of the crisis supports the basic assumption of Situational Crisis Communication Theory that crisis responses should be shaped in accordance with the crisis context (Coombs, 2007b, pp. 163–176).

In this sense, the findings suggest that public security institutions do not rely only on immediate operational reflexes. Rather, their communication practices also include strategic elements such as risk management, public reassurance, and the protection of institutional image. The correspondence between crisis type and institutional response is important because it helps institutions avoid a uniform communication style and encourages them to adopt a discourse suitable for the expectations of the public and the sensitivity of the event (Coombs, 2007a, p. 86). The integration of institutional communication units into decision-making processes can also strengthen the effectiveness and consistency of crisis communication, especially in situations that require rapid and reliable information flow (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 106).

From the perspective of Image Repair Theory, the selected institutional discourses include expressions that aim to reduce public concern, protect institutional reputation, and rebuild trust after crisis situations. Statements such as expressing sorrow, announcing that necessary procedures have been initiated, or informing the public about ongoing processes can be interpreted as discourse strategies directed toward responsibility management and image repair. These statements do not always mean that the institution accepts direct responsibility; however, they show that the emotional expectations of the public are taken into account in crisis communication (Benoit, 1995, pp. 10–25). Excellence Theory also provides a useful framework for interpreting the communication practices of public security institutions. The theory emphasizes that public relations should not be limited to one-way information transfer, but should support mutual understanding, transparency, and public-oriented communication. In this regard, the use of social media, public announcements, visual materials, and continuous updates during crisis periods can be seen as attempts to establish a more interactive relationship with the public. When institutional

communication units maintain contact with both senior management and the field, crisis communication becomes more consistent and more responsive to public expectations (Çalışır, 2019b, pp. 1476–1491; Grunig, 2006, pp. 151–176). These theories help explain how institutional discourse is shaped according to crisis type, public expectations, reputation concerns, and the need for transparent communication.

3.2. Case-Based Observations Through Crisis Discourses

The crisis communication strategies used by public security institutions aim not only to respond to incidents but also to maintain public order, reduce uncertainty, and support social trust. Within this context, the communication practices of the Gendarmerie during crisis periods provide a meaningful example of how institutional reflexes and public-oriented discourse can function together. In addition to operational activities in the field, the use of constructive, empathetic, and responsibility-based language in crisis communication reflects the changing character of modern public administration and public relations practices (Özgür, 2023, pp. 2483–2514). In the Gendarmerie's social media statements and public announcements, the discourse generally combines information sharing with emotional reassurance. Especially after natural disasters, search and rescue operations, missing person cases, or large-scale security activities, the language used by the institution tends to be clear, directive, and solidarity-oriented. Formulations emphasizing state–society solidarity, uninterrupted search efforts, and collective resilience do not merely provide information; they also respond to the public's need for emotional support and collective confidence during crisis moments (Çalışır, 2015, pp. 115–144).

Another noteworthy point in these institutional statements is that operational activities are often presented together with their human and social dimensions. In rescue-related communication, for instance, the dedication of field teams, their contact with citizens, and their cooperation with local units are emphasized. This type of discourse contributes to the presentation of public security not only as an issue of authority and control but also as a field of public service and social sensitivity (Özdemir & Aktaş Yamanoglu, 2010, pp. 123–136). Therefore, crisis communication becomes a means of strengthening the bond between the institution and the public.

The narrative structure used in such statements is generally simple, understandable, and reassuring. During crisis periods, the public needs quick access to reliable information and expects institutions to create a sense of control and confidence. Public security institutions respond to this expectation not only through operational presence but also through regular and accessible communication practices (Seeger, 2006, pp. 232–244).

In this sense, discourse patterns emphasizing uninterrupted duty and a continued presence in the field can be interpreted as expressions that underline institutional dedication, continuity, and responsibility. These statements also function as symbolic messages that strengthen institutional values in the eyes of the public (Kılınç & Bayçu, 2020, pp. 73–103).

In recent years, public security institutions in Türkiye have gone through a visible process of institutionalization in crisis communication. Institutions such as the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD do not only inform the public during crises; they also use supportive, empathetic, and trust-building discourses. From the perspective of public relations, these practices can be seen as indicators of a more public-oriented approach to communication in public administration (Çelebi, 2021, pp. 92–106). AFAD's post-disaster communication practices are particularly important in terms of crisis communication. The use of simple language, regular updates, and messages directly addressing citizens indicates that institutional communication is not limited to central press releases. Rather, it takes a more widespread and multi-layered form that reaches the field and different public groups. Messages emphasizing that citizens are not alone and that public resources remain active in the field may be interpreted as discourse examples that provide psychological support and reinforce public trust (Selçuk, 2024, pp. 994–1014).

In the statements of the Turkish National Police, especially regarding public incidents, a balance between institutional authority and social sensitivity can be observed. References to legal proceedings and transparent process management emphasize both the protection of public order and the public's right to be informed. This type of discourse corresponds to the crisis communication approach that seeks to balance institutional responsibility, public expectations, and the sensitivity of the event

(Coombs, 2010, pp. 17–53). It should also be noted that some crisis statements may occasionally use more technical, formal, or cautious language. However, this can be related to the uncertainty, time pressure, and legal sensitivity that exist in crisis situations. In such cases, official language may function as a protective discourse aimed at preventing misinformation and controlling the public reaction. Nevertheless, continued communication through follow-up statements, updates, and more detailed explanations can reduce this limitation and help maintain public trust (Seeger, 2006, pp. 232–244).

The Coast Guard Command's statements on sensitive issues such as maritime accidents and irregular migration also provide examples of careful and reassuring crisis communication. In these statements, humanitarian responsibility, the protection of human life, and legal obligations are often emphasized together. An emphasis on humanitarian duty reflects not only the operational role of the institution but also its social responsibility perspective. This contributes to the public perception of the institution as both a security actor and a humanitarian public service provider (Selçuk, 2024, pp. 994–1014). Overall, the crisis discourses of public security institutions in Türkiye indicate an increasing tendency toward speed, transparency, trust, and empathy. These elements show that crisis communication is no longer limited to one-way information transfer. Instead, it has become a strategic communication process in which institutions seek to manage meaning, public perception, and emotional expectations at the same time (Olsson, 2014, pp. 113–125).

The use of multiple communication channels also strengthens this process. Public security institutions increasingly use central press releases, social media platforms, local communication channels, visual content, and field-based communication practices together. This multi-channel structure helps institutions reach different segments of society and shape public perception more effectively during crisis periods (Aydoğan, 2021, pp. 1–26). Social media has also transformed the tone of institutional crisis communication. In addition to formal announcements, more affective and human-centered condolence and solidarity messages are now frequently included in institutional discourse. These expressions show that crisis

communication is not only a technical process of information delivery but also a means of social support and emotional solidarity (Kılınç & Bayçu, 2020, pp. 73–103).

In this context, the discursive sensitivity of public security institutions contributes to the strengthening of public trust. Maintaining communication not only during the crisis but also after the crisis through follow-up information, recognition of field efforts, and public-oriented messages helps transform trust from a temporary reaction into a more sustainable institutional value. These practices can be associated with the corrective action and empathy dimensions emphasized in Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995, p. 28). Despite these positive developments, crisis communication practices can still be improved. For example, some statements may be supported with more visual materials, field experiences may be incorporated more systematically into institutional narratives, and success stories may be used more effectively in public communication. Such suggestions should not be understood as criticisms of institutional inadequacy, but as opportunities to make existing communication practices more systematic, transparent, and sustainable (Coombs, 2015b, pp. 141–148).

3.3. Strategic Reflexes and Social Perception Management

The communication reflexes displayed by public security institutions during crisis periods have a direct effect not only on the management of the crisis itself but also on the construction of social trust. In contemporary public administration, crisis management is not limited to operational response; it also includes perception management, reputation protection, and the maintenance of institutional legitimacy. In this context, institutions such as the Gendarmerie General Command, the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD use crisis communication as a mechanism that connects information flow with the trust relationship established between the institution and society (Özgür, 2023, pp. 2483–2514). The public's first expectation of public institutions during a crisis is to receive accurate, clear, and timely information. However, modern public security institutions increasingly go beyond this basic expectation. Their crisis communication practices also include messages that provide moral support, reinforce collective solidarity, and reflect a sense of public responsibility. For example, AFAD's solidarity-oriented discourse after disasters or

the Gendarmerie's emphasis on uninterrupted duty can be interpreted as examples of an emotional and symbolic bond established with the public (Akar, 2021, pp. 244–259). These strategic reflexes function as purposeful responses to the concerns and expectations directed by society toward the state and public security institutions during crisis periods. In this way, crisis communication contributes to the preservation of institutional legitimacy and reputation not only during the crisis but also in the post-crisis period. Institutions that are able to gauge public sentiment, take social concerns into account, and provide reassurance through timely messages can maintain a stronger position in the public mind after the crisis (Çelebi, 2021, pp. 92–106).

Another important dimension of strategic reflexes is consistency in institutional communication language. In the crisis communication practices of public security institutions, statements are not only related to the immediate event; they also reflect institutional values, mission perception, and public service understanding. This helps public perception develop within a continuing relationship of trust rather than remaining limited to a single incident. Therefore, consistency in discourse becomes an important factor in transforming crisis communication into a sustainable institutional communication practice (Olsson, 2014, pp. 113–125). In addition to content, the tone of communication plays a decisive role in shaping social perception. The softer, more empathetic, and unifying tone observed in recent years enables the public to perceive institutional statements not only as sources of information but also as expressions of shared concern. For instance, the Coast Guard Command's emphasis on the protection of human life or the Turkish National Police's statements referring to legal procedures and the rule of law can be evaluated as examples of a strategic tone that combines institutional authority with public sensitivity (Çakmak, 2023, pp. 179–194). In this respect, crisis communication becomes one of the main areas through which institutional identity is made visible and the relationship of trust with the public is deepened (Selçuk, 2024, pp. 994–1014). Within this framework, crisis communication becomes a field in which institutional identity, public responsibility, social sensitivity, and perception management intersect.

CONCLUSION

This study examined crisis communication in public security institutions in Türkiye through a qualitative case study and discourse-oriented analysis. The study focused on the Gendarmerie, the Turkish National Police, the Coast Guard Command, and AFAD, and evaluated selected institutional crisis discourses within the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory. In this respect, the study aimed to understand how public security institutions construct crisis communication in relation to timing, transparency, empathy, trust, and institutional reputation.

The analysis indicates that crisis communication in public security institutions is not limited to the transmission of official information. Rather, it functions as a strategic communication practice that contributes to public trust, institutional legitimacy, and social cohesion. The selected examples show that institutional crisis discourses often include elements such as timely information sharing, reassurance, emotional support, responsibility, and reputation protection. These elements demonstrate that crisis communication has become an important part of institutional communication culture in public security organizations.

The findings also suggest that the communication practices of public security institutions can be interpreted through the combined use of major crisis communication theories. Situational Crisis Communication Theory helps explain how institutional responses may change according to the type and sensitivity of the crisis. Image Repair Theory provides a useful framework for understanding reputation-protecting and trust-restoring statements. Excellence Theory, on the other hand, helps evaluate the importance of transparency, public-oriented communication, and two-way interaction in crisis periods. In terms of theoretical contribution, the study brings together three major public relations theories and applies them to the specific context of public security institutions in Türkiye. In terms of contextual contribution, it discusses how crisis communication is shaped within institutions that have direct contact with society during disasters, public incidents, security operations, and other crisis situations. In terms of practical contribution, the study shows that crisis communication should be planned not only as an emergency information process but

also as a long-term strategy for maintaining public trust and institutional reputation. However, the study has some limitations. Since the research is based on publicly accessible institutional discourses and literature-supported interpretation, it does not include interviews, surveys, or field observations. Therefore, the findings should not be read as statistically generalizable results. Instead, they should be understood as a qualitative and interpretive assessment of selected crisis communication practices. Future studies may develop this framework through comparative content analysis, audience research, interviews with communication professionals, or more detailed examination of specific crisis cases.

Overall, the study concludes that crisis communication in public security institutions plays a central role in shaping public perception and strengthening the relationship between institutions and society. When conducted with timely, transparent, empathetic, and consistent communication strategies, crisis communication can support not only crisis management but also public trust, institutional legitimacy, and social solidarity.

Suggestions

Although public security institutions in Türkiye have developed increasingly visible crisis communication practices, these practices can be made more systematic, sustainable, and participatory. The following suggestions are offered not as criticisms of existing institutional practices, but as complementary recommendations for strengthening crisis communication capacity.

Strengthening Institutional Communication Units

Public relations and press units should be positioned more strategically in crisis management processes. These units should not only prepare announcements after a crisis occurs, but should also take part in planning, decision-making, message design, and post-crisis evaluation. Such an approach may help institutions produce communication that is both operationally accurate and socially sensitive.

Developing Cooperation with Communication Experts

Crisis communication strategies may be strengthened through cooperation with communication scholars, media experts, and public relations professionals. Such

cooperation can contribute to the development of a more consistent, clear, and public-oriented communication language, especially in situations involving high uncertainty, social sensitivity, or rapid information flow.

Strategic Use of Visual and Digital Content

Institutional crisis statements can be supported more effectively with infographics, short videos, photographs, and other visual materials. Visual content may help the public understand the crisis process more easily and may also increase the emotional and persuasive impact of institutional messages. However, visual materials should be used carefully, ethically, and in a way that respects the sensitivity of crisis situations.

Establishing Post-Crisis Feedback Mechanisms

Public security institutions may develop feedback mechanisms to evaluate how their crisis communication practices are perceived by the public. Digital surveys, social media monitoring, citizen feedback tools, and post-crisis communication reports may help institutions understand whether their messages were clear, timely, reassuring, and trustworthy. These mechanisms can also support the improvement of future crisis communication strategies.

Incorporating Field Experiences into Institutional Memory

Successful crisis communication experiences should be documented as part of institutional memory. The experiences of field personnel, communication units, local authorities, and citizens may be collected and evaluated through written, visual, and digital archives. These materials can later be used in training programs, institutional reports, and public communication practices.

Expanding Crisis Communication Trainings

Regular crisis communication training should be provided for both communication personnel and field personnel in public security institutions. These trainings may include topics such as crisis discourse, media relations, social media management, public sensitivity, misinformation, empathy-based communication, and post-crisis reputation management. Such training can strengthen institutional

consistency and help personnel develop a more conscious communication approach during crisis situations.

In conclusion, crisis communication in public security institutions should be considered not only as a technical process of informing the public, but also as a strategic field that supports public trust, institutional legitimacy, and social cohesion. Making crisis communication practices more systematic, participatory, and evidence-based may contribute to both the effectiveness of public security services and the strengthening of the relationship between institutions and society.

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Araştırmacı Katkı Oranı: Yazarların çalışmaya katkı oranları eşittir.

Çıkar Çatışması: Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.