Managing Digital Reputation During Sexual Abuse Crises: Communication Strategies for the Catholic Church

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ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church's reputation has been significantly compromised by intensifying the media coverage of sexual abuse scandals, resulting in disillusionment among its adherents and diminished conversion rates. This study employs a systematic approach to analyze real-world digital crisis behaviors across various contexts, identifying six critical indicators of impending digital crises and determining whether a series of criticisms in social media would constitute an incident or a crisis and how to manage them accordingly. Drawing from this analysis, a comprehensive framework tailored for the Catholic Church was developed, encompassing prevention, management, and mitigation phases. This structure transcends mere image preservation, aiming to demonstrate the Church's commitment to rectifying past transgressions, fostering a culture of safety and protection, and resolutely addressing challenges. The proposed guidelines offer pragmatic approaches to managing digital crises, including protocols for establishing crisis committees, addressing negative social media discourse, and implementing data-driven decision-making processes. By emphasizing continuous monitoring, targeted spokesperson training, and active stakeholder engagement, these recommendations provide the Church with essential tools for effective crisis management. These orientations underscore the significance of post-crisis accountability and the incorporation of lessons learned to strengthen the Church's evangelistic mission. By prioritizing empathy, accountability, and transparency in communication, this roadmap presents a strategic approach for enhancing the Church's digital crisis response capabilities. This methodology enabled the institution to restore trust within its community and effectively realign its focus

on its fundamental spiritual mission, thereby demonstrating an unwavering commit-ment to justice and healing.

Keywords: *digital crisis management, Catholic Church, sexual abuse scan-dal, communication strategy, digital reputation*

"I refused to believe that sexuality is important in life itself. I refused as a way of not acknowledging that I had been violated and abused at a young age. Denial was a manifestation of fear and my inability to overcome such painful moments. One way to cope is to have the strength to acknowledge that I was abused and to say it today."

This statement was made by Ricardo in Quito, Ecuador, in 2024,
one day before his suicide.[1]

1. Introduction

Few issues in the past 40 years have commanded as much global media attention, public debate, and emotional response as the sexual abuse crisis within the Cath-olic Church (Rashid and Barron 2019). While historical evidence suggests the prior presence of these kinds of perpetrations (Doyle et al. 2006), public reckon-ing began to intensify in the late 1980s, driven by increased media coverage of individual cases, particularly in the United States (Terry 2015). Key events in Lou-isiana and Massachusetts marked milestones, establishing a narrative of pedophile priests and highlighting inadequate institutional responses, including silence, cover-ups, and lack of clear protocols (Maniscalco 2005). Although these occur-rences raised awareness of the phenomenon, they were initially considered isolated incidents—mainly within the United States—due to the media's concen-trated coverage in that region (Terry 2015).

However, this perception began to shift as the matter gained international attention, with other countries slowly addressing sexual abuse in their dioceses during the 1990s. In Canada, allegations of abuse led the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to issue a statement in 1992 recommending a victim-cen-tered approach and acknowledging past failures to adequately protect children. Australia took a similar step in 1996, with the Australian Catholic Bishops'

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[1] In a final act before his suicide at the National Congress of Ecuador, the individual referred to here as Ricardo (pseudonym) compiled evidence related to the sexual abuse he endured. This evidence, comprising scanned documents, emails, and WhatsApp messages, spanned a period exceeding 36 years. He reportedly sent this collection to his wife via email. Ricardo's death sug-gests a profound sense of despair and a link to his pursuit of justice, which proved unsuccessful in both legal and ecclesiastical channels. Source: Wambra Medio Comunitario: https://wam-bra.ec/impunidad-sagrada-silencio-abuso-iglesia/.

Conference and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes publishing the document "Towards Healing." This document outlined principles and procedures for handling abuse complaints and acknowledged the Church's failure to prevent abuse, particularly through the transfer of clergy to new parishes without appropriate action. In Ireland, the prominent 1994 case of decades-long child sexual abuse had a significant societal impact. The televised trial brought the perpetrator's actions directly into public consciousness, allegedly contributing to increased public pressure and political instability (Moore 1995).

Ultimately, *The Boston Globe*'s 2002 investigation of the Catholic sex abuse crisis increased public attention and propelled it onto the global stage (Henley 2010). This monumental body of work, comprising nearly two dozen stories submitted for Pulitzer consideration, part of 600 published by *The Globe* that year on the scandal, earned the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. The series, which later served as the basis for the Oscar-winning film *Spotlight*, distinguished itself by its powerful combination of rigorous reporting and compelling storytelling, humanizing even some of the scandal's less sympathetic figures (Powers 2016). This pivotal moment initiated what some scholars have termed the Decade of Crisis (2002–2012), characterized by a sustained surge in media coverage and public scrutiny (Plante and McChesney 2011).

During this period, Pope Benedict XVI emerged as a central figure in the United States' media coverage of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse crisis. He was often associated with perceived inadequacies in the Vatican's reactive management and prioritization of institutional reputation over victim welfare (Wan 2010). However, his pontificate also initiated significant reforms, including the 2009 authorization of Special Faculties for dismissing clerics in extraordinary circumstances, and the 2011 Circular Letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which called for the development of consistent guidelines for handling abuse cases. These actions demonstrate an evolving institutional response, indicating concrete internal efforts despite the public's perception of deficiencies (Biliniewicz 2020).

This surge in reporting coupled with increased public pressure led to both legal and canonical actions against abusers and the institutions that enabled them (Francis 2014). These actions included trials, convictions, and the removal of priests from their ministries, alongside the imposition of canonical penalties, such as suspension and laicization. This pervasive media coverage transcended traditional news outlets and permeated popular culture through books, films, and documentaries (Verschueren 2013). Social media amplified the scandal, facilitating rapid information dissemination, fostering public outrage, and empowering survivors to share their stories (Cahill and Wilkinson 2017).

This trend of increased reporting, via both traditional media outlets and social media platforms, extended to regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean (Lecaros and Suárez 2024), Asia, and Africa since 2002 (Méténier

2020), although the number of reported cases remains relatively low compared to those in Europe and the United States. This disparity likely stems from systemic barriers and a historical reluctance to address the issue within these contexts, rather than a lower prevalence of abuse itself (Paulson 2002). In contrast, media coverage has widened its global focus. While the initial media focus centered on child abuse perpetrated by priests, it later expanded to the abuse of adults by priests or religious figures, as well as by lay individuals working within Catholic institutions (Child Rights International Network 2025).

By the second decade of the 21st century, the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandals had become firmly entrenched within the media's agenda-setting function (Rashid and Barron 2019). Non-confessional media played a crucial role in shaping public discourse, highlighting the implications of events for power dynamics, abuse, and institutional accountability (Terry 2015). In contrast, Catholic media, such as the Catholic News Agency, Catholic News Service, EWTN News, National Catholic Register, America Magazine, Catholic Herald, and Zenit News Agency, often prioritized a more spiritual approach. Their coverage emphasized a change of paradigm, a culture of disclosure, and international cooperation. Simultaneously, both sectors examined the causes of the crisis and the Church's responses, including the establishment of task forces, commissions, and protocols (Zavadilová 2022).

The scandal has profoundly impacted the Catholic Church, eroding trust among its members and the wider public (John Paul II 2002), impeding conversion processes, and hindering evangelization (Benedict XVI 2010). Prioritizing institutional reputation over victims fostered deep mistrust, impacting the Church's ability to communicate its messages effectively. Pope Francis (2014) called for prioritizing abuse survivor voices—sexual, spiritual, economic, power, and conscience—as crucial for healing, repentance, justice, and reconciliation. In a distrust climate, the Church must acknowledge failures, seek forgiveness, care for victims, implement preventive measures, and rebuild trust through transparency and accountability at all levels.

This damage extends beyond the spiritual realm, particularly in the digital sphere, where the rapid dissemination of information makes it crucial for the Church to adapt its communication strategies to this new reality. Therefore, notwithstanding the Church's emphasis on transparency and justice, the ramifications of the controversy necessitate enhanced digital crisis management tools and specialized training for spokespersons in transparent, assertive, and empathetic communication.

These resources and training must be tailored to the ecclesiastical context and structure for effective digital communication. In contrast to corporate interactions, which often prioritize institutional preservation, the Catholic Church's crisis communication requires a distinct ethical approach grounded in absolute veracity, the rigorous pursuit of truth and transparency, a victim-centered

approach that prioritizes victim welfare and rights, and zero tolerance for abuse, meaning transparent, timely reporting, and unequivocal condemnation of all abuse (Francis 2024).

In this context, this study presents a pragmatic method for enhancing the Church's digital crisis response and provides guidelines for prevention, management, and mitigation strategies. It is imperative to note that this perspective exclusively addresses communication methodologies and does not offer legal, spiritual, psychological, or canonical counsel; rather, it is designed to complement such guidance and reinforce the emphasis on the Church's fundamental mission of evangelization.

2. Methodology

The current study employs a systematization of real-world crisis events to formulate practical recommendations for crisis communication within the Catholic Church, with a particular focus on the digital environment. This methodology enables the extraction of actionable strategies from the dynamics observed during digital crises. The research corpus comprised 15 distinct events across 10 Latin American and Caribbean countries: Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago. These cases, spanning from 2015 to 2025, encompass a diverse array of organizational contexts, including corporate, institutional, confessional and non-confessional, and academic entities. This varied landscape was intentionally selected to capture the nuances of crisis communication across different sectors and structures, thereby providing a solid foundation for the proposed guidelines and enhancing their applicability beyond a single organization.

The author of this article, who has directed strategic communication units and served in external advisory roles, was responsible for data collection and management. Accordingly, data were obtained using social listening tools with licenses funded by the contracting institutions, and the findings, as aggregated data, are publicly accessible for academic purposes, as in the present publication. This transparency in funding and dissemination ensured the academic integrity of this study. However, specific information related to individual organizations remains classified and protected by confidentiality agreements, ethical standards regarding privacy, and proprietary data.

2.1. Development of the Analytical Framework

In parallel, data collection for this study was conducted within the framework of three key concepts: institutional reputation, digital reputation, and crisis. Institutional reputation is characterized by the acknowledgment given by essential stakeholders, which is intricately connected to both the actual accomplishments

of the institution and, crucially, to how these accomplishments are perceived. It extends beyond merely meeting obligations and expectations in reality; it also encompasses how stakeholders view this fulfillment (Villafañe 2022). An institution might achieve its intended objectives but be regarded as inadequate if it fails to effectively communicate or publicize these achievements. On the other hand, an institution could fall short of certain goals but still maintain a positive reputation if stakeholders recognize genuine effort, extenuating circumstances, or dedication to enhancement. Consequently, an ideal situation involves a strong correlation between actions and perceptions, where actual accomplishments are recognized and appreciated by stakeholders.

Digital reputation extends an institution's conventional reputation into online domains. This virtual image reflects how institutions meet their obligations and satisfy their expectations within the digital sphere. The concept of digital reputation is composed of two primary elements: digital footprint and digital shadow. The former consists of content actively produced and disseminated online by the institution, while the latter encompasses information about the organization generated by external sources, often beyond its direct influence (Beerepoot et al. 2023; Pollák and Markovič 2022). A robust digital reputation is characterized by a favorable equilibrium between these components, where the digital shadow complements and reinforces the intended digital footprint. By contrast, a weak or compromised digital reputation occurs when the digital shadow conflicts with or eclipses the digital footprint. This balance can be assessed through various techniques, including the examination of top search engine results, sentiment analysis utilizing sophisticated language models, and the employment of dedicated social sentiment analysis tools.

According to ISO 22301, a crisis is defined as an abnormal or extraordinary event or situation that threatens an organization or community and requires a strategic, adaptive, and timely response to preserve its viability and integrity (Calder 2021). Substantial damage to digital reputation can directly lead to such threats. Negative online narratives can rapidly escalate, affecting public perception, stakeholder trust, and ultimately, an organization's ability to operate effectively. The rapidity and broad reach of digital communications can amplify unfavorable information, making it challenging to manage and potentially resulting in tangible consequences for the subject. Therefore, a significant negative shift in digital reputation, which is indicative of broader damage to institutional standing, may indicate the onset of a crisis requiring immediate and strategic intervention. The interconnection of these three components is crucial: damage to an institution's reputation often first appears in the digital realm as a negative change in digital reputation, which can then act as a harbinger of an impending crisis.

To quantitatively substantiate this analysis, the study examined social interactions across various digital platforms, specifically focusing on social media mentions. These were defined as publications initiated by third parties in which the social media account under study, either tagged or referenced by name, and

native posts, defined as those published by the account being analyzed, either as the initial contribution to a conversation or as a standalone post in the absence of interactions (Navas 2020). These data were collected using a set of diverse platforms and approaches that leveraged specialized monitoring software designed to convert unstructured textual data, such as specific words or phrases, into quantifiable metrics that are then integrated into structured databases (Lutkevich and Hildreth 2022).

For this purpose, this research utilized the social media monitoring tool Viral Media, a brand operated by Viral Media Guatemala, which functions as a reseller of Reputation's global cloud-based social listening platform (https://www.viralmedia.gt/). This tool was used to systematically extract relevant text from a diverse array of online sources, including prominent social networking sites, blogs, discussion forums, and other social media outlets. The primary indicators included the total number of mentions, distribution of mentions per platform, sentiment analysis—which evaluates the emotional valence (positive, negative, or neutral) of published content—and influencer mapping. Influencer mapping identifies actively participating individuals within the digital ecosystem, distinguishes key contributors, assesses the sentiment expressed by these individuals, and evaluates the extent of their influence.

Beyond social listening, the methodology also integrated tools specifically designed for the analysis of digital profiles and behavioral patterns. These tools provided granular statistics pertaining to user accounts, follower dynamics, and activities across social media platforms. Among the tools used were Twitonomy, a Twitter analytics tool that provides insights into user activity, follower/following dynamics, and list management (https://www.twitonomy.com/); Metricool, a social media management platform that simplifies content scheduling, provides analytics across various social media channels, facilitates competitor analysis, and enables report generation (https://metricool.com/es/); and Fanpage Karma, a social media analytics tool that offers comprehensive monitoring and analysis of social media profiles, providing insights into competitor performance, content strategies, and audience engagement (https://www.fanpagekarma.com/es/inicio/).

Furthermore, monitoring message dissemination within digital environments is critical. This involves using tools capable of tracking the spread of links from potentially unreliable sources and organizations dedicated to fact-checking. These platforms also possess the capability to calculate a bot score, which estimates the probability of an account being automated rather than human-operated. For this purpose, the tool Hoaxy, developed by the Observatory on Social Media at Indiana University, was used to visualize the online circulation of misinformation across social media, primarily on X (formerly Twitter) and BlueSky (https://hoaxy.osome.iu.edu/). Botometer X (formerly Botometer) provides pre-calculated bot scores (ranging from 0 to 5, with higher scores indicating more bot-like activity) for social media accounts based on historical data

collected before May 31, 2023 (https://botometer.osome.iu.edu/). This archival tool was used to double-check accounts' behavioral characteristics to infer their likelihood of being human or automated. All the aforementioned tools were chosen from a pool of over 90 assessed platforms based on their superior functionalities, reliability of information, capacity for historical data collection, diversity of source coverage, and favorable cost-benefit ratio (Navas 2018).

2.2. Final Analytical Framework

The empirical analysis of 15 digital crises in Latin America facilitated the identification of six critical digital reputational risk indicators. By offering key insights into online crisis dynamics and distinguishing clearly between incidents and full-scale crises, this research established a robust framework for the systematic monitoring of digital reputations and the proactive management of potential crises. These indicators serve as essential benchmarks for assessing the severity of adverse situations and informed the development of 11 strategic actions to guide the swift and appropriate implementation of digital crisis response measures. These risk indicators include:

2.2.1. Potential reach

This metric is defined as the estimated audience size that can potentially access the distributed content. This measure is fundamental for assessing whether information may be amplified in networked spaces (Castells et al. 2023). However, it is important to note that while potential reach is a significant metric, it does not necessarily equate to engagement or meaningful impact. The key-visibility threshold is determined by the follower count of users disseminating negative content. Accounts with a minimum of 10,000 followers, categorized as *nano-influencers*, have demonstrated the capacity to amplify negative sentiment within broader audiences (Şenyapar 2024). Thus, the initial factor to consider is whether followers spreading negativity have a community of more than 10,000 members. An affirmative response indicates a preliminary indication of digital crisis risk. Subsequently, it is crucial to determine the number of accounts with 10,000 or more followers that propagate negativity; the greater this number, the more severe the risk.

2.2.2. Virality

Virality is characterized by the rapid and widespread dissemination of content across digital platforms, reaching vast audiences through user-driven sharing and amplification (Rathje et al. 2023). The virality rate was determined by dividing the number of shares by the number of impressions and multiplying the result by 10 (Campbell et al. 2022). Contextualizing virality within the participation inequality rule, also referred to as the *90-9-1 rule*, is essential. This principle suggests that 90% of users are passive observers, 9% contribute sporadically, and 1%

produce the majority of content and activities (Nielsen 2006). However, recent studies have challenged the accuracy of this rule. A study on a microblogging platform found that lurkers constitute approximately 75% of users, proposing an alternative 75-24-1 ratio (Antelmi et al. 2019). While this finding indicates a higher level of user engagement than previously theorized, it remains clear that only a small portion (less than one-third) of an online community's followers consistently engage with the content. In this context, when more than 24% of an account's followers share the same negative content about the targeted account, a potential risk that may precipitate a digital crisis should be considered.

2.2.3. Sentiment

This metric quantifies the attitudes, opinions, and emotions expressed by users on social media platforms through their posts, comments, and interactions, categorizing them as positive, neutral, or negative (Li et al. 2018). Negative sentiment surpassing 50%, encompassing dissatisfied users, non-compliant users, and individuals who oppose the content shared by official organizational accounts, can indicate widespread dissatisfaction or concern among the public (Tuten et al. 2019). The situation becomes particularly concerning when this heightened negativity coincides with high-reach followers and an increasing virality rate, which necessitates prompt action. Notably, scenarios in which negative sentiment exceeds 50% definitively signify a digital crisis.

2.2.4. Influencer engagement

Influencers are prominent figures with substantial followings and reputations across diverse digital platforms (Lokithasan et al. 2019). They are typically categorized based on their reach as nano-influencers (10,000 and above), micro-influencers (10,000–100,000), and macro-influencers (100,000–1 million) (Walter et al. 2025). This reach-centric classification should be augmented by two interrelated factors: relevance, which evaluates the congruence between an influencer's content and audience interests with the promoted institution, and resonance, which quantifies the level of engagement and interaction an influencer generates from their audience (Influence Hunter 2021). Influencers' participation in a negative social media discussion community amplifies the potential for previously unaffected individuals to become involved. Consequently, it is fundamental to identify whether influencers outside of the online community engage with criticism. If three nano-influencers, two micro-influencers, or one macro-influencer disseminate negative content, it may significantly increase the probability of a crisis escalating.

2.2.5. Crossover to traditional media

This phenomenon occurs when a negative narrative originating on social media platforms extends beyond its initial context and garners attention from

traditional media. Despite the increasing prominence of social media platforms as news sources influencing public perception and decision-makers (Powers 2016), some studies suggest social media may function as a perceived corrective mechanism to counterbalance presumed biases in mainstream news reporting (Fotopoulos 2023). This expansion enhances the probability of engaging public opinion influencers, potentially amplifying the reach of negative discourse or intensifying its impact on audiences. If criticism on social media is reported as news by a reputable traditional media outlet, this signifies that the digital context is significantly affected by the dissemination of information among new offline communities that may subsequently contribute comments to the digital sphere.

2.2.6. Stakeholder impact

Key stakeholders are individuals or groups interested in or affected by an organization's actions and decisions. When negativity is amplified on social media, some stakeholders engage in intense scrutiny, prompting them to question the authenticity of claims, potential implications for their association with the institution, and the manner in which their interests might be affected. The ephemeral nature of a digital crisis can represent both a short-lived challenge and a catalyst for institutional resilience in relation to key stakeholders (Li et al. 2023). Thus, if social media discourse adversely affects two or more stakeholders in a short timeframe, it serves as a robust indicator that digital negativity may inflict tangible harm on third parties and disrupt an institution's standard operations.

The systematic assessment of the previously delineated six-criteria framework for crisis potential enables the stratification of emergent occurrences into three categories: incidents (fulfilling one to two criteria, warranting internal response and surveillance), severe incidents (meeting three to five criteria, necessitating crisis committee evaluation and potential public engagement), and crises (satisfying all six criteria, demanding prompt internal and external action). Notably, two of these criteria, involvement of influencer engagement and crossover to traditional media, have prominence as amplification mechanisms, substantially elevating the likelihood of a crisis by expanding negative discourse beyond conventional networks. This taxonomic approach, in conjunction with ongoing surveillance, promotes preemptive crisis management, facilitates evidence-based interventions, judicious resource allocation, and cultivates robust stakeholder relations to effectively navigate the ever-evolving digital milieu.

3. Results

Digital crisis communication management, typically divided into prevention, management, and mitigation phases (Browder et al. 2024; Nuortimo et al. 2024; Strauβ and Jonkman 2017), provides a relevant structure for addressing the

unique challenges the Catholic Church faces in handling sexual abuse scandals. Rather than focusing on superficial reputation repair or concealment, this study establishes a framework grounded in accountability and transparency, guided by unwavering truthfulness, a victim-centered approach, and zero tolerance for abuse. These orientations aim to prevent further member disillusionment and conversion reversals, offering pragmatic strategies for each phase to ethically navigate digital crises, thus preserving the Church's spiritual mission and restoring authentic trust.

3.1. Phase 1: Prevention

3.1.1. Continuous digital monitoring

This permanent endeavor relies on sophisticated social listening platforms for proactive reputation management. It facilitates the systematic collection and analysis of online discourse, the comprehensive assessment of an organization's digital presence, and the detection of subtle shifts in public perceptions. Key indicators—volume of mentions, virality rate, sentiment, platform allocation, influencer mapping, and semantic networks—enable trend analyses, emerging risk identification, empirical assessment of reputation management strategies, and resource distribution optimization. Continuous digital monitoring serves as a primary preventive measure by acting as an early warning system for all six risk indicators. By providing real-time insights into online discourse, it enables the Church to anticipate and mitigate potential stakeholder impacts before they escalate. In the Catholic Church context, continuous monitoring is vital for identifying and analyzing narratives surrounding sexual abuse. It allows for the identification of key participants in these conversations and distinguishes between positive actors and those engaging in harmful activities. This insight enables the Church to conceptualize and implement targeted strategies for addressing both supportive and antagonistic groups, fostering a more constructive and accountable digital environment.

3.1.2. Creating a reputational risk map

A reputational risk map is a proactive analytical instrument for identifying and mitigating potential threats to an organization's public standing. This tool evaluates vulnerabilities across operational processes, communication structures, and stakeholder engagement by employing a dual-dimensional approach to assess risk likelihood and impact severity, thereby enabling strategic prioritization and resource allocation. Continuous adaptation to the evolving digital landscape through regular reviews and modifications ensures map relevance. Creating a reputational risk map moves beyond real-time monitoring to strategic foresight, identifying systemic weaknesses within an institution that could generate negative sentiment and stakeholder impacts. By mapping these vulnerabilities, targeted

preventive measures can be implemented to reduce the likelihood of negative content gaining a high potential reach, virality**,** attracting influencer engagement, or crossover to traditional media. For the Catholic Church, this map is crucial for identifying specific vulnerabilities related to sexual abuse scandals, such as gaps in reporting protocols, inadequate victim support systems, and inconsistent communication practices. By mapping these risks, the Church can proactively implement measures to strengthen safeguarding policies, improve victim support, and ensure transparent communication, thereby mitigating the impact of future scandals and fostering a culture of accountability.

3.1.3. Establishing a permanent crisis committee

Effective crisis management necessitates the establishment of a committee comprising top-level representatives from key sectors. This body is tasked with formulating communication strategies, monitoring digital platforms, and orchestrating crisis response. To maintain operational preparedness, the committee must engage in regular meetings and conduct crisis simulations. When crisis indicators emerge, specialized task forces are formed, including legal professionals, communication experts, and digital strategists. These *ad hoc* groups operate under strict confidentiality protocols and dissolve following a crisis resolution. A carefully curated network of external specialists provides swift access to diverse expertise, which aids in mitigating unforeseen challenges. This action is a fundamental organizational prerequisite for effectively managing crises, centralizing decision-making, and coordinating responses across all risk indicators. The committee's role in monitoring digital platforms directly informs its assessment of potential reach, virality, sentiment, and influencer engagement. Its strategic planning and response orchestration directly address the escalation of all risks, including the potential for crossover to traditional media and stakeholder impact. Ongoing training and simulations are critical for reducing response time, which directly impacts the ability to respond within 90 minutes of a crisis outbreak and to mitigate stakeholder impact within a two-hour window. For the Catholic Church, this organizational structure is crucial for addressing sexual abuse scandals. Such situations require a core committee with proficiency in pastoral activities, canon law, and victim advocacy, supplemented by experts in trauma and psychological counseling, as well as forensic investigators, to ensure a thorough victim-oriented approach. Ensuring that responses are both legally sound and pastorally appropriate and that communication strategies prioritize victim support and transparency are of paramount importance.

3.1.4. Developing a communication crisis management manual

Formulated during routine operations, this manual is crucial for organizational resilience. It outlines communication-centric strategic aims, response frameworks, legal and ethical standards, responsibilities, and communication

action protocols, empowering designated personnel to manage crises effectively. The document must articulate procedures for various communication contexts, encompassing internal and external messaging, stakeholder interaction, and information distribution with a well-defined escalation hierarchy. Periodic assessments and revisions that integrate simulation-derived insights and emerging practices are essential to maintain pertinence. This manual is an operational blueprint that translates the strategic intent of the crisis committee into actionable steps, which are crucial for overcoming the temporal urgency of digital crises. It provides predefined protocols for managing situations characterized by high potential reach, virality, negative sentiment, influencer engagement, and crossover to traditional media, ensuring consistent messaging. As applied to the Catholic Church, this manual must incorporate specific communication directives for managing allegations of sexual abuse, prioritizing victim-oriented messaging, applying communication-related canonical processes, and transparently disclosing information to ensure uniform, ethical communication responses across dioceses. These guarantees responses are consistently aligned with the Church's victim-centered and accountability principles, which are vital for mitigating long-term sentiment and stakeholder impact.

3.1.5. Implementing spokesperson policies

The implementation of spokesperson policies is essential for controlled crisis communication, delineating authorized representatives, disclosure parameters, and communication channels to prevent disinformation and ensure alignment with organizational principles. By controlling who speaks and what is said, this policy directly manages the narrative, preventing unauthorized or inconsistent messaging that could exacerbate potential reach, virality, negative sentiment, negative influencer engagement, or crossover to traditional media. Specifically, in instances of sexual abuse scandals, bishops and archbishops must function as primary spokespersons and demonstrate institutional accountability, which necessitates comprehensive media training. For minor incidents, the communications director may serve as spokesperson; for serious incidents, a higher-ranking official; and for full-scale crises, particularly those involving sexual abuse, the highest authority. This strategic selection ensures that response severity corresponds to the specific situation and demonstrates transparency and responsibility. A clear spokesperson policy ensures that stakeholders receive accurate and timely information from credible sources, thereby reducing uncertainty and mitigating negative stakeholder impact. Within the ecclesial structure, this policy must emphasize canonical and pastoral considerations, ensuring that communication reflects both legal obligations and the Church's commitment to the care and spiritual healing of victims.

3.2. Phase 2: Crisis Management and Response

During the crisis response, management phases undergo rapid transitions, necessitating expeditious redistribution of resources and a focus on addressing imminent threats and mitigating potential harm. This period demands prompt decision-making, effective communication channels, and the capacity to adapt strategies as circumstances evolve.

3.2.1. Immediate convening of the institution's crisis committee

The pre-established crisis committee, integral to information acquisition and strategic planning, must convene for an expeditious assessment of the situation and consider expert consultation. Employing sophisticated methodologies for online discourse analysis, the committee categorizes events as incidents, serious incidents, or crises, and identifies key actors, such as critics, antagonists, or automated accounts, based on the aforementioned risk indicators. Subsequent to categorization, the committee formulates internal and external communication strategies, incorporating external expertise as necessary. The convening of the committee represents the critical transition from prevention to active management. The committee rapidly assesses the real-time status of potential reach, virality, sentiment, influencer engagement, crossover to traditional media, and stakeholder impact to categorize the crisis and inform the immediate response. This swift convening is crucial for enabling a timely public response and mitigating stakeholder impact within the critical two-hour window. Within the ecclesiastical structure, this committee must include canonical and psychological proficiency, particularly when addressing cases of sexual misconduct. Remote meetings are permissible, provided all participants have consented to stringent ethical protocols and committed to non-disclosure of any information discussed.

3.2.2. Public response within 90 minutes of crisis outbreak

The ephemeral nature of digital crises, typically lasting approximately two hours, necessitates a swift public response within 90 minutes of onset, requiring a fundamental reconfiguration of conventional response protocols. An initial public declaration in accordance with the crisis committee guidelines may be necessary. Therefore, internal stakeholders must be informed prior to public announcements to maintain organizational unity. This 90-minute response window is a critical operational directive that directly addresses the rapid pace of digital crises. Its speed is essential to preempt or counter the rapid spread of negative content, thereby influencing virality and limiting its potential reach. A timely response aims to control the initial sentiment before it solidifies or escalates beyond the 50% crisis threshold. By providing an authoritative counternarrative, it can also reduce amplification by high-reach accounts, influencer engagement, or crossover to traditional media. Crucially, a prompt public response is vital for mitigating adverse effects on stakeholders within the critical two-hour window,

providing reassurance and demonstrating institutional control. In the context of the Church's response, social media communication should be cohesive and uniform and avoid individualized responses during critical periods. Requests for additional information via private messaging should be redirected to arrange formal consultations when deemed essential. The choice of response mechanisms—be they official pronouncements, media briefings, or social media engagement—should be determined by the severity of the crisis and, in cases of sexual abuse scandals, should invariably adhere to victim-centric principles and canonical standards.

3.2.3. *Responding with empathy, accountability, and transparency*

Empathy, with its cognitive, emotional, and compassionate dimensions, coupled with transparency, which demands clarity and truthfulness, forms the cornerstone of effective communication strategies (Navas 2022). When addressing sexual abuse through digital platforms, these principles manifest as transparent communication, characterized by clarity, factuality, responsibility, sincerity, timeliness, consistency, focus, and openness. Careful selection of language, tone, and delivery methods is critical to ensure that all communication reflects an unwavering commitment to truth, victim well-being, and accountability. This type of communication is an ethical imperative underpinning all effective crisis responses. While speed manages the spread of negativity, empathy, accountability, and transparency are essential for addressing the root cause of negative sentiment and rebuilding authentic trust. This approach directly aims to shift negative sentiment by demonstrating genuine concern, taking responsibility, and providing factual information. Empathetic and transparent communication is vital for reassuring affected stakeholders, addressing their concerns, and mitigating tangible harm. Responses characterized by these principles are more likely to be viewed favorably by credible influencers and traditional media, potentially leading to more balanced reporting and counter amplification. Although it does not directly control potential reach or virality, a credible and empathetic message can reduce the impact of negative reach and virality by fostering trust and encouraging a more positive reception of information. In the context of the Church's response, this approach necessitates giving precedence to victim narratives, openly acknowledging institutional shortcomings, and consistently demonstrating a dedication to restorative justice and protective measures. Such actions rebuild trust and promote healing within the affected community.

3.3. Phase 3: Mitigation and Recovery

The mitigation phase of crisis communication is crucial for minimizing long-term impact and facilitating recovery. These elements help organizations transition from crisis management to long-term recovery, learning, and improvement.

3.3.1. *Periodic accountability*

In the realm of digital crisis management, a comprehensive approach transcends damage control, necessitating a transparent demonstration of institutional accountability and dedication to positive transformation. The absence of communication following a crisis can significantly erode trust; hence, it is crucial to present a narrative that clearly illustrates accountability with a focus on victim reparation, victim-centric protocols, and procedural improvements. This narrative should encompass detailed accounts of crisis response measures, ongoing initiatives, and acquired insights while providing transparent information on victim welfare and the cultivation of a safety-oriented culture. To avoid subjective interpretations, it is imperative to rely on factual and verifiable information rooted in demonstrable actions. Periodic accountability represents a long-term commitment that differentiates genuine institutional change from mere crisis containment. It directly addresses long-term negative sentiment and stakeholder trust by demonstrating ongoing commitment to addressing root causes and making amends. By addressing the root causes and fostering a safety-oriented culture, the likelihood of future negative content gaining high potential reach and virality is reduced. Within the context of the Church's communication strategy, this approach mandates public disclosure of canonical investigation procedures, implementation of robust safeguarding policies, and continuous support for survivors. Such measures demonstrate an unwavering commitment to restorative justice and the prevention of future abuse in the ecclesiastical community.

3.3.2. *Stakeholder engagement*

In particularly sensitive crises, such as sexual abuse, it is imperative to prioritize victim welfare while strategically cultivating relationships with key opinion leaders, including journalists, to ensure balanced reporting. This approach requires active listening, proactive development of counterarguments, and timely dissemination of information. Targeted public relations efforts should provide journalists with accurate information, prompt responses, and positive narratives that emphasize recovery and reform. Engagement with other stakeholders, including collaborators and the faithful, through open dialogue and forums is essential for restoring trust and demonstrating accountability. Stakeholder engagement is a relational aspect of crisis mitigation. While accountability demonstrates what an institution is doing, engagement focuses on how it communicates and interacts with those affected. It directly addresses the needs and concerns of affected stakeholders, fostering dialogue and rebuilding trust. Proactive engagement with journalists and key opinion leaders aims to influence their reporting and commentary, providing balanced or positive narratives to counter negative amplification from crossover to traditional media and influencer engagement. Direct engagement and open dialogue can help shift negative sentiment by allowing stakeholders to voice their concerns and witness the institution's

commitment to reform. By influencing key communicators, it can indirectly affect the potential reach and virality of positive or neutral narratives in the media. The Church's outreach should prioritize direct engagement with survivors, foster transparent dialogue with the faithful, and utilize trusted media channels to disseminate information about safeguarding measures and restorative justice efforts, thereby rebuilding trust and promoting healing among the faithful.

3.3.3. Self-assessment of communication responses

A comprehensive post-crisis review that analyzes response strategies and their effectiveness is essential for institutional governance and resilience. Systematic documentation of communication-related lessons learned from protocol revisions ensures adaptability to changing circumstances. Mitigation efforts must extend beyond public image restoration, focusing on reinforcing the Church's evangelizing mission, addressing root causes, and prioritizing internal healing. This self-assessment constitutes a critical learning component of the crisis management cycle, transforming a crisis from a damaging event into a valuable learning opportunity. By analyzing the effectiveness of past responses to specific risk factors (e.g., how well a response mitigated virality or stakeholder impact), the Church can refine its strategies for future incidents, thereby enhancing its overall preparedness and reducing the likelihood and severity of future crises related to all six indicators. This feedback loop directly informs and strengthens all preventive measures (e.g., refining the risk map, updating the communication manual), thereby reducing the likelihood of future negative sentiment and stakeholder impact and improving the institution's capacity to manage potential reach and virality. Within the Church's evaluative process, this review should specifically examine the efficacy of messaging strategies, victim support outreach, and the transparency of disclosures related to canonical procedures. This ensures that insights directly contribute to preventing future failures and restoring trust in the ecclesial community.

Figure 1 visually delineates the intricate relationships between the 11 strategic crisis management actions and the six digital crisis risk indicators. Organized by the distinct phases of crisis management—prevention, management, and mitigation—this comprehensive chart illustrates how each proactive measure and responsive intervention directly or indirectly addresses, mitigates, or enables the management of specific risk dimensions, thereby underscoring the integrated nature of the proposed framework for ecclesial resilience.

Figure 1. Relationships Between Digital Crisis Risk Indicators and Crisis Management Actions.

Crisis management action \ Risk factor	Potential reach	Virality	Sentiment	Influencer engagement	Crossover to Traditional media	Stakeholder impact
Phase 1: Prevention						
1. Continuous Digital Monitoring	Directly monitors	Directly monitors	Directly monitors	Directly monitors	Indirectly monitors	Indirectly monitors
2. Creating a Reputational Risk Map	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause	Addresses root cause
3. Establishing a Permanent Crisis Committee	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response
4. Developing a Communication Crisis Management Manual	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Mitigates impact
5. Implementing Spokesperson Policies	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Shapes narrative	Mitigates impact
Phase 2: Crisis Management and Response						
1. Immediate Convening of the Committee	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response	Enables response

2. Public Response within 90 Minutes	Mitigates spread	Mitigates spread	Mitigates impact	Mitigates amplification	Mitigates amplification	Mitigates impact
3. Responding with Empathy, Accountability, and Transparency	Builds trust	Builds trust	Shifts perception	Builds trust	Builds trust	Restores trust
Phase 3: Mitigation and Recovery						
1. Periodic Accountability	Builds resilience	Builds resilience	Restores trust	Builds trust	Builds trust	Restores trust
2. Stakeholder Engagement	Influences narrative	Influences narrative	Restores trust	Influences narrative	Influences narrative	Restores trust
3. Self-Assessment of Communication Responses	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response	Improves future response

Source: Albertina Navas

This illustration reveals several key insights regarding the interconnectedness of crisis management. This clearly demonstrates that actions within the prevention phase, such as *continuous digital monitoring* and *creating a reputational risk map*, primarily serve to identify and address the root causes or early signs of all six risk indicators, laying a foundation for preparedness. During the management phase, actions such as the *immediate convening of the committee* and *public response within 90 minutes* are designed for rapid intervention, directly enabling or mitigating the immediate spread, impact, and amplification associated with high potential reach, virality, negative sentiment, influencer engagement, crossover to traditional media, and stakeholder impact. Finally, the mitigation phase, encompassing *periodic accountability, stakeholder engagement*, and *self-assessment of communication responses*, focuses on long-term recovery and resilience, aiming to restore trust, shift perceptions, and improve future responses across all risk dimensions. This

comprehensive mapping underscores that effective digital crisis management is a dynamic, multifaceted endeavor in which each action plays a crucial role in navigating the complex interplay of digital risks.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Successful navigation of digital crises in the Catholic Church hinges on a deeply integrated framework that proactively identifies and monitors digital risks, responds with speed and ethical integrity, and commits to long-term accountability and healing. The Church faces a severe credibility crisis due to widespread sexual abuse scandals, further intensified by the pervasive influence of social media and a trust deficit that profoundly threatens its fundamental evangelization mission. This ephemeral nature of digital crises, coupled with the profound impact of sexual abuse scandals, necessitates a comprehensive and principled approach that transcends conventional reputation management, demanding a strategy that incorporates expert communication techniques, cutting-edge technological tools, and an unwavering commitment to empathy, accountability, and transparency. The urgency of this approach stems from the critical need to restore institutional integrity and address deep-seated disillusionment in the faithful.

The Church's reputation concerns transcend mere surface-level image management; the trust erosion caused by these scandals results in profound disenchantment among existing members and impedes conversion processes. Consequently, the Church must openly communicate its initiatives to address abuse cases, implement stringent safeguarding protocols, and cultivate a protective environment. This proactive communication approach not only aids in rebuilding trust but also demonstrates the institution's dedication to its evangelization mission by highlighting its commitment to justice and healing. Technological advancement is no longer optional for the Church; digital tools must be embraced for data gathering, community engagement, and combating disinformation. The utilization of advanced social listening platforms and analytical tools allows the Church to gauge public sentiment, identify emerging narratives, and preemptively address false information, thereby enabling informed decision-making, enhancing community relationships, and equipping the Church to effectively guide its followers in an increasingly digital landscape.

The communication guidelines presented here, derived from a systematic analysis of real-world crises and subjected to continuous refinement, offer a robust framework for managing digital crises. These strategies, grounded in the analysis of institutional and digital reputations, emphasize proactive prevention, strategic management, and comprehensive mitigation. The employed methodologies, including performance-impact modeling and social media analytics, ensure that the guidelines are evidence-based and adaptable to a dynamic digital environment. Based on this analysis, actionable recommendations for the Catholic

Church include prioritizing resources for sophisticated continuous digital monitoring systems and dedicated personnel to interpret data. These actions would enabling the proactive identification of emerging threats related to potential reach, virality, and sentiment for early intervention before incidents escalate.

Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure that the principles of empathy, accountability, transparency, and victim-centeredness are not merely stated values but are deeply integrated into all crisis management protocols, training, and decision-making processes, particularly concerning sexual abuse allegations, where moral integrity is paramount for restoring trust. The Church must also continuously train the permanent crisis committee, conduct regular simulations, and refine communication manuals and spokesperson policies; doing so would strengthen internal preparedness and agility, ensuring rapid, coordinated, and consistent responses within the critical 90-minute window to mitigate immediate harm and control the narrative. Developing robust strategies for cultivating relationships with key stakeholders, including abuse survivors, the faithful, and journalists, is essential for proactive stakeholder and media engagement. This approach will foster trust and ensure accurate, balanced reporting that supports restorative justice efforts and counters negative amplification from traditional media and influencers.

Finally, the Church should establish clear processes for periodic accountability reports and comprehensive post-crisis self-assessments to commit to ongoing accountability and learning. This strategy ensures that lessons learned lead to continuous improvement in safeguarding policies, victim support, and communication strategies, thereby reinforcing the Church's long-term resilience and spiritual mission.

Statements and Declarations

Data Availability: The aggregated data generated by this study are publicly accessible for academic purposes. However, specific information related to individual organizations remains classified and protected under confidentiality agreements, ethical standards regarding privacy, and proprietary data.

Compliance with Ethical Standards: All research was conducted in full compliance with relevant ethical standards. The author declares no conflict of interest directly or indirectly related to this work.

AI Use: In accordance with the journal's policy, I disclose that Paperpal was used for language proofreading and editing to assist with English clarity, and Magisterium.com was used to locate relevant Vatican documents and official Church statements. All intellectual content, data verification, and citations remain entirely the author's own responsibility.

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