

## **Influence of Covid-19 Crisis Communication on Public Perception of the Kenyan Government Communication Strategy: A Case of Kibra Sub-County Nairobi, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

COVID-19 communication has drawn a sharp focus across the globe and elicited varied public perceptions. This study sought to assess the influence of covid-19 crisis communication on public perception of the Kenyan government communication strategy with a case of Kibra sub-county Nairobi, Kenya, from March 2020 to December 2020. The main objective was to assess how the government's daily speeches influenced the public interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis. The rationale was based on assessing the public perception of the government's communication strategy. The findings of this study will be helpful to communication experts and will help in improving the existing crisis communication strategies. This was limited to Lindi ward in Kibra sub-county. Source Credibility Theory (CT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (CCT) were used for understanding perception. This study adopted a survey design to collect quantitative data involving 123 household heads sampled purposively in Lindi, Kibra through a modified Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) questionnaire. Averagely, 1% of the respondents disagreed with questions regarding COVID-19 daily speeches, 8.5% indicated neutrality, and 90.5% agreed with the statements. The study concluded that the public's perceptions of government communication strategy regarding the COVID-19 crisis were favorable. The study recommends investigating the impact of the centralization of the Kenyan government communication departments on crisis communication.

**Keywords:** *Crisis Communication, Public Perception, Communication Strategy*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Undoubtedly, communication plays an important role during a crisis. Scholars suggest that the public's perception and willingness to comply with the government's directives during a crisis depends on the message's credibility and believability (Choi et al., 2015). Positive perception and message acceptability correlate with the public's willingness to assume the proposed protective behaviour during a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **1.2 Background of the Study**

Global concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic are on the rise. Governments work tirelessly to sensitize their public on the best response practices to avert their citizens' possibilities of succumbing to the pandemic's adverse effects (Radlovacki, 2020). Amidst the governments' efforts, confusion, misinformation, rumours, and distrust reign. Depending on the factors that exponentially increase the risk and damages associated with the crisis, it is paramount for any government to have an effective communication strategy that the public can trust. According to Ulmer et al. (2010), a crisis is any situation to harm or threaten people or property, interrupt business, or damage reputation. Crisis communication is a critical function of any government today. The role of crisis communication is to inform the public of desired actions that help in prevention and recovery measures.

Since its emergence in Wuhan, China, in 2019, COVID-19 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) has heavily impacted the lives of many communities and society at large (Fu et al., 2020). In order to contain the pandemic's rapid spread, the Chinese government improved its command and decision-making, organization, and collaboration because of strategic crisis communication with its citizens. The Chinese government's action pointed out the positive input of communication in times of pandemic (Lee & Jin, 2019).

COVID-19 communication in China showed that public evaluation of the government's communication performance is hinged on trust. According to Bian et al. (2021), an increase in perception of the government's action is directly proportional to public trust. Therefore, in their recommendation, Bian et al. (2021) stated that public emotions and risk perception ought to be considered in crisis communication. On the other hand, a study by Túri et al. (2022) in the Eastern Europe region (Romania) found that the government was unable to implement timely and adequate measures because of its inability to communicate government measures. The United States was also one of the most affected countries in the world. According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the US government recorded 27 669,556 cases and 489,067 deaths as of February 17, 2021 (Bialek et al., 2020). The Trump administration's communication strategy regarding the virus was a continuous subject of discussion. Critics pointed out that the government would have saved many lives had it taken a more coordinated response. There was a need for clear communication, a skill Rutledge (2020) argues was deficient in President Donald Trump's public speeches.

In Africa, public distrust of the authorities was found to hinge on people's experience with the communication emanating from the government; thus, the public tended to ignore information from the administration (Seytre, 2020). According to Nche (2022), religious

groups hesitated to comply with the government's COVID-19 containment measures. The findings attributed noncompliance to suspicion and distrust of the government's communication and management of the pandemic, alongside believing in God as the sole healer and protector. A study by Chilanga et al. (2022) suggested that religious ideologies were vital in determining the community's response to the government's communication. However, Alexander (2020), in a study in Uganda, found that religion played a critical role in mobilizing citizens to follow the government's directives on COVID-19.

Kenya reported its first COVID-19 case on March 2019 through the Kenya Ministry of Health (Makachia, 2020). The Kenyan government developed a crisis communication strategy that involves daily briefings through the mainstream media (television and radio). It enabled the government to communicate to the public and issue briefs concerning new infections, COVID-19 recoveries, and de-escalation measures. The communications were carried out through the cabinet secretary of health. The role of crisis communication, in this case, was to provide information about the crisis and strategically gather and disseminate new information consistently and as quickly as possible (Murugi&Mberia, 2019). However, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding the public perception of crisis communication strategies during emergencies like infectious disease outbreaks (Lee &Jin, 2019). These knowledge gaps are critical in understanding the coronavirus experience and its crisis communication. Importantly, the public remains critical of the government's communication strategy. This study's objective is to assess how the government's daily speeches influenced the public interpretation of the COVID-19 crisis. It seeks answers regarding how the public perceived daily speeches used as a strategy during the COVID-19 crisis from March 2020-December, 2020.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Source Credibility Theory (CT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the premise for this study are paramount because the COVID-19 crisis has brought many communication challenges that must be urgently addressed. Consistency and urgency in communicating and providing up-to-date information cannot be understated. Amidst information influx from many quarters, including social media, it is paramount to examine the credibility perceptions and factors such as trust in government and message exposure, among others. Whereas SCT addresses credibility, SCCT addresses trust as an essential factor for fulfilling communication when a crisis occurs (Seiler & Kucza, 2017).

### **2.1 Process of Perception**

#### ***2.1.1 selection***

Jervis (2017) opines that we can only perceive part of the information presented to us despite our bombardment with loads of information each day and almost all the time. Therefore, the selection is a critical stage in perception because at this stage, we naturally convert the environmental stimuli into sensible and meaningful experiences.

#### ***2.1.2 organization***

The organization is the second stage of perception, where the formation of a meaningful pattern or arrangement of information consciously or subconsciously in a sequence takes place (Knowles, 2020). This stage is important in making sense of information. The organization

stage is the categorization stage because it is the point at which we classify things or information to give them shape.

### **2.1.3 Interpretation**

After the selection and organization stages, the stimuli must imply an explicit meaning. However, the meaning attached to the organized stimuli is subjective and may not commonly apply across communicators (Knowles, 2020). Cultural diversity and experience determine to a greater degree, the interpretation of stimuli and are normally the cause of conflict in communication.

## **2.2 Source Credibility and the Impact of Spokespersons during a Crisis**

According to a study by Abu-Akel et al. (2021) and Islam and Siddika (2020), the speaker plays an important role in shaping public perception. The study reports that public figures could effectively promote social distancing through public speeches and other channels due to their perceived influence and credibility. Furthermore, Christensen and Lægreid (2020) conducted a content analysis study in Norway. They found the speeches of the Norwegian government were punctuated by information clarity, timeliness, and reiteration of the messages, thus informing public actions. The speeches were delivered by credible leaders and experts in their field. Also, there was an increase in trust in the Norwegian government and the health authorities by the citizens, who responded positively to the government's directives. The increase was recorded by the end of March 2020, when citizens' satisfaction had increased from 23% to 49%. The study suggests that a positively perceived communication strategy that involved the political leaders, the administrative authorities, and all the professionals with a joint call was the reason for the increased trust.

## **2.3 Public Trust in Crisis Speeches**

Mohamad et al. (2020) conducted a descriptive study in Malaysia. It sought to gauge the relationship between COVID-19 information sources and the attitude of the Malaysian public in the fight against the pandemic. According to the findings, the Malaysian Ministry of Health was preferred and trusted more than other information sources, with 95.1 % approval. Sources such as television and online news platforms had 73% and 64% ratings, respectively. Another COVID-19 information source that gained the least preference was family and friends (2%). Therefore, the study concluded that local authorities were perceived positively as champions in disseminating COVID-19 information through public speeches; consequently, they were seen as the best in times of crisis communication compared to other outlets.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The design for this study was a descriptive survey method for collecting quantitative data. The design was appropriate for collecting data that reflects the attitudes, behavior, opinion, and beliefs that are not directly observable. The additional rationale for this design was the assumption that it accorded the target respondents an environment that made them feel more comfortable accomplishing the survey instead of interviews.

### **3.2 Study Area**

The study was conducted in Kibra Sub-county, one of the seventeen Sub-counties in the larger Nairobi County, located on the Southwest of Nairobi City, occupying an area of 12.1 Km squared. It is 6.5 kilometers away from the city (Were & Kimaru-Muchai,2021).

### **3.3 Target Population**

The target population was the Lindi Ward, Kibra Sub-county Nairobi households, with an average of 12,815 households. One hundred thirty-six households were the sample size based on the average population of 12,815 (Were & Kimaru-Muchai, 2021).

### **3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique**

Probability sampling was applied to determine the study's location, and purposive sampling for determining the households because of the household heads' availability and socioeconomic reasons.

#### **3.4.1 Sample Size**

The research study used the Cochran formula to determine the sample size and arrived at 136 households. The sample size was considerably large to enable sufficient data collection to analyze the phenomenon. As noted by Mugenda & Mugenda (2012), an acceptable sample size should enhance the result of the quantitative research.

### **3.5 Data Collection Instruments**

This study employed a questionnaire to assess the public perception of Kenya's government's COVID-19 crisis communication strategy. A modified 20-item Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication questionnaire were used to gather perception information.

### **3.6 Pre-Testing**

The researcher conducted a pilot test for the questionnaires on a small number of the primary sample size (20 households) in Makina Ward, Kibra, to give prior knowledge regarding the tool's validity and reliability (Creswell, 2014).

### **3.7 Validity of Research Instruments**

As explained by Baxter and Jack (2008), instrument validity is about its accuracy and truthfulness as far as scientific research is concerned. The questionnaires were prepared before the data collection and piloted for validity.

### **3.8 Reliability of Research Instruments**

Upon subjecting the research instrument to a pre-test, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71 was ascertained to support the statistical reliability.

### **3.9 Ethical Consideration**

This research sought approval from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) for data collection approval as an essential aspect of ethical research practices. The study included duly notified participants who submitted written and signed consent to show their acceptance to participate in the research.

## **4.0 RESULTS**

This study's objective sought to assess how the government's daily speeches on COVID-19 influenced the public interpretation of the crisis in Kibra Nairobi, Kenya. After the collection of data and analysis, this section presents results as shown in the following tables. The response rate for this study was 90.4%.

*Table 4.1 Age and gender of the Respondents*

Item	Description	Frequency	Percentages
Respondents Gender	Male	70	56.9

	Female	53	43.1
	Total	123	100
Respondents Age	20-30	78	63.3
	31-40	36	29.3
	41-50	9	7.4
	Total		
		123	100

Regarding the age and gender of the respondents, Table 4.1 shows the distribution of the results. A total of 123 respondents participated in the study, of which 53% were female and 70% male. The age of the respondents had a mean of 30.54 years. 63.3% were between 20-30 years, 29.3% were between 31-40 years, and 7.4% were between 41-45 years.

*Table 4.2 General Information about the respondents' demographic characteristics*

Item	Description	Frequency	Percentages
Educational Level	Primary	7	5.7
	Secondary	73	59.3
	Tertiary	37	30.1
	University	6	4.9
	Total	123	100.0
Marital Status	Single	42	34.1
	Married	79	64.2
	Widowed	2	1.6
	Total	123	100.0
Employment Status	No	49	39.8
	Yes	74	60.2
	Total	123	100.0

On the educational level, table 4.2 presents the following findings. 5.7% of the respondents attained primary education, 59.3% had secondary education, 30.1% had attained tertiary education, and only 4.9% had gone to the University. Respondents' marital status was registered as follows, 34.15% indicated that they were single, 64.2% were married, and only 1.6% indicated that they were widowed. On employment status, 60.2% of the respondents indicated that they were indeed employed, while 39.8% indicated they were unemployed.

*Table 4.3 Respondents' Means of Getting Information*

	Responses	
	N	Percent
Covid-19 brief	123	46.9%
Mobile text	24	9.2%
Social media	115	43.9%
Total	262	100.0%

Table 4.3 presents respondents' means of receiving COVID-19 information; 46.9% indicates that they receive the information through government brief, 9.2% indicated mobile text messages as their means of receiving COVID-19 information, and 43.9% cited social media. Public confidence in the government's communication and messages during a crisis yields a good response. According to William et al. (2021), information and access minimized COVID-19 risk perception and shaped the public response.

A CERC questionnaire with seven itemized statements required the respondent to indicate whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were neutral or strongly agreed. The questions addressed the first objective of the research.

Table 4.4 COVID-19 Daily Briefs/Speeches

	strongly disagree	disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
The regular speeches from the Government of Kenya on COVID-19 from March to Dec 2020 are understandable and actionable.	0.0%	0.8%	4.9%	46.3%	48.0%	4.41	.626
The Government of Kenya's daily speeches from March to Dec 2020 adequately prepare me for the challenges I will likely face.	0.8%	0.0%	3.3%	19.5%	76.4%	4.71	.610
I comply with the COVID-19 crisis protocols because I clearly understand the speeches' message.	1.6%	0.0%	0.8%	30.9%	66.7%	4.61	.673
Kenya's health cabinet secretary possesses the necessary knowledge and expertise on the situation and has influenced my response to the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.0%	0.8%	22.0%	56.1%	21.1%	3.98	.683
The information released by senior Government officials on the COVID-19 crisis has been accurate, concise, and timely and is repeated enough to keep the public safe.	0.0%	1.6%	6.5%	17.9%	74.0%	4.64	.679
The Government of Kenya's COVID-19 speeches from March to Dec 2020 reflects its role in managing the pandemic.	0.0%	0.8%	14.6%	49.6%	35.0%	4.19	.705
The regular updates increase my trust in the speeches of the Government of Kenya on the COVID-19 crisis.	0.0%	0.8%	7.3%	35.0%	56.9%	4.48	.670



As displayed in table 4.3, the respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement, "regular speeches from the government of Kenya on the COVID-19 situation are understandable and actionable." 0.0% strongly disagreed with the statement, 0.8% disagreed, 4.9% were neutral, 46.3% agreed, and 48.0% strongly agreed; therefore, 94.3% of the respondents agreed that the government speeches in the stated period were indeed understandable and they acted on them.

On a statement that the Government of Kenya communication team adequately prepares the respondents for the challenges they are likely to face, 0.8% strongly disagreed, 0.0% disagreed, 3.3% were neutral, 19.5% agreed, and 76.4% strongly agreed. Most respondents (an average of 47.95%) approved that speeches effectively created awareness of what needed to be done regarding the COVID-19 crisis. Concerning a statement that sought to assess whether the respondents comply with the COVID-19 crisis protocols because they clearly understand the speaker's message, 1.6% strongly disagreed, 0.0% disagreed, 0.8% were neutral, 30.9% agreed, 66.7% strongly agreed. Therefore, an average (48.8%) agreed they comply with the COVID-19 protocol due to message clarity during the speeches. In responding to a statement that Kenya's health cabinet secretary possesses the necessary knowledge and expertise on the COVID-19 situation and has been consistent in the delivery of the message, 0.0 % strongly disagreed, 0.8% disagreed, 22% were neutral, 56.1% agreed, and 21.1% strongly agreed. An average of 38.6% represented a significant positivity rate compared to the neutrals (22%), and an average of 0.4% disagreed. The statement that the information released by senior government officials on the COVID-19 crisis has been accurate, concise, and timely and was repeated enough to keep the public safe got the following response, 0.0 % strongly disagreed, 1.6% disagreed, 6.5% were neutral, 17.9% agreed, and 74.0% strongly agreed. Therefore, 91.9% disagreed with (1.6%), and the 6.5% neutrals approved the accuracy, conciseness, and frequency of messages entailed in the speeches by the government in keeping the public safe. Results of a statement that the government's daily speeches from March to Dec 2020 reflected its role in managing the pandemic indicated that 0.0 % strongly disagreed, 0.8% disagreed, 14.6% were neutral, 49.6% agreed, and 35.0% strongly agreed. An average of 42.3% returned a positive response, 0.4% was negative, and 14.6% were neutral. Regarding a statement that the regular updates from March to Dec 2020 increased the respondent's trust in the COVID-19 crisis speeches by the government, 0.0 % strongly disagreed, 0.8% disagreed, 7.3% were neutral, 35.0% agreed, and 56.9% strongly agreed. Therefore, an average of 0.4% disagreed, and 7.3% remained neutral compared to an average of 45.9% who agreed with the statement.

## **4.1 Discussions**

### **4.1.1 The Implication of the Demographic Characteristics**

From a theoretical angle, SCCT suggests that people's understanding and reaction to public crises are shaped by factors such as culture, personal knowledge, and level of interest. It also helps explain the public's behaviors about the crisis (Reisenzein & Rudolph, 2018). According to the results in table 4.1, most Kenyan government COVID-19 message recipients in Kibra were youthful, with a mean age of 30.54, and male than females (70% male to 53% female). The finding is in congruence with Lazarus et al. (2021) finding that showed that males are more likely to rate government communications favourably than females. Additionally, the study associated young

people with an appreciation of some forms of art more than children and older adults and indicated they preferred artistic expressions to other forms of communicating crisis.

Furthermore, table 4.2 indicates that the government's communication would be fairly understood and perceived by the literate lot and others enjoying privileges such as employment and family. It agreed with a study by Lazarus et al. (2021) that established that younger respondents are better paid. The respondents who were literate demonstrated a positive perception of the Government's COVID-19 communication thus suggesting that greater attention should be paid to less advantaged citizens. In the context of SCCT theory, individuals' perception of the information as they receive and interpret it forms their judgment of the cause based on their experiences. Notably, according to Knowles (2020), interpretation variance is pegged on several factors, including literacy and sociocultural experiences.

#### **4.1.2 Information Source During a Crisis**

According to the finding in table 4.3, the government of Kenya's COVID-19 briefs and social media were the main source of information. Notably, the findings are similar to Moreno et al. (2020), who noted that people mainly relied on social media as their main source of information in Spain and government speeches. According to the SMCC model, networks, groups, and individuals communicate with each other using social media during a crisis as they seek information (Lu & Jin, 2020).

#### **4.1.3 Public Perception of Daily Speeches/ COVID-19 Briefs**

The findings, as in table 4.4, indicate the public understood and acted on the information provided by the speeches because they contained clear, timely, and concise messages. This finding agrees with Christensen and Læg Reid's (2020) finding that information clarity, timeliness and reiteration informed public action on the COVID-19 pandemic in Norway. Also, the finding is in accord with Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. (2020), whose results indicated that speeches assured the public that the government was in control of the situation and would comply based on the speeches. Also, the findings suggest that the speeches adequately prepared the public for the COVID-19 challenges, which agrees that speeches countered disinformation, expressed empathy, and clarified facts, thus showing the government's commitment to stand with the public in hard times (Benard et al., 2021). The findings also showed that the people thought the health cabinet secretary was knowledgeable and qualified to issue COVID-19 information; thus, the speaker influenced public response. Also, the study found that the public indicated that the government had a role in communicating the COVID-19 situation. This finding agrees with Mohamad et al. (2020)'s finding that indicated that the health ministry was the most trusted source during the pandemic. The study's finding is similar to Abu-Akel et al. (2021)'s, who found that experts and celebrity spokespeople are perceived to be more credible during the COVID-19 crisis. Also, the study found that speech regularity and consistency increased public trust in the government. The finding is in line with a study by MacGuire et al. (2020), who found that official speeches gave reassurance and impacted public interpretation and comprehension of the message.

However, the findings by Islam and Siddika (2020) and Ogola (2020) disagree. Islam and Sidika state that government officials' public perception is not so favourable because the government is associated with delayed response in handling crises and always resorts to propaganda or spreading

rumours. At the same time, Ogola found that COVID-19 speeches were punctuated by denial, secrecy, and misinformation, thus engendering public distrust.

More importantly, speech messages must be understandable. Christensen and Læg Reid (2020) found that New Zealand Government's framing messages of the speeches and the evidence-based daily briefing strategy created a direct dialogue with the people. As a result, people adhered to COVID-19 instructions because they perceived the government as trustworthy. Additionally, they exhibited solidarity with the government.

## **4.2 Summary of the Study**

As noted by the study, speech as a COVID-19 communication strategy by the Government of Kenya was perceived positively. The majority indicated that the government speeches on the COVID-19 crisis were well conducted, and they approved of the professionalism and qualification of the spokesperson. Therefore, this study finds speeches in times of crisis as effective in creating awareness about a situation and drawing desired public response.

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter four elaborated on the analysis of data gathered during the research process. This chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and the study's final recommendations. The conclusions are based on research findings on the perception of the Kenya government's COVID-19 crisis communication strategy between March 2020 and December 2020. The researcher has highlighted three recommendations.

### **5.2 Conclusion**

The objective sought to assess how the government's daily speeches on COVID-19 influenced the public interpretation of the crisis. The Literature review explained the public's perception of COVID-19 speeches by the public and how the public interpreted and acted on the information. The study found that during the COVID-19 crisis (March 2020 to December 2020), the government's speeches on the COVID-19 crisis were generally accurate, credible, clear, concise, timely, and regular, factors that enhanced message comprehension and led to positive perception. Notably, the public perceived the GoK's speeches as effective and informative as far as COVID-19 is concerned; thus, they were able to act as required. It is also important to note that gender, economic, education, and age did not negatively impact the public perception of the government's communication strategy.

Establishing public perception in every crisis communication strategy is critical because it is not in all cases that all strategies may be effective despite how trendy they might be. The higher the favorability of public perception, the greater the chances that desired responses shall be achieved. Additionally, crisis communication used must be credible. It must emphasize message clarity, conciseness, understandability, and timeliness.

### **5.3 Recommendation**

Investigating the impact of the centralization of Kenyan government communication departments on crisis communication would be paramount.

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