Teaching Brief/GIFT

A Simulation Exercise on Tackling AI-triggered Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) introduces new challenges to crisis communication. This teaching brief describes a crisis simulation exercise, conducted separately in two crisis communication classes at a university in the United States, where undergraduate public relations students apply crisis communication theories to address a GenAI misuse scenario based on the artificial intelligence (AI) scandal involving Sports Illustrated. Students assume roles of crisis management team members, board members, or journalists to perform specific tasks throughout the simulation. A mock press conference is integrated into the simulation, enabling students to engage in real-world crisis communication dynamics and practice their crisis communication skills in a realistic, high-pressure setting. Afterward, the crisis responses developed in each class are shared for critique, objective feedback, and reflective learning.

Keywords: crisis simulation, crisis communication education, GenAI, role-playing

Introduction

As Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is transforming the communication and media industry (Cision, 2023), the risk of misuse is also rising, including the use of undisclosed AI-generated content and fabricated sources. These unethical practices can quickly lead to crises, damaging the organization's reputation. Therefore, educators need to equip future public relations professionals with the skills to identify AI-related risks, assess the impact of GenAI misuse on public perception, and develop effective and ethical response strategies to manage crises triggered by such technologies.

Crisis simulation exercises have been recognized as effective tools in public relations education because they enable students to learn by doing (Buzoianu & Bîră, 2024). Role-play, in particular, has been shown to increase student engagement, foster perspective-taking, and improve decision-making (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Crisis simulations also provide an opportunity for students to apply key crisis communication theories—such as Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)—to realistic scenarios, which is especially effective in helping students internalize crisis communication strategies and theories—something that is often difficult to achieve through lectures alone (Yook, 2024).

This teaching brief presents a crisis simulation exercise focused on GenAI misuse: a fictitious fashion magazine, XYZ Magazine, is accused of using fabricated authors with AI-generated headshots to publish product reviews, mirroring the AI-triggered crisis experienced by Sports Illustrated. Using a hypothetical case, this simulation prevents students from replicating Sports Illustrated's crisis response and promotes critical thinking and creative problem-solving.

The value of using an AI-triggered crisis scenario lies in immersing students in a timely and increasingly relevant challenge for

their future careers. GenAI makes it easy to produce highly convincing yet misleading content, accelerating the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Shoaib et al., 2023) and necessitating new approaches to crisis communication. Engaging students with this scenario in a simulation helps them grasp the real-world consequences of organizational misuse of GenAI and develop the skills needed to manage the unique complexities of AI-triggered crises—challenges that traditional crisis scenarios do not capture. It also promotes reflection on other emerging issues arising from the rise of GenAI, such as the ethical use of GenAI by organizations and evolving media ethics in the AI era.

This crisis simulation is designed as a 150-minute learning experience. It has been implemented in two consecutive 75-minute public relations classes and conducted separately in two sections of an undergraduate crisis communication class at a public university in U.S. Competition between classes can motivate students to perform better than they typically would and encourage more objective peer feedback as students feel more comfortable evaluating work from students outside their immediate class group (Kemp & Palmer, 2022).

Student Learning Goals

1. Foster students' ability to evaluate and analyze complex crisis scenarios from various perspectives, promoting critical thinking.
2. Deepen students' understanding of key crisis communication theories and enhance students' ability to effectively apply IRT and SCCT to real-world crises.
3. Help students understand the challenges that GenAI misuse presents to crisis management, fostering greater AI awareness and literacy.
4. Develop students' ability to effectively address AI-triggered crises.

Simulation Design and Alignment with Learning Goals

During the simulation, students are assigned to assume various roles, including Crisis Management Team (CMT) members, board

members, and journalists. CMT members are responsible for leading the development of the crisis response. They must effectively assess the situation, determine appropriate strategies, communicate swiftly, and coordinate internal and external messaging. Their role emphasizes the practical application of IRT and SCCT, as they need to craft responses that address stakeholder concerns while also protecting the organization's reputation.

Board members provide strategic oversight and governance (Lumorus, 2025). They evaluate the proposed crisis strategies through the lens of organizational mission, values, and long-term strategic priorities. Their responsibilities include ensuring that crisis communication is legally compliant, ethically sound, and supporting long-term reputation repair.

Journalists approach the crisis from an external and independent standpoint. Tasked with serving the public interest, they seek to uncover the facts and hold the organization accountable. They will ask critical questions about what happened, why it occurred, and what actions the organization will take to correct and prevent the recurrence of the problem, while preparing timely and accurate coverage. This role trains students to recognize how reporters gather and frame information, interpret organizational messages, and shape public understanding.

Role-playing moves students from passive learning to active, experiential engagement, which is central to achieving learning goals (Munna & Kalam, 2021). By inhabiting different roles, students analyze the crisis from multiple stakeholder perspectives, which fosters critical thinking and helps them evaluate competing interests to make informed decisions. By stepping into the shoes of both internal and external stakeholders, students experience the tension between protecting the organization's reputation and responding to public scrutiny, and gain an understanding of how crisis responses are developed, negotiated, and interpreted from multiple perspectives. Role-playing also deepens their understanding of key crisis communication theories. Applying IRT and

SCCT in real-time enables students to experience how theory guides their decision-making and message options (Kemp & Palmer, 2022; Yook, 2024). Such a transformation of abstract concepts into concrete, memorable learning reinforces students' theoretical understanding and builds confidence in addressing complex, real-world crises. In addition, the simulation immerses students in the distinct challenges posed by GenAI misuse, which they confront directly through their assigned roles. These firsthand encounters sharpen students' AI awareness and literacy, preparing them to respond effectively to AI-triggered crises.

Simulation Procedure

Step 1: Role Assignment

This simulation exercise begins with role assignment. Roles are assigned randomly to ensure fairness and minimize bias. Each student draws lots to decide their roles. In each class section of about 20 students, 8-9 assume the role of CMT members, 5-6 serve as board members, and 5-6 act as journalists.

Step 2: Crisis Scenario Briefing

Next, students are introduced to the crisis scenario: "a leading news site has published a story exposing XYZ Magazine (a major fashion magazine) for using fabricated authors with AI-generated headshots to publish product reviews. This revelation has sparked outrage among XYZ Magazine's readers, who have flooded social media and the magazine's email inbox with accusations, questioning the organization's ethics and credibility. Simultaneously, XYZ Magazine's staff journalists have voiced dissatisfaction, demanding responses and expressing concerns that the magazine's practices have compromised their journalistic integrity. XYZ Magazine's CMT thus calls an emergency meeting to address this challenging situation." This brief and focused scenario realistically reflects the insufficient information characteristic of the early stages of a real-world crisis, prompting students to examine the situation critically.

Step 3: Task Performing

Then, the CMT uses 60 minutes to complete four tasks: (1) proposing a crisis response stance ranging from defensive to accommodative and presenting crisis response strategy recommendations for the board; (2) developing a holding statement for journalists; (3) crafting an internal response to address employee concerns, and (4) preparing a crisis statement for the press conference. The limited time available to CMT members mimics the time pressure experienced in real-world crisis communication.

Having already learned how to write holding and crisis statements, students who assume the role of CMT members first engage in a discussion that draws on IRT and SCCT to determine the crisis response stance and strategies they will propose. After obtaining the board's approval of the crisis response stance and strategy, they split into smaller groups to work separately on the abovementioned tasks. Finally, the CMT collaborates with the board to select a spokesperson and prepare them to respond to journalists' questions during the press conference.

The board members' task is to review and approve CMT's proposed crisis response stance and strategies, ensuring they align with XYZ Magazine's organizational goals and values and are legally compliant and ethically sound. To support this task, only board members receive the mission, vision, and value statements specifically created for XYZ Magazine (see Appendix A), which can help them evaluate whether the proposed responses reflect the organization's mission. Board members also review and provide input on the holding statement, internal response, and crisis statement drafted by CMT to ensure consistency across all messaging. Board members are encouraged to apply IRT and SCCT to assess whether the proposed responses are suitable, given the perceived level of crisis responsibility, and whether the selected message options are effective in addressing stakeholder concerns.

Meanwhile, journalists move to a separate space after the crisis scenario briefing to prepare questions for the press conference. This arrangement isolates journalists from CMT and board members' internal discussion, allowing both internal and external publics to focus on their respective tasks while simulating a realistic crisis communication environment. To help journalists effectively perform their tasks, they are provided with general news reporting guidance. They are also encouraged to adopt IRT and SCCT to assess whether the crisis response is appropriate and credible.

Step 4: Press Conference

The press conference begins at the start of the second exercise session. The spokesperson delivers the crisis statement, and then journalists ask questions, which the spokesperson addresses individually. The press conference concludes when the spokesperson deems it appropriate to adjourn.

Step 5: Journalists Individually Draft Reports on the Press Conference

Following the press conference, each journalist independently drafts a brief report summarizing the conference's key messages. These reports are then shared with their class, allowing students to evaluate how effectively the spokesperson addresses the journalists' questions and communicates the key messages, and whether the spokesperson's messages came across.

Step 6: Critiquing Crisis Responses

After the press conference, the professor shares the internal responses and crisis statements created by both crisis communication classes for peer critique (see Appendix B for examples of student work). Students are asked to identify the crisis response stance and specific strategies used in the statements based on IRT and SCCT, assess how well the responses align with SCCT's recommendations, and compare the

approaches taken by the two classes. Additionally, students are encouraged to discuss what worked well and what could be improved to enhance the effectiveness of crisis communication.

Next, the professor presents the real-world response from Sports Illustrated to its AI scandal. Sports Illustrated disputed the accuracy of the allegations that it had published AI-generated articles and attributed the content to a third-party company, AdVon Commerce (see Appendix C for Sports Illustrated's official statement and analysis of its statement). Students are asked to use IRT and SCCT to identify the crisis response stance and strategies used by Sports Illustrated and compare this real response with their own responses. This comparison further encourages students to think deeply about what constitutes effective crisis communication.

Step 7: Reflection

After the critiquing session, students complete a self-reflective assessment (see Appendix D) to evaluate their learning and articulate key takeaways.

Connection to Public Relations Theories

The theoretical underpinnings of this crisis simulation exercise include IRT (Benoit, 1997) and SCCT (Coombs, 2007). Both theories are introduced and discussed early in the course before the simulation. The IRT provides students with a comprehensive list of strategies that organizations can adopt to restore their image after a crisis. SCCT offers students a structured approach to determining appropriate crisis response strategies. Specifically, SCCT guides students in assessing the crisis situation by examining the type of crisis and the associated crisis responsibility faced by an organization, as well as the organization's crisis history and prior reputation. Together, these two theories provide students with a comprehensive framework to devise effective crisis communication strategies.

In the AI-triggered crisis scenario presented in this simulation, the case falls into the preventable crisis cluster outlined by SCCT because it results from ethical lapses by the organization and its staff rather than uncontrollable factors. In high-responsibility crises like this, the most appropriate and ethical response is to adopt a rebuilding posture and take corrective actions. This means offering a sincere apology to readers and employees and implementing concrete measures such as stronger editorial oversight and clear policies for AI use. By contrast, responses like denial or shifting blame to a third party are least appropriate, since they deflect responsibility and risk causing even greater harm to the organization's reputation.

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Student learning outcomes are evaluated and evidenced in two major ways. First, a critical analysis of the crisis responses developed by students themselves, their peers in another class, and the real-world response from Sports Illustrated was conducted. During the critique stage, students correctly identified the crisis response stance and strategies employed in their response, the other class's response, and Sports Illustrated's official response. They also examined each developed internal and external response in detail to pinpoint improvements that can enhance crisis communication outcomes.

In addition, students also completed a self-reflective assessment of this crisis simulation exercise (see Appendix D for the full instrument). Specifically, Questions 4–8 measured their perceived learning gains on a 5-point Likert scale. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for self-assessment scores by role on Questions 4–8.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Student Self-Assessment Scores by Role (Questions 4–8)

Role	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Crisis Management Team	4.39 (0.78)	4.33 (0.77)	4.17 (0.71)	4.06 (0.80)	4.17 (0.62)
Board Members	4.00 (0.71)	4.00 (0.91)	3.85 (0.90)	4.00 (0.71)	3.92 (0.76)
Journalists	3.78 (0.67)	4.11 (0.60)	3.78 (0.67)	3.78 (0.67)	3.89 (0.78)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

The results indicated that across all five questions, students rated this crisis simulation exercise highly, with mean scores generally at or above 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale. Such results demonstrate that this simulation successfully achieved its intended learning goals. In line with Learning Goal 1, students rated the simulation very useful for understanding the real-world application of crisis communication (Q5, M = 4.18), suggesting that applying crisis communication theories in a realistic scenario and role-playing can foster students' ability to analyze complex crisis scenarios and prompt critical thinking. Supporting Learning Goal 2, students reported that this exercise deepened their understanding of crisis communication principles and response strategies (Q4, M = 4.13) and felt more prepared to apply those strategies in the future (Q6, M = 3.98). Addressing Learning Goal 3, students indicated that the exercise enhanced their understanding of the challenges specific to managing AI-related crises (Q7, M = 3.98). Finally, consistent with Learning Goal 4, they expressed a high level of preparedness to handle AI-triggered crises in the future (Q8, M = 4.03).

Notably, students assigned to the CMT consistently reported the highest average scores across all items. This may be because they

have to actively apply crisis communication theories to develop response strategies from scratch, a task that demands initiative, creativity, and critical thinking. In contrast, students in the journalist role reported the lowest scores on four of the five questions. This may indicate that, while the journalist role is valuable, it provides fewer opportunities to practice developing response strategies. However, it is important to note that results from one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences among the three groups in any of the five questions. Thus, these trends are not definitive. However, one practical takeaway is that rotating roles across multiple crisis simulations can enhance learning outcomes by allowing each student to experience different perspectives and take on various responsibilities.

Moreover, students' qualitative comments further demonstrate that this crisis simulation effectively met its intended learning goals. It helped students better understand and apply crisis communication theories, especially in handling AI-triggered crises. Below is a small sample of feedback students provided in the self-evaluation questionnaire[1].

- "I feel like this simulation enhanced (m)by competencies a great deal. I had a way to apply the information learned in class in a class setting where I could receive peer and instructor feedback."
- "It helped me understand the importance of the strategy behind the messaging and how to use the best strategy. Initially I almost used a denial strategy, but after further discussion realized a more accommodating strategy would be better."
- "Before I had never thought through a "crisis" before and now I feel confident to have those critical thinking skills to be able to get through one."
- "I am more aware of stakeholders I need to address, important information to include in statements, and how a non-empathetic response sounds to an audience."
- "It helped me to think through what the best response is to keep

trust in your organization but also take accountability. I also think it helped me prepare what the best way is to answer questions I don't know the answers to."

• "The simulation definitely improved my understanding of crisis communication. I feel much more prepared to handle a crisis under pressure while still collaborating and covering necessary details."

[1]This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university with which the researchers are affiliated. All student responses are reported in accordance with IRB-approved guidelines.

Conclusion

This AI-triggered crisis simulation offers a timely and effective way to prepare students for the evolving demands of crisis communication. Based on a realistic GenAI misuse scenario, it exposes students to crisis dynamics that differ from traditional cases. Through role-playing and practical application of crisis communication theories, students deepen their theoretical understanding and gain practical experience. As GenAI continues to reshape the field, such exercises are crucial for developing the awareness and skills that future professionals need to manage AI-related crises with confidence and integrity.

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Appendix A
Mission, Value, and Vision Statement of XYZ Magazine

Mission Statement of XYZ Magazine

Our mission is to inspire and empower individuals through fashion by providing the latest trends, expert insights, and creative content. We aim to be a trusted resource for fashion enthusiasts, showcasing diverse styles and voices while encouraging self-expression and confidence in every reader.

Value Statement of XYZ Magazine

We value creativity, inclusivity, and innovation. Our content embraces diversity in all its forms, celebrating fashion as a tool for personal expression regardless of age, size, gender, or background. We are committed to responsible and sustainable fashion practices, providing our audience with both aspirational and attainable style inspiration. Above all, we believe fashion should be a force for individuality, positivity, and empowerment.

Vision Statement of XYZ Magazine

Our vision is to be the leading voice in fashion media, shaping the future of style through innovation and inclusivity.

Appendix B
Examples of Student Work

Internal Response

XYZ Employees,

We know you are all aware of the recent AI misuse within our company. Firstly, we want to directly apologize to each of you for the disruption to your credibility as a journalist. We deeply value your individual insight and emphasize how important you are to our company.

Our team and the board are currently investigating the situation, but until final evaluations are complete we want to introduce new policies that will be put in place to prevent this from happening in the future.

While we trust the authenticity of your work, we will be hiring a team of AI analysts that will create guidelines they will use to review all work prior to being published. Additionally, we will be having mandatory AI training over the next two weeks aimed at encouraging a deeper understanding of this developing technology.

If you have any comments or suggestions you wish to share on these developments, please feel free to reach out to our team.

XYZ Management

Crisis Statement

Thank you for gathering here today to discuss our ongoing investigation. We first wanted to apologize for any mistrust this might have caused customers to feel towards our company. Our biggest values as an organization are integrity, transparency, and the trust of our customers. In the spirit of these values, these next steps are of the upmost importance to us.

First off, we have removed any and all AI generated product reviews from our website. From here on out, all future use of AI in our

content will be disclosed. We have placed our product reviews editor on leave pending further investigation.

We want all current and future employees to fully understand where our priorities lie in terms of AI ethics and uses. Starting earlier today, all of our employees will be required to complete an AI ethics and awareness course. Together with our board, we are in the process of establishing an AI Ethics Review Committee. All published content will be approved through this committee, in accordance with the guidelines set forth in Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics.

At our core, we are committed to providing our customers with trustworthy, responsible and sustainable fashion practices and information. We appreciate your patience and cooperation as we continue in our investigation and we will update you as further information arises.

Appendix C
Sports Illustrated's Official Statement on the AI-Generated Content Allegations

Today, an article was published alleging that Sports Illustrated published AI-generated articles. According to our initial investigation, this is not accurate.

The articles in question were product reviews and were licensed content from an external, third-party company, AdVon Commerce. A number of AdVon's e-commerce articles ran on certain Arena websites. We continually monitor our partners and were in the midst of a review when these allegations were raised.

AdVon has assured us that all of the articles in question were written and edited by humans. According to AdVon, their writers, editors, and researchers create and curate content and follow a policy that involves using both counter-plagiarism and counter-AI software on all content. However, we have learned that AdVon had writers use a pen or pseudo name in certain articles to protect author privacy – actions we strongly condemn – and we are removing the content while our internal investigation continues and have since ended the partnership.

– Spokesperson for The Arena Group

Note. *Sports Illustrated* adopted a defensive crisis response stance aimed at minimizing its responsibility in response to allegations. It attributed the issue to a third-party company, AdVon Commerce, which claimed the articles were human-written. Sports Illustrated's response reflects SCCT's diminishment posture and IRT's evasion of responsibility strategy, specifically by implying the organization lacked direct control over the vendor's practices. While the company condemned the use of pseudonyms and took corrective actions (removing content, launching an investigation, and ending the vendor partnership), it did not accept direct responsibility.

Appendix D
Self-reflective Assessment of Crisis Simulation Exercise
On which team did you participate?

1. On which team did you participate?
   A. In-house crisis management team
   B. Journalists
   C. Board members
2. How would you rate your contribution to your team on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you were present but made minimal contribution, while 5 means you led the team or made the most significant contributions?
   Select one: 1   2   3   4   5
   Comments about your input:
3. How would you rate your team's performance in this exercise? Which specific areas do you believe your team excelled in, and where could improvements be made?
4. To what extent did this crisis simulation exercise deepen your understanding of the crisis communication principles and response strategies learned from the class?
   1. Not at all
   2. A little
   3. Somewhat
   4. Quite a bit
   5. To a great deal
5. How useful do you find this crisis simulation exercise in helping you understand the real-world application of crisis communication?
   1. Not useful
   2. Slightly useful
   3. Moderately useful
   4. Very useful
   5. Extremely useful

6. How well has this crisis simulation exercise prepared you to proficiently apply the crisis communication principles and response strategies learned from the class to real-world crisis scenarios in the future?
   1. Not well at all
   2. Slightly well
   3. Moderately well
   4. Very well
   5. Extremely well

7. To what extent did this simulation enhance your understanding of the crisis communication challenges specific to managing a crisis involving AI?
   1. Not at all
   2. A little
   3. Somewhat
   4. Quite a bit
   5. To a great deal

8. After completing this simulation, how prepared do you feel to handle AI-related crises in the future?
   1. Very unprepared
   2. Somewhat unprepared
   3. Neutral
   4. Somewhat prepared
   5. Very prepared

9. What aspect of this crisis simulation exercise did you find most challenging? Please explain it.

10. Do you think this simulation exercise enhanced your crisis communication competencies? If so, please describe the ways in which you believe your competencies have developed.

11. Do you have any suggestions for improving this crisis simulation exercise? If so, please explain.