

**Dynamic capabilities: Strategies and tactics for leaders engaging in crisis communications**

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**Abstract**

Public relations leaders have never been more aware of the need to pivot quickly in crisis communications due to COVID-19. While dynamic capabilities is a construct used in strategic management research to help organizations navigate volatile situations, public relations scholarship has yet to examine this construct. This study examines the connection between the strategic management theory of dynamic capabilities three factors (sensing, seizing, and transformation) and crisis communication. Using the framework provided by Kump et al. (2019) for dynamic capabilities, this study seeks to explore the connection between dynamic capabilities and public relations crisis communication. As one of the first studies to connect public relations scholarship to dynamic capabilities, this qualitative study found eight themes that related to public relations professionals. Recommendations are provided for industry professionals as well as integration for public relations scholarship.

*Keywords:* Crisis communication, dynamic capabilities, sensing, seizing, transformation, public relations, innovation, COVID-19

Disruption from both internal and external sources propels organizations toward innovation and change, a critical step if they want to survive in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world and industry (Christensen et al., 2017). Navigating innovation and change, however, especially in times of crisis, is difficult. Schoemaker et al. (2018) argue that for a business to perform well in this VUCA environment requires dynamic capabilities which include three factors, “sensing external change, seizing new opportunities, and transforming organizations” (p. 36). Dynamic capabilities, the “organizational capabilities that allow firms to ‘build and renew resources and assets [...], reconfiguring them as needed to innovate and respond to (or bring about) changes in the market and in the business environment” (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1149) is increasingly being connected to the study of public relations crisis communication due to the high level of relevance and similarities between the two areas.

Research has shown that organizations that have dynamic capabilities are able to “stay ahead with rapid innovation and distinctive business models” (Schoemaker et al., 2018, p. 36). In light of COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, understanding dynamic capabilities within the realm of crisis communication is more important than ever to public relations professionals as they help plan, navigate and implement communication plans for both internal and external audiences on behalf of organizations. This study seeks to present the factors of dynamic capabilities to public relations professionals to explore whether or not the theory is to applicable to their practice of crisis communication.

### **Literature Review**

This study focused on the intersection between the strategic management theory of dynamic capabilities and public relations crisis communication practices.

#### **A Review of Crisis Communications Research**

Understanding how and why crisis situations occur, how a crisis should be responded to and effectively managed is something that communication scholars have studied for a long time. Thankfully, crises “have an identifiable life cycle” (Coombs, 2019, p. 8), thus making the process of observation and learning from crisis situations possible. Studies of crisis communication has covered a lot of different subjects including brand equity and image repair post-crisis (Benoit, 1997; Dietz & Gillespie, 2012; Dutta & Pullig, 2011, Ulmer et al., 2007), the usage of apologies in crisis (Bentley et al., 2018; Verhoeven et al. 2012) as well as denials (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Kim, et al., 2004). Additionally, crisis communication studies have examined the position of spokespeople that should be used (Gupta et al., 2018), the channels through which communication should happen (Chewning, 2015; Nijkraak et al., 2015), the importance of trust and source credibility (Tkalac Verčič, 2019), the impact of previous crisis on current crisis situations (Coombs, 2004), as well as the attributes of the leader managing the crisis (Bowers et al., 2017; Tkalac Verčič, 2019; Verhoeven et al. 2012).

Crisis communication methods, however, are consistently being disrupted with best practices changing at the speed of social media and connectivity (Eriksson, 2018). There have been studies, for example, that examine the usage of social media to help position the organization in the midst of a crisis situation (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Poorly handled crises have also been studied, such that of the BP oil spill crisis. BP’s lack of clear communication and their inability to adapt and respond in real-time showed the importance of having a plan, especially in

a social media world (Chewning, 2015). Because of the change in the speed in which communication needs to occur with stakeholders it is critical that communication with stakeholders needs to be dynamic and address the right audiences because the organization's credibility is on the line (Kim & Brown, 2015).

Even with all this research and studies of best practices, however, crisis communication research is often seen as having a gap between theory and practical application. In a study of 22 internationally recognized crisis communication scholars, Manias-Muñoz et al. (2019), found that there were questions about the actual impact of crisis communication research as the studies didn't seem to address real-world crises. The research also showed that crisis communication, when taught at a university level, is taught as "either practice-oriented or research-oriented, but rarely both" (Manias-Muñoz et al., 2019, p. 6). Additionally, research shows that organizations are not preparing for times of change or disruption. Bowers et al. (2017), for example, found that "organizations rarely allocate adequate resources to prepare for crisis management" (p. 552).

Finally, perhaps the newest area of research in crisis communication is a direct result of COVID-19. Recent studies related to crisis communication in light of COVID-19 include studying social media and the challenges of misinformation (Malecki, K., et al., 2020) and the usage of twitter by government officials to reassure the public (Rao, H. R., et al., 2020). Without a doubt, there will be many more studies as COVID-19 introduces a pandemic level crisis situation that people and organizations were not prepared to manage. There is, however, a lack of research that helps provide the tangible tools and understanding for crisis communicators in light of this pandemic.

### **Dynamic Capability Theory in Crisis Communication**

Dynamic capabilities research aims to understand "how firms can sustain a competitive advantage by responding to and creating environmental change" (Helfat & Peteraf, 2009, p. 91). The theory of dynamic capabilities studies the 'above-average' capabilities used to "sense change, seize opportunities, and transform itself to navigate volatile future environments" (Schoemaker et al., 2018, p. 19). However, only recently have scholars suggested that the theory of dynamic capability and the competencies that it is associated with can and should be applied to crisis communication studies. Bundy et al. (2017), for example, stated that scholars should consider how dynamic capabilities and crisis communication can be studied together as both have organizational learning, the ability to adapt according to their circumstances, and a focus on performing well as their focal points. As of this point in time, however, only two peer-reviewed studies have been published to help establish the connection between dynamic capability and crisis communication in light of real-world situations (Kaltenbrunner & Reichel, 2018; Mansour et al., 2019). Neither of these studies, however, provide a framework that helps practitioners know how to bring the two topics together.

The lack of literature connecting crisis communication and dynamic capability may be because scholars have only recently moved the theory of dynamic capability into the practical area with the development of a universal scale. In 2019, Kump et al. proposed a 14-factor scale that focused on the items of sensing, seizing, and transforming. Sensing is defined as "an organization's capacity to continuously scan the organizational environment" (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1152) and includes the factors of 1) knowing the best practices in the market; 2) being up-to-date on the current market situation; 3) an organization systematically searching for current market situation information; 4) knowing how to access new information; and 5) keeping an eye on competitor activities (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1158).

Seizing, according to Kump et al. (2019), is the “mobilization of resources to address needs and opportunities, and to capture value from doing so” (p. 1152) so that “market opportunities are successfully exploited and that threats are eluded” (p. 1157). The factors that make up seizing include 1) quickly relating the knowledge attained; 2) recognizing what new information can be utilized within an organization; 3) utilizing the new technological knowledge into practice; and (4) product innovation, and using current information to develop new products and services (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1158).

Finally, transformation is “putting decisions for new business models, product or process innovations into practice by implementing the required structures and routines, providing the infrastructure, ensuring that the workforce has the required skills, and so forth” (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1157) and has the following factors: (1) the defining of clear responsibilities which allow for the successful implementation of plans for changes; (2) decisions on planned changes are pursued consistently within the organization; (3) projects that implement changes being seen through to completion consistently even though there are unforeseen interruptions and; (4) the change projects can be put into practice alongside daily business activities (Kump et al., 2019, p. 1158). Given that there is now a universal scale that has been developed, solidifying the three factors of sensing, seizing, and transforming, there is now more opportunity for scholars to develop the connection that seems to be clear between crisis communication and dynamic capabilities.

In summary, despite the rich depth and breadth of research related to crisis communication, there is a sense that due to the changing digital age, previous research is outdated. There is also a consensus among crisis communication scholars that there is a gap between the research of crisis communication and the practice of crisis communication. Additionally, while many facets of communication and its intersection with crisis situations have been studied, there is still a need to understand how crisis communications can be applied to organizations in practical and innovative ways. Dynamic capabilities, a concept characterized as the holy grail of strategic management, has been identified as construct that could bridge the gap between theory and practice for crisis communication. In light of this, this study aims to bring additional research to bridge the theory of dynamic capability with crisis communication. This is especially important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research in this area may assist organizations in understanding practical ways in which to engage in crisis communication in ways that showcase their dynamic capabilities.

The objective of this study is to utilize qualitative research methods to assess whether public relations and communication professionals see a connection between dynamic capabilities and crisis communication practices. The research questions, therefore, are as follows:

RQ1: What is the connection, if any, between an organization’s ability to “sense” and crisis management in practice?

RQ2: What is the connection, if any, between an organization’s ability to “seize” and crisis management in practice?

RQ3: What is the connection, if any, between an organization’s ability to “transform” and crisis management in practice?

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The items of the Kump et al., 2019 scale, developed through quantitative research, were used to formulate the qualitative survey questions that were asked of crisis communication professionals managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis at their respective organizations. These individuals were asked to identify their perceived connection between crisis communications and the three dynamic capabilities factors of sensing, seizing, and transformation. This study utilized purposive sampling and reached out to communication professionals in high-ranking positions at large and small organizations, agencies, and nonprofits to answer the questions. These professionals were identified through the network of the primary researcher. In addition, each request for participation was accompanied by a request to share the information for participation with other professionals, which did occur and led to an increase in the participation sample. The researcher also utilized social media to invite professionals from groups within social networks (such as social media professors and Accredited Public Relations Professionals (APR)).

A total of 22 public relations and communication professionals responded to and completed the qualitative survey instrument between September 8, 2020 and September 20, 2020. One respondent, however, chose to remain anonymous and did not share any demographic information. Of the 21 professionals that shared their demographic information, 18 were female (85.71%) and three were male (14.29%). The ages ranged between 25 to 54 with seven in the 25-34 age range (33.33%), ten in the 35 to 44 age range (47.62%), and four in the 45 to 54 age range (19.05%). The range of industries that these public relations professionals represented included aerospace, retail, healthcare, e-commerce, telecommunications, social media management, higher education, entertainment, nonprofit, agencies, food public relations, insurance, and professional services. There was also an equal range of representation in the titles: Senior Account Executive, Digital Content Strategist, Public Relations Coordinator, Director of Corporate Communications, Communications Specialist, President & Chief Storyteller, Social Media Manager, Quality Assurance Manager, VP Communications, Vice President/Principal, Professor, Senior Manager of Public Relations, Director and Communications Manager.

There was also a range in the experience level that these public relations professionals had, as far as being in the role of professional communication for a brand. Two of the respondents had between 1 to 2 years (9.52%). There were four in both the three to seven-year range (19.05%) as well as in the eight to ten-year range (19.05%). The majority of the respondents, eight individuals, had 11 to 15 years of experience (38.10%) and three had 16 year or more of experience (14.29%). Finally, 17 of the 20 completed responses (75%) indicated that they are currently “tasked with developing strategies for communicating on behalf of organizations” and 15 of 21 completed responses (71.43%) said that they manage others in their communication/public relations department. Finally, five (23.81%) of the 21 respondents had the professional credential of being an Accredited Public Relations (APR) professional.

This research utilized SurveyMonkey as an online asynchronous qualitative survey method, which research suggests allows for participants to provide deep reflection and complete thoughts (James, 2017; James & Busher, 2006; Hawkins, 2018). This also allowed the professionals to answer questions at the pace that is helpful to them and to help provide thoughtful answers without pressure from the interviewer (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015;

James, 2017). This method was preferred to a synchronous interview method given that purposive sample was targeting individuals who were actively managing the crisis communications for their respective organization in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In order to get sufficient participation and quality and thoughtful responses, while also catering to the timeframes for the individual. All participants were also asked whether or not they would be willing to engage in follow up conversations.

Once survey participants acknowledged the nature of the study and confirmed that they are willing to participate, are over the age of 18, and understood the voluntary nature of the study, they were asked questions related to the study.

Each question was structured in the same way with a quick definition of dynamic capabilities provided for each of the three factors (sensing, seizing, and transformation). There were three questions, one for each factor, that were asked of the participants. First, the question related to sensing was asked as follows: "From your experience, what ways have you seen this type of activity helping or playing a part in crisis communication efforts?" The second question, related to seizing was, "From your perspective, what is the value of seizing capabilities to crisis communications and change management?" The third question related to the dynamic capabilities factor of transformation prior: "From your experience, how does an organization benefit from have strong transformation capabilities, especially in light of times of crisis and communicating change?" These first three questions were designed to be simple and straightforward while also encouraging open-ended response.

Additional questions in the qualitative survey were of the background of the individual to help understand their experience and provide demographic information that may be helpful in the analyzing of the results (gender, age, ethnicity, industry, title within organization, years of experience managing communication for a brand or organization, whether or not they are tasked with developing communication strategies, if they manage others in the communication/public relations departments, if they are an accredited public relations (APR) professional, and whether or not they would be willing to receive follow up and a place for them to provide contact information).

### **Analysis**

In order to explore the information that was presented by the participants, an inductive approach was used, using the in vivo method to code the data and identify themes in the analysis of the results. The meaningful unit was usually a complete sentence but there were often phrases or concepts that made sense in context. The author then clustered the codes into categories and then transcriptions were reviewed a couple of times and underwent recoding and recategorizing (Saldaña, 2009) until saturation was reached. The participants identities were kept anonymous as a part of the original instrument and so titles, experience, and industries are presented as a part of the analysis instead.

### **Results**

Based on the 20 qualitative survey responses from the public relations professionals, it was clear from they understood the nature of the questions by the relevant answers they provided. Collectively, looking at the three dynamic capabilities factors of sensing, seizing, and transformation, several themes emerged to address the research questions of this study.

RQ1: What is the connection, if any, between an organization's ability to "sense" and crisis management in practice?

### **Listening**

A consistent theme that occurred from the majority of the public relations professionals is that of the ability to listen. The professionals described listening in the following terms: "social media listening", "tuned into the current news landscape", constantly scanning hot topics to gain a sense", "scanned their audience", "systematic issue/environmental scanning", and "sensing opportunities and scanning for threats" among others. One professional that is the vice president/principal at a marketing and public relations firm pointed out that "monitoring environments for both positive and negative outcomes that may affect a brand is crucial. This includes monitoring news cycles, community, and public sentiment, along with employee sentiment." The reason for the importance was stated by many, including one responded who chose to remain anonymous, who said that "The bottom line is that organizations that have systematic issue/environmental scanning have an advantage in getting ahead of issues and preventing them from becoming crises." Speaking to the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis that we are in, an PR and communications manager with 11-15 years of experience noted, "in the beginning of the crisis, I think there was a delay in sensing the gravity of the crisis ... there was no cascade of communication to sectors that could have benefited from an ability to put that information into context of an environment scan and that failed sectors across the nation." The ability to listen, therefore, as a part of sensing is highly connected to the management of crisis situations. Additionally, the importance of listening was seen across many sectors including education, marketing and public relations, healthcare, telecommunications, retail, and the professional services industry.

### **Responding**

In addition to the importance of listening, some of the professionals highlighted the importance of responding. For example, a senior manager in food public relations with 11-15 years of experience discussed the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement and the impact to organization:

Overnight brands were forced to change policies, positions, operations, communications to reflect a shifting cultural behavior and consumer expectation. Consumers looked to brands to have strong perspective and positioning on matters that are directly impacting them and their communities. Brands that didn't respond accordingly, transparently or in a timely manner faced backlash.

Being aware of the crisis and through listening and sensing also was, therefore, critical in the ability for an organization to respond to the crisis. Another professional, a director at a nonprofit organization, discussed that their organization is "sending out regular surveys to get updated communication on how staff and partners/beneficiaries are experiencing COVID-19." As a communications manager for a city, another professional discussed the importance of sensing and retrieving understanding from local community groups and the local university "to determine the level of communications needed during recent demonstrations surrounding racial injustice".

### **Responsibility**

While listening and responding were two major themes that arose, another theme that arose was that of responsibility, an ethical commitment to one's organization and their publics. A director of corporate communications within the healthcare industry commented, "Communications professionals are literally scanning the market 24/7. There is no end in sight

and the news changes hourly. Companies not staying on top of the news cycle will not thrive.” There is according to this professional a direct impact to an organizations ability to thrive and the ability to engage in sensing activities. This sentiment was echoed by a professor who stated, “When leaders take time to sense what’s going on, they demonstrate listening, understanding, and a desire for common good. An accredited public relations (APR) who has more than 16 years of experience in public relations discussed that “Scanning one's environment helps to be prepared for issues or threats to one's property, business or the public in general.”

RQ2: What is the connection, if any, between an organization’s ability to “seize” and crisis management in practice?

### **Planning**

The professionals discussed the importance having a crisis plan prepared prior to a crisis that they can rely on and use during a crisis situation. A vice president/principal at a marketing and public relations firm stressed the importance of this, especially since it matters to his clients, “Our clients expect us to drop everything in times of crisis, therefore, we have internal plans in place to ensure our clients feel confident that we are devoted to their situation.” This idea of the importance of having a plan was also emphasized by others. A director of corporate communications who is also an APR and has over 16 years of experience put it in this way:

We can’t always exploit opportunity and thwart threats. That’s just not realistic. I think the most valuable tool in a communications or PR toolbox is the plan. Plan ahead and try to anticipate what may happen – event both good and bad. Without a plan, you’re at risk.

Another brand manager with 11-15 years of experience also had the same perspective, “You must plan for the worst in hopes you never have to use the plan but you know it is there if needed”. The communications manager for a city who is also an APR stated the purpose of the plan for the city:

The goal for the plan was to mobilize resources in order to minimize the threat of the pandemic to the community. Resources included communication channels including our website, social media channels, community groups and employees who could create and distribute communications materials throughout the city (posters, signs, etc.)

### **Reaction**

Another theme that was presented in connection to the ability to “seize” is that of protecting an organization and publics from an even bigger crisis. One respondent, who opted to remain anonymous, explained the value of seizing capabilities to crisis communications and change management is “to effectively act/react organizations need to be able to mobilize resources quickly with a goal of managing issues, preventing issues from becoming crises, and crises from becoming nightmares.”

The food public relations senior manager discussed how Taco Bell responded to the COVID-19 crisis and how they acted to protect (and serve) their audience:

An example was during the first wave of COVID-19 responses, Taco Bell closed down all interior dining -- leaving drive-thrus open. Unfortunately, since large service vehicles (ambulances, deliver trucks, etc) could not fit in the drive-thrus. And since dining rooms were closed, they were left with no options. In response, we turned Taco Bell HQ (which had been closed) into a drive-thru for large essential service vehicles. We provided food at no charge as a thank you for their service on the frontlines of the pandemic.

### **Human Dignity in Communication**

Finally, the concept of exploitation was discussed by a couple of the professionals. One of the ways in which Kump et al. (2019) defined seizing was that it was the “mobilization of resources to address needs and opportunities, and to capture value from doing so” (p. 1152) so that “market opportunities are successfully exploited and that threats are eluded” (p. 1157). This definition was used to share context for what seizing is in the parameters of dynamic capabilities with the public relations professionals. The response to the term, exploitation, was a point on which some commented on. A social media manager who owns their own business with 8-10 years of experience said:

I believe there's a balance between seizing during a crisis and exploiting a crisis. Seizing new opportunities requires creativity and agility and can open up doors to new things that were never possible or thought of before. But I try to be careful not to fall into the exploitive side of seizing opportunities by staying away from communication that uses fear or manipulation when talking about new opportunities.

A professor also discussed the topic and objected to the definition itself, “I totally object to this definition. It offends me. Exploitation is a terrible thing ... even “seizing sounds forceful to me.” Thus, the theme of giving people dignity in communication was established. It was not just the communication in a negative way, as discussed with exploitation, but also in the way that organizations treated people. As highlighted earlier, the food public relations senior manager at Taco discussed how the organization provided food for no charge to the front-line workers for COVID-19. This is another way in which people who have been serving the community were thanked and given a sense of dignity.

RQ3: What is the connection, if any, between an organization’s ability to “transform” and crisis management in practice?

### **Action-Orientation**

One of the most significant discussions that arose from the conversation about transformation in times of crisis situations was that of taking action. Multiple professionals discussed the importance of not only having a plan, but also acting on the plan. “The first two steps might be great but if you don’t actually act on them they become meaningless. Transforming is where the rubber meets the road,” shared a professor. This same language was used by the Vice President/Principal of a marketing and public relations firm who responded, “This is where the rubbers meets the road. All talk and no action is, unfortunately, where many brands land. It’s vital to walk the talk, which includes implementing new changes, updating infrastructure, and ensuring that employees are well-positions to lead”. The action was not only external-facing, but also internal-facing. “A strong organization looks at the reality of the situation and what they’re asking of the workforce and creates an infrastructure that supports their teams and goals” said a social media manager that manages others in their communication and public relations department.

### **Agility**

Another important theme that arose was agility. A digital content strategist working in aerospace stated that transforming “sounds like a team’s willingness to be flexible, agile and resilient to external change, which I consider extremely important”. The importance of agility was also highlighted by a director in the nonprofit sector who said that “the organization will benefit if it can remain agile and flexible. This will allow the organization to transform with the market. Remaining agile will also help the org transform for the future. Communication and adaptability are key.” A director of corporate communications within the healthcare industry

who is also an APR put it this way, “Companies have to be agile and change plans on a dime.” Others, while they didn’t use the terms explicitly, shared the same sentiment. “The need to pivot to address major changes is important and perhaps the main way to survive as an organization,” stated a quality assurance manager in higher education. Discussing the current COVID-19 situation, the food public relations senior manager shared the following:

But largely, organizations are paralyzed as they wait for a more influential player in their field to take the lead. Stunned by the ineptitude, again, of local and federal governments, most business sectors are caught between a rock and a hard place in terms of truly being able to transform their business for success during this crisis. I think the restaurant industry is the only example of an industry that continuously transforms and pivots as new information comes out, quickly offering groceries or takeout, outdoor dining and safe spacious offerings to accommodate the changing environment.

## **Discussion**

### **Application to Public Relations Scholarship**

To the author’s knowledge, there is no other study that seeks to integrate the construct of dynamic capabilities (Kump et al., 2019) into public relations research. This gap in connection between dynamic capabilities and public relations research is an area other scholars have observed and suggested future research address (Bundey et al., 2017). This study worked to make a first effort to address that call by using the three dimensions (sensing, seizing, and transformation) identified by Kump et al. (2019) to explore the connection with specific organizational communication practice. From this study, eight themes emerged that are specifically applicable to communication professionals. While much of dynamic capabilities has previously focused on management work (Schoemaker et al., 2018), public relations professionals often are at the front of the ability for organizations to make change, since the communication of change and the connection to stakeholders is crucial to navigating crisis and transformation (Coombs, 2019). Thus, examining communication and relationship management within the concept of dynamic capabilities is an important first step to establish the construct of dynamic capabilities within public relations scholarship.

### **Applications for the Industry**

In the wake of Covid-19, public relations professionals are more aware than ever before of the necessity of being able to manage communication efforts in VUCA environments (Christensen et al., 2017). This study provides a valuable contribution to both public relations scholarship and public relations practice, as it ties together the concept of dynamic capabilities and public relations.

Crisis communications is a well-established research area within public relations (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2019; Coombs, 1995; Dietz & Gillespie, 2012; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Despite the established scholarship, there have been scholars who suggest a gap between academic theory and applied practice that would help public relations professionals effectively manage real-world communication efforts (Manias-Muñoz et al., 2019). This study works to provide a step forward for practitioners to understand specific steps and actions during crisis communication. This is particularly salient as researchers continue to identify the impact of poorly managed communication in crisis situations and the overall impact to brands (Malecki, K., et al., 2020, Rao, H. R., et al., 2020). Using Kump et al. (2019) as a model for the construct of dynamic

capabilities, this study identified eight specific areas that uniquely apply to public relations professionals. Breaking these 8 themes into the 3 dimensions of the dynamic capability construct proposed by Kump et al. (2019), professionals may be better poised to develop, monitor, engage, and act on communication throughout a crisis situation.

More specifically, as scholars have identified a lack of adequate resources to prepare for crisis management (Bowers et al., 2017), this study provides specific areas that managers and leaders in public relations can use to equip their team to effectively navigate VUCA situations. While crisis communication often examines the life-cycle of a crisis situation and the stages at play in order to craft communication (Coombs, 2019), digital technology (Eriksson, 2018) and the overall impact of large scale crisis situations such as Covid-19 (Malecki, K., et al., 2020; Rao, H. R., et al., 2020) have resulted in public relations teams needing tangible and quick options to craft communication in crisis situations. This study's eight themes provide a framework for teams to prepare for rapid communication in VUCA environments, often requiring the team to shift between areas such as information gathering and sense-making, while also developing an action plan, response, and future steps in a short-timeframe. By tying together things such as listening with responsibility (within the first dimension of sensing), brands are able to couple an ethical commitment to the public good with the act of gathering information and making recommendations. Additionally, as teams develop plans (in the second dimension, seizing), the integration of not only being strategic but also protecting human dignity is a further way that professionals can practically interact with publics. In 2020 alone, multiple social justice and global impact issues arose that brands were drawn into communicating about with their stakeholders. Understanding that crisis communication involves not just a plan, but an organization's dedication to human dignity for the public will help protect and sustain the brand's reputation, public loyalty, and overall credibility. Ultimately, the focus on agility and transformation, which is the third dimension, identified the need for communication teams to be flexible, able to pivot, and professionally equipped to navigate communication development and strategy quickly.

### **Future Research and Limitations**

This study provides a foundation into linking dynamic capabilities as a construct into public relations. While it is an initial study, it is limited by the scale of participants. It would be helpful to continue building on this study with further explore of the 8 themes identified. This could be through a larger qualitative study, but also it is recommended that there is a quantitative study on the eight dimensions, to develop a specific scale for dynamic capabilities for organizational communication.

### **Conclusion**

This study suggests that there is a close connection between the three factors of dynamic capabilities (sensing, seizing, and transformation) with the real-life practice of public relation and communication professionals in terms of crisis plans and crisis communication. This may help bridge the gap between the academy and professional realms with a tangible scale originally only used within the realm of strategic management. In addition to the scale, it was been revealed that there are eight themes connected to dynamic capabilities that undergird and inform public

relations professionals as they engage in crisis communication: 1) listening; 2) responding; 3) responsibility; 4) planning; 5) reaction; 6) human dignity in communication; 7) action orientation; and 8) agility. Future research could help continue to bridge the gap between theories and practice in public relations crisis communication.

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