East African Journal of Communication Studies (EAJoCS)
2026, VOL. 1, NO. 2, 28-57
https://doi.org/10.56279/eajocs.v1i2.2

Dar es Salaam
University Press
(DUP)

Attribution-Independent Emotions of Government in the Context of Crisis Communication in Mbeya City, Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from an exploratory qualitative study examining attribution-independent emotions in government crisis communication in Mbeya City, Tanzania. Guided by Weiner Attribution Theory (WAT), data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants recruited via snowball sampling and a purposive review of crisis news articles, press releases, and the 2004 National Disaster Management Policy (NDMP), alongside documents from the Mbeya Region, news media, discussion forums, and blogs. Data were analysed thematically. The findings show that the government prioritised a crisis victim relief framework over assigning responsibility by expressing attribution-independent emotions, including sadness, sympathy, compassion, fear, anger, and happiness, throughout the crisis lifecycle rather than only during initial appraisals. This departs from traditional attribution theories, including WAT and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasise identifying the causes of crises and assigning responsibility. Instead, the study demonstrates that these emotions serve as strategic communication tools to express concern for crisis-victim stakeholders, reduce negative reactions, and reinforce perceptions of government responsiveness. It concludes that a crisis-victim-centred communication approach shapes crisis discourse by minimising blame attribution, alleviating human suffering, and fostering empathy and public trust during crises.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 4 May 2026
Accepted 23 July 2026

KEYWORDS
Emotional response, attribution-independent emotional response, crisis, and crisis communication

HOW TO CITE
Kayuni, S et al. (2026). Attribution-Independent Emotions of Government in the Context of Crisis Communication in Mbeya City, Tanzania. *East African Journal of Communication Studies*, Vol. 1(2), 28–57. https://doi.org/10.56279/eajocs.v1i2.2

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1. Introduction

All organisations, whether government or non-government, are subject to crises (Zakiri, 2020). In this study, a crisis is conceptualised as an event that has diverse effects on people and their environment, leading to a state of suffering that necessitates government intervention. This suffering threatens both an organisation and its stakeholders. In this situation, an immediate response is required to mitigate the threat (Ulmer et al., 2015). When a crisis hits an organisation, it is known as an organisational crisis. Because of their disruptive nature, organisational crises typically trigger intense reactive emotions and public outcry (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). This threatens the reputation of an organisation in crisis, as stakeholders become angry and anxious that the organisation has allowed the crisis to occur and has harmed them (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Being angry and anxious is an emotional response to the organisation, and this situation threatens its reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Coombs, 2007). The threat to the organisation's reputation increases as more stakeholders assign responsibility for the crisis to it (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Organisations immediately use crisis communication as a strategic defensive mechanism to mitigate their reputational damage (Benoit, 2013; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013; Coombs, 2007, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021).

Although communication fosters mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders regarding actions, even in highly uncertain and threatening crisis contexts (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021), it is challenging, as the organisation’s verbal and non-verbal actions significantly influence stakeholders' or the public's perception of the organisation in a crisis (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Li et al., 2023). On one hand, an organisation can verbally instruct the stakeholders, adjust them, deny the crisis information, apologise to the stakeholders for the crisis, diminish the crisis outcomes, and remind its stakeholders (Benoit, 1995, 2013; Coombs, 1995, 1996, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005, 2010). On the other hand, organisations convey non-verbal messages through both vocal and visual channels, which collectively shape stakeholders’ or the public’s perception during a crisis. Specifically, vocal cues, such as shouting or a raised pitch, interact with deceptive visual cues to inadvertently signal underlying

emotional stress, defensiveness, or insincerity to the public (De Waele et al., 2018; Claeys & De Waele, 2022; Li et al., 2023).

Current crisis-communication scholarship predominantly conceptualises organisation emotional responses as attribution-dependent, maintaining that these emotions are linked to the perceived cause of an event (Schoofs & An-Sofie, 2021; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). While such emotional expressions are recognised as critical determinants of reputational protection or damage (Schoofs & An-Sofie, 2021), this focus remains limited to causal diagnostic enquiry. However, emotions are not solely triggered by feelings about the causes of an event (attribution-dependent emotions) but also by its outcome (Weiner, 1985, 1986). Attribution-independent emotions, also termed outcome-dependent emotions, arise as a direct response to the consequences of an event, regardless of its cause (Weiner, 1985). Despite evidence that organisational emotional responses significantly influence the interpretation of a communicated message and the reputation of an organisation (Choi & Lin, 2007; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014), little is known about attribution-independent emotions of organisations, especially government, in the context of crisis communication. The objective of this study is to analyse the government's attribution-independent emotions in the context of crisis communication.

Emotions are adaptive reactions to life events (Plutchik, 1965; Robinson et al., 2013). They help an organism to organise and motivate rapid actions in response to immediate threats to survival (Darwin, 1897; Izard, 2009). However, there is little agreement among emotion theorists about which emotions should be included in the list of basic ones (Kowalska & Wrobel, 2017). Power and Dalgleish (2016) formulated a factor model of correlated basic emotions to explain a list of basic emotions that reflect basic appraisal scenarios. The list includes emotions such as anger (anger, frustration, irritation, aggression), sadness (despair, misery, gloominess, mournful), disgust (shame, guilt, humiliated, blameworthy), fear (anxiety, nervousness, tense, worried), and happiness (happiness, joy, loving, cheerful). These emotions are aroused when an individual appraises the significance of environmental stimuli, and they range from distinct negative to positive emotions (Lazarus, 1991). This study conceptualises the attribution-independent emotions of government as collective emotional states expressed by Government Crisis Response Officials (GCROs), intentionally or unintentionally, in crisis-communication contexts affecting their

government. Unlike attribution-dependent emotions, these are triggered by the impact of a crisis on an organisation and its stakeholders rather than by the assignment of blame.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Weiner's Attribution Theory, which provides a robust conceptual framework for understanding how attribution-independent emotions are elicited through direct experience and perception of an event's outcome. The theory's intellectual roots trace to Heider (1958), who established the foundational premise that individuals function as intuitive psychologists perpetually seeking causal explanations for human behaviours. Haider (ibid) established personal and impersonal as the main folders for categorising causes of an occurrence. In the personal folder, we blame or credit the person for their effort or skills, whereas in the impersonal folder, we blame or credit the situation or environment, such as bad luck, a hard task or other people. Building on Heider's (1958) foundational work, attribution theory established two categories for explaining the causes of any given occurrence: personal attribution, which locates causality within the individual through factors such as effort or ability, and impersonal attribution, which assigns causality to external situational factors such as task difficulty, chance, or the actions of others. Heider's categorisation of causal explanations (personal and impersonal) served as the conceptual blueprint from which Weiner and subsequent attribution theorists constructed their more elaborate models.

Although the WAT traditionally focuses on how beliefs about causality determine emotions, Power and Dalgleish (2016) and Weiner (1985, 1986) assert that individuals automatically form initial interpretations of the event's outcome, which trigger attribution-independent (outcome-dependent) emotions. When this initial interpretation is negative, individuals begin the attribution process, which then leads to attribution-dependent emotions (Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs, 2007; Power & Dalgleish, 2016; Weiner, 1986, 2014). A key principle of WAT, central to this study, is that perceived crisis outcomes elicit specific emotions even before the attribution process begins to identify causal factors. This principle justifies analysing the government's emotional responses to market fires, floods, and transport accidents as attribution-independent affective reactions

triggered by the perceived crisis severity rather than causal blame. This provides the theoretical basis for treating the government's emotional responses as attribution-independent, enabling the study to systematically analyse and interpret how the government expressed the emotions. Additionally, WAT is relevant to this study because it provides the psychological foundation, specifically the dimensions of causal attribution for the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the dominant theoretical framework in contemporary crisis communication scholarship, such as Williams (2021), Coombs & Holladay (2005), and Coombs, Holladay, & White (2020).

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the government's attribution-independent emotions in the context of crisis communication in Mbeya City. The approach was selected because crises evoke a wide range of emotions that vary with perceptions of responsibility for the crisis and stakeholder characteristics (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Ulmer et al., 2015). These emotions represent complex, subjective experiences that require in-depth exploration of attitudes and behaviours, facilitated by prolonged participant contact (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dawson, 2002). The approach is uniquely suited to understanding the nuanced meanings individuals ascribe to human problems, allowing researchers to collect data in natural settings and employ inductive analysis to derive general themes from specific emotional responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

With this qualitative approach, a phenomenological research design was adopted to describe participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon as described by Creswell and Creswell (2023) and Creswell (2013). Consistent with this phenomenological design, the researcher collected data from 12 participants through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted individually at a venue convenient to the participant within the Mbeya City Council. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes to accommodate preliminary procedural tasks, including assessing participants' awareness of crisis communication and reviewing informed consent. The interviews were scheduled based on each participant's availability and time constraints, with sessions conducted either on the same day or on separate days throughout the study period to accommodate participants' availability and official schedules.

The participants comprised eight Government Crisis Response Officials (GCROs) recruited from the Regional Commissioner (RC), Regional Police Commander (RPC), Regional Fire and Rescue Service Commander (RFRSC), City Executive Director (CED), and four Crisis Victims (CVs) from the general public affected by crises. Data on the government's attribution-independent emotional responses were collected from the GCROs regarding the crises they personally encountered in their official capacities and the emotions they expressed in response to them on behalf of the government. Correspondingly, the CVs provided data on the government's attribution-independent emotional responses, based on their firsthand experiences of the same crises and their observations of crisis communication strategies and the emotional responses displayed by the GCROs as representatives of the government. The CVs' responses provided a complementary perspective that triangulated the accounts offered by the GCROs themselves. These GCROs and CVs directly experienced crisis events in the study area and developed composite descriptions that captured the crisis, the attribution-independent emotions the government expressed and how it expressed them.

This study was restricted to Mbeya City (MC) due to its uniquely complex crisis environment, as highlighted by market fires between 2006 and 2018 in all four major markets (Mwanjelwa, SIDO, Uhindini, and the forest) and recurrent fires in the close markets of Mwanjelwa and SIDO. While market fires occur elsewhere in Tanzania (Mazimu, 2022; Msokwa, 2018), their occurrence across all major markets in the cities and their recurrence in such close proximity warrant a deep investigation. Additionally, the city's topography and human activities make it equally vulnerable to recurrent flash floods in the lowlands and to transport accidents on mountainous road networks, particularly on steep slopes (Mwakyembe, 2016; Mathias, 2023), both of which warrant investigation.

The purposive sampling extended beyond human participants to include crisis news articles, press releases, and the 2004 National Disaster Management Policy retrieved from the Mbeya Region's web pages, news media, discussion forums, and blogs from which data were extracted through document review. The purposive selection of these data sources was based entirely on their direct relevance to the study's objective,

particularly their crisis communication content. To identify and access these valuable informational resources, the researcher conducted a systematic review of crisis news publications across the Mbeya region's web pages, news media, and discussion forums, from which attribution-independent emotions were identified. To maintain rigour and consistency throughout the data extraction process, the researcher utilised a structured review checklist, which served as a guiding framework to ensure the review remained focused on the government's attribution-independent emotional responses and to prevent the omission of critical information during the analysis of the textual materials. The extraction of readily available written data helped the researcher save time and reduce data transcription costs (Creswell, 2014). This also helped the researcher capture emotions that participants might have overlooked during reflective interviews.

This study utilised a qualitative thematic analysis framework structured around a five-step procedure established by Creswell (2014) and supported by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) to systematically identify significant patterns (themes) in the data. The process began with data preparation, wherein interview transcripts and document data were organised, anonymised, and thoroughly reviewed to establish initial analytical impressions. Subsequently, the researcher executed an iterative, concurrent process of data collection and analysis, systematically segmenting text into meaningful chunks (generating initial coding ideas) using colour coding in the word-processing software. These initial codes were collated into emerging themes, which were then continuously reviewed, refined into preliminary categories, and verified for internal coherence. A reflexive, constant comparative approach guided the analysis, enabling continuous refinement of the thematic structure while preserving alignment with the participants' original narratives. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively after each interview and crisis news publication until data saturation was achieved. By the twelfth interview and tenth crisis news publication, the collection of new data ceased to yield novel insights or themes, consistently reinforcing the existing ones instead. This indicated that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon had been reached regarding the emotional responses of government during crises, which were ultimately interpreted through the Weiner Attribution Theory as attribution-independent emotions.

Although the sample comprised 12 participants and 10 crisis news publications, data saturation was achieved through a combination of

iterative analysis and a strategic sampling design. The study utilised purposive sampling to recruit a homogeneous group of information-rich participants with direct lived experiences of the crisis communication and organisational emotional responses under investigation. This homogeneity ensured significant overlap in their narratives, allowing common, overarching themes to surface robustly from a concise sample size while maintaining the depth and rigour required for interpretive analysis.

Validity of data pertaining to the emotional responses of government during crisis communication events that occurred several years ago was ensured by adopting two measures: the adoption of a phenomenological research design, which facilitated acurate capture of participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon, and triangulation, whereby GCROs' interview responses were cross-referenced with those of the CVs and with data extracted from crisis news publications, providing contemporaneous documentary evidence of emotional responses of the government at the time of occurrence and thereby mitigating potential recall bias inherent in retrospective accounts.

As the research involved intruding into people's lives, ethical integrity was maintained throughout all phases of the study, aligning with Creswell's (2014) recommendation to address ethics from inception through to reporting. Formal authorisation was granted by the University of Dar es Salaam and the Mbeya regional administrative secretary, and all participants provided written informed consent. To uphold confidentiality and protect participants' rights, participants signed informed consent forms and were assigned alphanumeric pseudonyms, such as GCRO1 and CV6, to prevent identification in the final paper.

3. Results

This paper analysed the government's attribution-independent emotions in the context of crisis communication. This section presents the key findings of the study, derived from themes identified through thematic analysis of the data. The findings identify attribution-independent emotions of the government as a component of its crisis communication. They include: sadness, sympathy, compassion, anger, fear, and happiness. These findings were derived from participants' recollections of the government's emotional responses and from thematic extraction of data from digital

crisis news publications. The evidence gathered from both interviews and secondary digital publications is precisely explicated within the subsequent sections.

3.1 Sadness

This study indicates that the government frequently expressed sadness in response to market fires, floods, and road transport accidents. This emotional response was evident immediately upon learning that it was in crisis and persisted throughout the crisis. Upon receiving the news of the crisis, the GCROs reported feeling deeply saddened. The expression of sadness demonstrated a deep, shared sense of the victims' suffering and the moral weight of the CVs' suffering.

This was manifested in their direct verbal expressions of sorrow and the use of negative emotion terms during these crises. During interviews, the OCROs frequently used phrases such as “I felt bad,” "I felt pain," and "I was sad" to describe their emotional state during these events. This was captured in an interview with GCRO1, who stated:

> Nilijisikia uchungu pale ninapofika eneo la tukio na kukuta mali zinateketea na kuona kwenye ajali watu wamekufa, wengi wametapakaa barabarani eehe…wengine bado hawajafa lakini wamebanwa kwenye gari na wanalia kwa uchungu yaani mtu ameshabanwa kwenye mavyuma mule. Katika mazingira haya ilinilazimu nijisikie uchungu(GCRO1, personal communication, June 7, 2023).

Translation:

> I felt pain when I arrived at the scene of the incident and found property being destroyed, and when I saw people who had died in an accident, many of them were scattered along the road. Others were not yet dead but were trapped in the vehicle and crying in pain. These circumstances caused me pain (GCRO1, Personal communication, June 7, 2023).

From GCRO1’s perspective, the observation of casualties among CVs and the destruction of their property during the crises directly prompted the government’s expression of sadness. This expression of sadness demonstrates a deep, shared sense of suffering and the moral weight of CVs' suffering.

Furthermore, the expression of sadness was corroborated by interview data with CVs and a document review. On the one hand, the CVs reported

that the government publicly expressed its collective sorrow for every crisis that disrupted its routines and affected their lives. On the other hand, excerpts from the government's press releases indicate the CVs' profound sadness. In this regard, CV9 recounted her experience of the floods and shared:

> Tulipopata matatizo ya mafuriko, cha kwanza mwenyekiti na diwani walikuja kututembelea. Walipotutembelea, wakatupa pole, ndio wakaanza kuwasiliana na jiji na jiji likaja na mbunge wetu pia alikuja na watu wake na wakatupa pole. Viongozi wa mkoa na jiji walikuja walikuwa wanatembea barabarani humo wanaangalia nyumba ambazo zimeathirika (CV9, personal communication, June 21, 2023).

Translation:

> When we faced floods, our chairperson and ward councillor visited us first. When they visited us, they expressed their sorrow and then began communicating with the city, which responded by visiting us. Our member of parliament also came with her people, and they expressed sorrow for the situation. The regional and city leaders came and walked along the road there, inspecting the houses that had been affected (CV9, Personal communication, June 21, 2023).

In the official press release responding to the 16 August 2017 SIDO market fire outbreak, the Regional Commissioner (RC) Makala stated:

> Natoa pole kwa wote walioathirika na janga la moto kwa wafanyabiashara soko la SIDO. (…) nirudie tena kuwapa pole wale wote walioathirika na janga na Mungu awatie nguvu katika kipindi hiki kigumu (RC press release, August 16, 2017).

Translation:

> I express my sorrow for the victims of the SIDO market fire. (…) Once more, I express my sorrow for the victims of the outbreak, and may God grant them strength during this difficult period (RC press release, August 16, 2017).

The verbatim statements suggest that the deep suffering endured by CVs during the Sido market fire outbreaks prompted the government to express sadness, thereby establishing a solidarity-based connection with the victims and demonstrating humanitarian care for them during the crisis.

Framed within WAT, the observed sadness of the government is conceptualised as an attribution-independent emotion, as it was triggered directly by the immediate outcome of the crisis, specifically property destruction, material loss, and casualties, rather than by the causes of the crisis and these harms.

3.2 *Sympathy*

Triangulated data from interviews and crisis news documents indicate that the government consistently expressed sympathy across all crises. This expression served a dual purpose, most notably as a direct response to victims' psychological states. This was noted in the interview responses of GCRO5, who recalled his experience of the August 2017 SIDO market fire outbreak and said:

> Niliwaonea huruma waathirika wa majanga kutokana na hali iliyokuwepo. Ilikuwa ni mapema sana kumfanya muathirika akuelewe unachomuambia ama kumshauri kwasababu walikuwa wamepata mshtuko mkubwa (GCRO5, personal communication, June 17, 2023).

Translation:

> I felt sympathy for the victims of the crisis, given the situation. It was too early to influence the victims to understand what you were telling or advising them, as they were in a state of severe shock (GCRO5, personal communication, June 17, 2023).

This communication indicates that the government recognised the victims' profound psychological shock and, consequently, expressed deep sympathy as a means of emotional stabilisation. This suggests that the government favours emotional support over mere information dissemination in contexts of serious emotional turmoil.

On the other hand, expressing sympathy is seen as a core responsibility of the government. This was captured in interviews with GCRO11, who recounted his experiences of market fires and road transport accidents, and shared:

> Na mimi kama jukumu langu ni kulinda raia na mali zao, kwahiyo inapotokea ajali obvious lazima nifeel sympathy na

> lazima nijisikie vibaya (GCRO11, personal communication, June 27, 2023)

Translation:

> My duty is to protect citizens and their property; therefore, I obviously feel sympathy and sadness when an accident occurs (GCRO11, personal communication, June 27, 2023).

The description suggests that expressing deepest sympathy is a government duty, particularly when an event adversely affects people under its protective mandate. This reinforces the government's identity as a compassionate and caring entity during times of crisis.

When asked about the circumstances that elicited sympathy, the participants described the victims' crisis-related challenges. The participants' responses indicated that the organisation expressed this emotion upon witnessing its victims suffer various forms of crisis-related harm, including family displacement and the loss and destruction of property such as houses, shops, businesses, vehicles, roads, domestic animals, clothes, and essential services like electricity and water. In this regard, GCRO4 and GCRO3 recalled their experiences of floods and market fires in the city and said:

> Nilijisikia huruma kwasababu zile familia zilihangaika sana zilikosa mahala pa kulala, mahitaji ya msingi na watoto walishindwa kwenda shule (GCRO4, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Translation:

> I felt sympathy for the families who had been displaced from their homes. They lacked shelter and basic necessities, and their children were unable to attend school (GCRO4, personal communication, June 15, 2023).
>
> Niliwaonea huruma kulingana na hali halisi ya maisha. Mfano, kuna watu walichukua mkopo wa benki wakiwa bado hawajazalisha. Usiku maduka yanaungua (GOO3, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Translation:

> I felt sympathy for the victims' real-life circumstances. For example, some of them had bank loans, and their shops

> burned down at night before they had even begun to make a profit (GCRO3, personal communication, Jun 15, 2023).

The utterances suggest that the expression of sympathy is rooted in observations of the victims' specific suffering, including displacement, lack of shelter, loss of borrowed business capital, and disruption of children's education.

The government's expression of sympathy is further corroborated by data extracted from digital crisis news documents. For example, the Mbeya-RC press release regarding the August 2017 SIDO market fire explicitly articulated sympathy, reinforcing the organisation's commitment to recognising and stabilising the victims' emotional turmoil, as expressed:

> Natoa pole kwa wote walioathirika na janga la moto na kwa wafanyabiashara soko la Sido. SOKO la sido lilianza kuungua saa 3:32 dakika jana usiku na kuteketeza mali za wafanyabiashara wa soko la sido… Nirudie tena kuwapa pole wote walioathirika na janga na mungu awatie nguvu ktk kipindi hiki kigumu (Ombara, 2017, p.3).

Translation:

> I express my sorrow to all the victims and businesspersons affected by the SIDO market fire. The fire broke out at 21:32 hours last night and destroyed the businesspeople's property. Let me once again express my sympathy to all the victims; may God grant them strength during this difficult period (Ombara, 2017, p. 3).

The repeated expression of sympathy in this excerpt indicates the government organisation's recognition of the victims' emotional turmoil and a deliberate effort towards emotional stabilisation. By repeatedly expressing these sentiments, the government organisation ensures that the victims' psychological needs remain the focal point during that time.

3.3 *Compassion*

Responses from participants indicate that the government helped CVs overcome the harm caused by the crisis by rescuing them and their property and providing aid tailored to their needs. Crises led to the loss of property and homes, the destruction of market infrastructure, starvation, and casualties. The expression of compassion was intended to relieve them of this harm. As for this, GCRO1 recalled his experience of various crises in the government and shared the following:

> … Mimi kama Afsa wa Jeshi la Zima moto na Uokoaji, nilishiriki kikamilifu kufanya hilo zoezi la uzimaji moto… Mimi kama kiongozi nilikuwa mstari wa mbele kwenda kusimamia hilo zoezi nikiongoza askari na kuwasimamia kwa ajili ya uzimaji moto na kuokoa mali zile ambazo zilikuwa bado hazijaathirika na huo moto (GCRO1, personal communication, June 7, 2023).

Translation:

> …As a Fire and Rescue Service Officer, I fully participated in carrying out the fire-extinguishing task. As a leader, I was at the forefront, supervising the task by leading and overseeing FRS officers in extinguishing the fire and rescuing victims' property that had not yet been affected by it (GCRO1, personal communication, June 7, 2023).

> Kama muwakilishi wa Halmashauri ya Jiji la Mbeya katika kamati ya maafa, tulifika maeneo ya matukio na kutoa misaada ya kibinadamu kama mchele, maharage (vyakula) na tulikwenda na Mkuu wa Wilaya pamoja na wataalamu mbalimbali wa mazingira, Wahandisi, na Afisa wa Mamlaka ya Barabara Mjini na vijijini Tanzania (TARURA) ambapo kila mtu aliwajibika kulingana na kitengo chake (GCRO4, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Translation:

> As representatives of our Mbeya City Council on the disaster committee, we arrived at the flood-affected areas and provided humanitarian aid, including rice and beans. We went with the District Commissioner, various environmental experts and engineers, and the Tanzania Rural and Urban Road Authority (TARURA), with everyone responsible for their respective sections (GCRO4, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

These accounts suggest that the government recognised the negative outcomes of the crises for victims, including the loss of property, homes, and market infrastructure, as well as starvation and casualties, and therefore provided immediate humanitarian aid to alleviate these effects.

This demonstrates care for the victims. In light of the WAT, the government's effort to rescue and protect the CVs and their property during crises, aimed at helping the CVs overcome the challenges posed by those crises, is interpreted as an attribution-independent emotion because it was induced by the challenges the crises posed to its CVs. This care for the victims was expressed not only at the beginning of the crisis incidents but also throughout them in the study area.

The government's expression of compassion is further corroborated by responses from CVs, which detail the government's support and aid across various crises. The CVs who participated in this study each recalled crises they faced and shared the emotional responses the government expressed during these crises. Specifically, CV7 reflected on his experience of the 2006 Mwanjelwa and the August 2017 SIDO market fire outbreaks, observing that:

> Maafsa wa Mamlaka za jiji walikuja tu, wakatupa pole na wakatusaidia na mambo mengine. Tukawa tunakaa vikao na viongozi wetu kuona ni jins gani tutaanza utaratibu wa kujirudishia mabanda.

Translation:

> The city authorities just came, expressed their sorrow, and helped us with other issues. We were holding meetings with our leaders on how to regain the business spaces (GCRO7, personal communication, June 7, 2023).

The message suggests that the government decided to treat its victim stakeholders with compassion because it was aware of their suffering and sought to alleviate it. Drawing upon WAT, the organisation's compassionate response was an attribution-independent emotion, directly observable suffering of victims, rather than the determination of the causes of the crises and their outcomes throughout the crises.

3.4 Anger

Anger is a negative emotion expressed when an individual is dissatisfied with another person or a situation. Data analysis indicates that the government experienced and expressed anger during crises to protect the public from immediate physical harm and to secure crisis victims' property against intentional theft or vandalism by some members of the public. The expression of anger involved the government's aggressive actions and utterances towards looters and those who attempted to jeopardise their own and others' lives. Aggressive actions included chasing, detaining,

frightening, and handcuffing them during the crises, as GCROs and CVs recalled their experiences of road accidents and both the 2006 Mwanjelwa and the August 2017 SIDO market fires, and shared in Kiswahili how the government responded with anger towards those who were taking advantage of the crisis incidents to benefit themselves instead of handling the victims with compassion. For this case, GCRO11 said:

> Japo watu ni wagumu kuelewa lakini tulijitahidi sana kupambana nao kwa kuwakimbiza wasisogee na wakawa wanasogea mbali. Wengine walitaka kutumia nguvu ili wachote mafuta. Wao hawajui wakati wowote yanaweza kutokea madhara makubwa. Lakin bahati nzuri tukawa na Regional Traffic Officer pale tukamkamata (GCRO11, personal communication, June 27, 2023).

Translation:

> Although it was difficult to persuade some members of the public to stay away, we chased them away. Some of them tried to fetch fuel by force. They didn't realise that great harm could occur at any time. Luckily, we were with the Regional Traffic Officer there, and we captured him (OCRO11, personal communication, June 27, 2023).

This excerpt suggests that the government does not tolerate behaviours that jeopardise public safety or property during crises. In this regard, when public members failed to recognise the imminent threat posed by their actions, the government strategically shifted from persuasive communication to coercive measures, which involved chasing, detaining, frightening, and handcuffing them during crises. This strategic use of coercive measures was essential to the government in preventing further harm and ensuring public safety.

This finding was cross-checked by asking the participants about their CVs. Their responses indicate that the government reacted coercively against some individuals who intentionally took advantage of the crisis incidents to benefit themselves by plundering and looting CV property. The government aggressively prevented and/or arrested these individuals, labelled “hooligans”, from accessing the property of the CVs and the crisis sites that

were on fire. As for this, CV7 recalled his experience of both the Mwanjelwa and SIDO market fires and said:

> Polisi waliendelea kusimamia usalama kwa kulinda mali za wafanyabiashara ili asiwepo mtu wa kupola vitu vilivyookulewa. Ambaye sio mhusika wa eneo hilo hawakuruhusu kupita hapo. Polisi walisema jamani kama mtu hamtambui humu ndani anakuja kuingia kwenye chumba cha mtu ninyi ongeeni sis tunaondoka naye. Kama mtu anang'ang'ana, wanakamata na wanaondoka naye (CV7, Personal communication, June 17, 2023).

Translation:

> The police officials safeguarded the victims and their property against the hooligans. They told us to identify the intruders who were plundering and looting the victims' rescued property. The identified hooligans were seized and arrested by the police officers (CV7, Personal communication, June 17, 2023).

This passage suggests that the government aggressively prevented and arrested hooligans to maintain social order and protect CVs from potentially harmful decisions they might make after losing their property to looters. The organisation realised that expressing empathetic emotions toward the looters would elicit negative emotional reactions in the CVs toward the government and the looters, which would damage the government's reputation.

Furthermore, the finding is supported by data extracted from crisis news publications, which reveal that the looting of CV's property provoked anger among some rescuers, leading to clashes between the looters and rescuers. In this case, Nebart Msokwa, the author of the market fire outbreak news article, reveals how the government expressed anger, stating in Nipashe (August 15, 2018):

> Taharuki kubwa iliibuka wakati wafanyabiashara na wasamaria wema wakishirikiana na vyombo vya ulinzi na usalama kuokoa mali, huku vibaka kwa upande wao wakinufaika kwa kubeba chochote walichoona kinawafaa. Aidha, kutokana na vitendo vya vibaka kukwapua mali za wafanyabiashara hao ambazo zilikuwa zimeshaokolewa, viliwatia hasira baadhi ya waokoaji na kuibua mapambano

> ambayo yalitumia muda mwingi, kuliko uokoaji (Nipashe, August 15, 2018).

Translation:

> The great tension arose as traders and other Samaritans collaborated with security and defence forces to rescue CVs' property from the hooligans who were plundering anything they found suitable. These hooligans' malpractices angered the rescuers, leading to conflicts that consumed more time than the actual rescue operations (Nipashe, August 15, 2018).

From the narratives above, it is clear that the government dealt firmly with malpractices such as plundering and looting of CVs' property because these actions intensified harm to victims. This implies that the government showed concern for its CVs by stopping malpractices perceived as sabotaging its efforts to limit and control the suffering caused by the crisis. The government believed that expressing anger towards the hooligans would instil in victims and the public a sense of governmental concern for the suffering caused by the crisis.

3.5 Fear

Drawing on Ekman's (1992) conceptualisation of fear as a basic survival mechanism for threat response, the analysis reveals that the government feared advising the emotionally distressed and taking legal action against some members of the public to avoid their negative reactions. This fear was evident in the government's hesitation to take legal action against members of the public who intentionally broke the law by looting CV property and sabotaging the government's efforts to limit the crisis's harm, for fear of a negative reaction. Although the data analysis indicates that the government angrily prohibited and arrested some of the looters, it did not take them to prison cells for legal procedures, as it feared they might react negatively. The expression of fear served as a mechanism for avoiding unnecessary negative reactions from these individuals and their associates. In this case, GCRO11 and GCRO3 reflected on this, stating:

> Wengine walitaka kutumia nguvu ili wachote mafuta. Walisema tuwaache na wao wapate riziki. Tena nakumbuka mmoja alisema bwana kama tunawazuia angewasha sigara ili

> gari la mafuta liwake moto. Lakin bahati nzuri tukawa na Regional Traffic Officer pale tukamkamata na baadae tukamwachia kwasababu unajua watu wakishakuwa wengi, ukimwaarest mtu unaweza kuleta taaruki kubwa. Tukamuonya na tukampa elimu natukamuwachia na kumwambia aondoke pale eneo la tukio (GCRO11, personal communication, June 27, 2023).

Translation

> Others wanted to forcibly siphon the spilt fuel from the tanker. They said that we had to allow them to enjoy the benefit. I remember one of them threatening to smoke a cigarette near the spilt fuel if we prevented them from siphoning it. Luckily, we were there with the Regional Traffic Officer, and we arrested him. Later, we warned him, released him, and ordered him to leave the place. You know, if you arrest one person among many, you can cause a big mess (GCRO11, personal communication, June 27, 2023).

> Sikuongea chochote na wale watu kwasababu niliwachukulia kama ni wagonjwa kutokana na janga lililowakuta. Wengi wao walikuwa na mikopo na wengine ni biashara ndogondogo tu walianzisha huku hawana bima kiasi kwamba biashara zao zilikuwa zimeishia hapo (GCRO3, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Translation

> I didn't talk to those people at all because I considered them to be like patients due to the harm they were experiencing. Many of them had loans, and others had just started small businesses without insurance, which meant their businesses had ended right there (GCRO3, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Based on the narratives, the government avoided taking serious legal action against these individuals and advised the emotional victims to avoid negative reactions from both the looters and their associates, as well as from the angry victims. The government realised that rigid adherence to protocol would exacerbate such negative reactions, which in turn would complicate efforts to mitigate the harm and damage caused by the crisis and damage the government's reputation.

Notwithstanding, the analysis indicates that the government feared the potential escalation of hooliganism among its stakeholders, primarily driven by the systematic economic displacement of youth stakeholders following the destruction of their businesses in market fires. The destruction left most of them jobless, with no means of livelihood. In this situation, the government feared that the jobless would opt to engage in hooliganism, as CV7 recalled the government's experience of the 2006 Mwanjelwa and the August 2017 SIDO market fire outbreaks and stated:

> Sasa kitendo cha soko kuungua moto, viongozi wa serikali walikuwa na fikra na walihofia kwamba hapa sasa watu wameshasambaratika. Wangezalisha hata vibaka kwa mfumo huu na hatuna uwezo wa kuwashinda (CV7, personal communication, June 17, 2023).

Translation:

> The market's burning led government leaders to fear that people had become desperate and scattered. In such a situation, they could even reproduce hooligans and be unable to control them (CV7, personal communication, June 17, 2023).

The expression suggests that the government recognises that hooliganism threatens its reputation, as its growing scale weakens the government's capacity for effective social control during routine operations and crises. From WAT's perspective, this government's fear can be interpreted as an attribution-independent emotion, as it is not linked to the causes of the crises but rather to the massive, undeniable negative outcomes, such as rejection/resistance from the CVs, associates of looters, and the escalation of hooliganism.

3.6 Happiness

This study reveals that the government expressed happiness at CVs' prompt responses to its crisis messages and the successful meeting of CVs' expectations. During the crises, the government informed the CVs and the public about their prevalence. Some of these stakeholders responded instantly to the information, while others did not. The instant feedback from some of the CVs assured the government that the messages had successfully reached their intended recipients. This was a key point

highlighted during an interview with the participants, as GCRO3 recalled his experience of the August 2017 SIDO market fire outbreak and said in Kiswahili:

> Wakati janga la moto la SIDO linatokea Agosti 2017, niliwapigia simu baadhi ya watu kuwapa taarifa. Wengi wao walikuwa hawaamini kama hilo jambo limetokea. Wengine hawakuweza kinijibu chochote ila wengine walikuwa wakijibu kwa kuhamaki… Nilijisikia furaha sana kujibiwa haraka ujumbe wangu. Na hicho ndicho kilisaidia wengine waweze angalau kuwahi kuja kuokoa vitu vyao (GCRO3, Personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Translation:

> When the August 2017 SIDO market fire crisis occurred, I telephoned some of the people to inform them. Most of them did not anticipate the crisis. Some of them replied, but others did not. I was delighted to receive their immediate feedback. Their prompt feedback helped them to rescue their property (GCRO3, Personal communication, June 15, 2023).

From the narrative above, it is clear that the government expressed happiness with CVs' feedback on its crisis communication messages, which were crucial in assuring the organisation that its communication was effective and would reduce harm to CVs and the government's reputation.

Moreover, the findings indicate that the government felt happy because it met the public's expectations during the crises. The data show that it expressed happiness when stakeholders appreciated and confirmed that their expectations were met. During the crises, stakeholders expected the government to rescue them and their property and to provide aid. The data indicate that the organisation successfully did so to the extent that stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the service. In this case, GCRO4 recalled the experience of floods in Nsalaga, Igawilo and Uyole wards and clearly said in Kiswahili:

> Nilijisikia furaha kuona watu wangu wanaonesha kuridhika kwa kinachofanyika na serikali juu yao (GCRO4, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Translation:

> I was happy to see my people being satisfied with what was done to them by the government" (GCRO4, personal communication, June 15, 2023).

The excerpt suggests that the organisation views public satisfaction as an indicator of the effectiveness of its crisis management. By positioning public satisfaction as a measure of how well it mitigates harm from crises, the organisation strategically fosters trust, which in turn attracts positive behavioural intention from the public towards it. Likewise, the data indicate that the government expressed happiness upon successfully achieving its primary objective of saving people's lives during the crises. The government's primary goal during crises was to save victims' lives, and once this was achieved, it expressed its happiness. In this case, GCRO1 stated:

> Nilijisikia furaha nilipoweza kufika eneo la tukio kwa wakati na kuokoa mali nyingi za watu kabla hazijateketea. Pia nilijisikia faraja na kuwa na hali ya furaha pale nilipoweza kuwanasua watu ambao walikuwa kwenye ajali na bado walikuwa hai na kuwafikisha hospitali haraka wakiwa hai (GCRO1, Personal communication, June 7, 2023).

Translation:

> I felt happy when I was able to reach the crisis site on time and rescue many people's property before the fire destroyed it. I also felt relieved and joyful when I was able to rescue people involved in accidents who were still alive (GCRO1, Personal communication, June 7, 2023).

The expressions of happiness in the quotes suggest that the primary objective of crisis response was to save people's lives from harm caused by crises; therefore, upon successfully rescuing them, the government expressed happiness, indicating that it had achieved its life-centric goal. In line with WAT, this happiness is categorised as an attribution-independent emotion, as it is contingent solely on the attainment of favourable outcomes rather than on the specific causes of the crises; these outcomes include prompt feedback, meeting stakeholders' expectations, and saving victims.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that government crisis communication functions as a strategic framework primarily oriented toward victim relief and harm limitation rather than making attribution (finding the causes for the crisis). By focusing on identifying and limiting harm rather than on assigning crisis responsibility, the government's crisis communication is dominated by attribution-independent (outcome-dependent) emotions. This strategic orientation aligns with Li and Liu's (2025) subject-emotional framework, which posits that an affective, human-centred response is appropriate when high media participation coincides with highly sensitive event types, and/or when factual clarity remains incomplete and negative sentiment is weak. It further reflects Coombs' (2007, 2010) SCCT, which mandates prioritising stakeholders' well-being over organisational reputation during a crisis, as this underpins the reputation asset.

While these findings partly corroborate Coombs (2007) and Weiner (1985, 1986), who contend that an event triggers an initial general positive or negative emotional reaction based on the perceived outcome (primary appraisal), they contradict the assertion that attribution-independent (outcome-dependent) emotions are confined to the initial interpretation of an event's outcome and that the causal attribution is a default subsequent action when the interpretation is negative or unexpected. On the contrary, this study indicates that the government expressed attribution-independent emotions not only at the beginning of each crisis but consistently throughout its duration, driven by ongoing perceptions of the crisis's impacts, human vulnerability, property losses, and the government's capacity to counteract the harm caused by the crisis.

Regarding the expression of sadness, the findings partly align with Claeys and Schoofs (2021), who assert that while the expression of sadness by organisational officials risks organisational reputation by diminishing the perception of the organisation's competence, it simultaneously enhances reputation by evoking public empathy towards the organisation, a sentiment positively associated with organisational reputation (Claeys & Schoofs, 2021; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; De Waele, Schoofs, & Claeys, 2020). Notably, however, whereas established crisis communication literature conventionally characterises sympathy as a response expressed by victim stakeholders (Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs & Holladay, 2005), this study identifies sympathy as a response expressed by the government itself

– a humanitarian reaction to the severity of the crisis impact on human life and property, independent of causal appraisal.

Concerning fear, although its expression by the government contradicts studies in crisis communication literature, which traditionally focus on how stakeholders feel, this finding aligns with Jin, Pang and Cameron's (2012) Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM), which frames fear as a dominant emotion when a crisis is perceived as high in threat but low in coping capacity. In ICM, fear is framed as an avoidance or defensive strategy, similar to this study, in which the government's fear manifests as a calculated avoidance of negative reactions from the CVs and hooligans (a sophisticated tool for risk assessment), not as a sign of psychological weakness. This is further corroborated by Barkouli (2015), who documented fear among organisational leaders in response to threatening, risky, or dangerous stimuli.

Finally, the government's expression of happiness during crises represents perhaps the most theoretically significant departure from the dominant crisis communication literature, which typically frames crises as inherently harmful events that elicit exclusively negative emotional responses (Coombs, 2007; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). This finding, however, provides empirical support for Weiner's (1985, 1986) proposition that task success elicits happiness as an attribution-independent emotion. In this context, the government's successful execution of rescue and mitigation operations not only fulfilled its protective mandate but also elicited feelings of pride and satisfaction consistent with Atkinson's (1957) assertion that mastery of difficult tasks fundamentally arouses such a state. This is further supported by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019), which acknowledges that surviving or successfully managing a negative event can evoke positive affective states among responders.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a significant departure from traditional, attribution-centric crisis communication models by demonstrating that government crisis communication in Mbeya City prioritises a crisis-victim relief framework over causal attribution. Deviating from the default attribution-dependent patterns proposed by Coombs (2007) and Weiner (1985, 1986, 2014), the findings reveal that the government strategically expressed attribution-

independent emotions, including sadness, sympathy, compassion, anger, fear, and happiness, throughout the crises to stabilise crisis situations and alleviate human suffering. Furthermore, this study redefines the role of non-traditional emotions expressed by the government: fear functions not as a psychological failing but as a sophisticated mechanism to de-escalate negative public reactions; conversely, happiness following successful rescue operations serves as a vital indicator of administrative efficacy and competence. Ultimately, these findings establish the expression of victim-centric emotions as a rational, vital component of effective government crisis communication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest related to this work.

Funding

This work was funded by the University of Dar es Salaam.

Data availability statement

Data will be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the University of Dar es Salaam for providing financial support that made this study possible. Sincere appreciation is also extended to the Mbeya city management for granting administrative authorisation to conduct this research, and to the government crisis response officials and crisis victims who generously volunteered to participate in the investigation.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools, particularly Grammarly Pro, Gemini 3, and Claude Sonnet 4.6, were used for routine tasks such as refining spelling, grammar, language preferences, and reference list formatting during the preparation of this manuscript.

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