Crisis Management and Communication in Moroccan SMEs: Analysis using the Processual Approach.

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ABSTRACT:

Today, companies are faced with a myriad of complex challenges, underlining the crucial importance of effective management and appropriate communication to effectively resolve emerging issues. In this context, our study aims to understand the various perceptions of crises and analyzes the management and communication strategies adopted in such circumstances according to a process-oriented approach.

We explore how Moroccan small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) improve their crisis management and communication in crisis situations. Our qualitative methodology is based on a comprehensive exploratory study structured around four distinct case studies, providing a coherent overview.

The results indicate that crisis management encompasses multiple approaches, requiring adapted communication and flexibility in the implementation of strategies to overcome challenges. The crisis management and communication process approach allow managers to understand, communicate and manage difficult situations according to a well-structured framework.

These findings could also guide decision-makers toward effective strategic and operational solutions to contemporary challenges.

this research can make a significant contribution to improving crisis management and communication practices within Moroccan SMEs, which face complex and changing environments. By deepening our understanding of these processes, we hope to foster resilience and adaptive capabilities, thereby strengthening the competitiveness and sustainability of Moroccan SMEs.

Keywords : communication, SME, crisis management, communication strategies, Morocco.

1   INTRODUCTION

Faced with an uncertain environment, businesses need a wide range of communication tools at all levels. Crises are considered emergencies and managed reactively, without sufficient attention to their causes and evolution (Taylor 2010). A study by a public relations consultancy on the crisis communication of Moroccan companies during COVID-19 revealed that 31.6% considered it to be good, 42.1% average, 5.5% very good and 15.8% insufficient. The quality of communication is mainly based on responsibility (21.1%), regular speaking out (26.3%) and transparency (15.8%) (BERRADA et BENAMAR 2022).

Another study in three Greater Maghreb countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) assessed the quality of crisis communication media during COVID-19. This study showed that the quality of Maghreb crisis communication media deteriorated in most aspects and elements (notably psychosocial) (Ben Abdelaziz et al. 2021).

SMEs have limited resources. As a result, crisis management in these companies is less studied than that of large corporations, even though they are vulnerable to crises (Zitouni et Mounir 2022). This study aims to examine how Moroccan SMEs improve their crisis management and communication in difficult situations.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   CRISIS MANAGEMENT: A PROCESS-BASED APPROACH

Crisis is defined as "a process which, under the effect of a triggering event, brings to light a series of dysfunctions"(Roux-Dufort 2003). It can be characterized by a departure from the usual framework of known incidents (Combalbert 2005). Vraie (2009) defined a crisis according to four essential characteristics: disruption of the continuity of usual activities, ambiguity, time constraint and uncertainty (Vraie et Gaultier-Gaillard 2015). Nevertheless, definitions of crisis lack a common consensus among researchers (de Vittoris 2020).

Generally speaking, the development of a crisis follows three essential phases (Darsa et Fourmond 2013): post-crisis phase, characterized by the signs of a crisis, and a crisis-during phase marked by exacerbation, making it essential to respond to the various repercussions as a matter of priority. Finally, the post-crisis phase, allows the organization to take various actions. This is an important feedback phase, enabling the organization to improve its decision- making and risk management mechanisms. Figure 1 summarizes the crisis management process cited in the literature.

Fig. 1 Crisis management processes cited in the literature
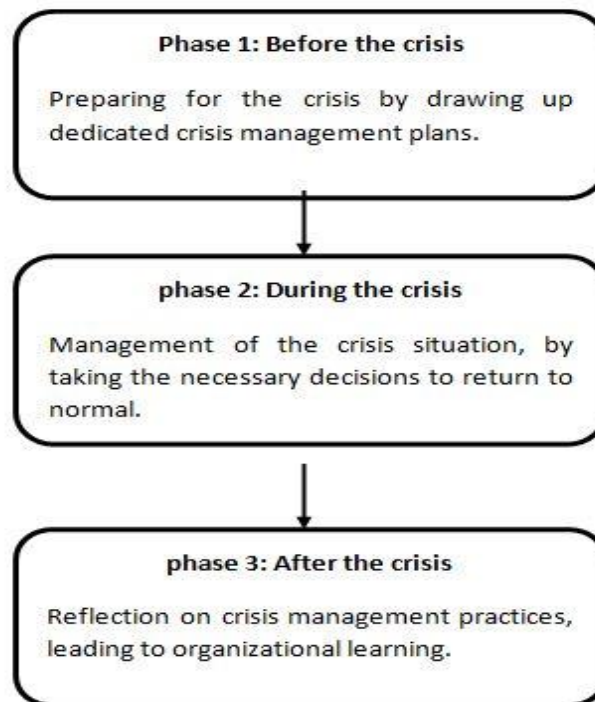
Source: (Zitouni & Mounir, 2022), p. 294 (translated)

The process approach to crisis management is considered an effective strategy for managing complex and unpredictable crisis situations. It is process- oriented, enabling the crisis to be understood within a broader framework, both temporally and spatially (Pündrich, Brunel, et Barin-Cruz 2009). Moreover, it recognizes that crises do not follow a set pattern, but constantly evolve, requiring a constant re-evaluation of plans and strategies (Mitroff, Pauchant, et Shrivastava 1988). In reality, it is a process whose different phases, such as installation, evolution and development, can generally be identified (Roux-Dufort 2003).The trigger phase is the starting point of the crisis, which may result from errors in social and entrepreneurial systems, human error or a combination of these factors. The acute phase is characterized by the convergence of information and events on the company, the disruption of its management routines, and the questioning of its identity, culture, mission and values. Finally, the rebalancing and change phase represents the moment when the company can choose to return to the previous situation or opt for profound change (Pündrich, Brunel, et Barin-Cruz 2009).

2.2   CRISIS COMMUNICATION

In the corporate world, communication encompasses all actions aimed at promoting the company's image to its customers and partners. Generally, two types of communication in the company can be distinguished: internal communication which interests employees and external communication intended for the company environment (Benazzi 2013).

Crisis communication is common-sense communication based on transparency and the deferred dissemination of certain information (Clarisse et KUMANDE 2008). It involves sending and receiving messages "*in order to prevent or mitigate the negative consequences of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders and industries from damage*" (Coombs 1999). Crisis communication can fulfill three essential functions: instructive information, which informs people how to react in terms of personal protection; adaptive information, which helps people cope with uncertainty; and internalized information, which refers to information that helps the organization control its reputation (Sturges 1994).

The company can adopt different strategies depending on the nature of the crisis. In this context, three main communication strategies can be implemented (Moutia 2018; SAUCIN 2015). The first is to recognize and accept the crisis as quickly as possible, in order to control and limit its negative consequences. The second strategy aims to change the angle of view of the crisis, also known as the "lateral project". This project allows the crisis to be shifted outside the company by counter-attacking, shifting responsibility to the outside or minimizing communication. The third strategy is the refusal to acknowledge the crisis, whether by not talking about its advent at the outset or from a specific point in time, or by downplaying the scale of the crisis (SAUCIN 2015). This strategy can have consequences for the company's credibility and reputation.

3   METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using a qualitative approach based on four case studies. Qualitative study involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, where the researcher tries to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people give them. So, researchers collect and use empirical material describing problems in people's lives (Denzin et Lincoln 2000).

Case studies enable us to understand phenomena at individual, group, social, organizational and political levels, in order to maintain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real processes (Yin 2003).

There are at least three important uses for case research: motivation, inspiration and illustration (Siggelkow 2007). The case study can also be used to illustrate certain theoretical aspects of crisis management as closely as possible to the company's reality (Pündrich, Brunel, et Barin-Cruz 2009).

This study is based on four Moroccan SMEs that have been affected by crisis situations, especially the covid-19 pandemic crisis. Data collection was carried out using semi-directive interview guides administered electronically to the various study participants. The approach used is based on the transcription and analysis of the qualitative data collected in chronological order, using NVivo 10 software.

The interview guide contains two main themes: crisis management and crisis communication. The crisis management theme includes questions on the definition, characteristics and triggers of a crisis, as well as how to manage and take control of a crisis. Crisis communication, on the other hand, is addressed through questions on the advent of crises in the interviewees' sectors of activity, the importance and characteristics of crisis communication, and the knowledge and use of communication strategies when a crisis occurs.

4   RESULTS OF CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

The questions in the interview guide were addressed to four interviewees representing the characteristics summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Profile	Company size	Activity Sector
1	Woman	25-35	Entrepreneur	SMES	IT (information technologies)
2	Men	36-45	Manager	SMES	Communication agency
3	Men	25-35	Contractor	SMES	Software department
4	Woman	36-45	Entrepreneur	SMES	Tourism

Source: authors

The three entrepreneurs and the manager work in SMEs in the IT, communications, tourism and software service sectors. These small businesses have no more than 16 years' experience in their sectors. They are therefore confronted with a number of market risks and instabilities.

The lexical analysis of the interviewees' speeches helps to understand the meaning of words and their use in the context of crisis management and communication. It helps identify keywords, key phrases, and important concepts in their responses. Figure 2 presents the frequency distribution of words used in the interviewees' speeches, and the table 2 also presents the most used words along with their weighted percentages.

Fig. 2 Distribution of words used in the interviewees' speeches (NVivo 10)
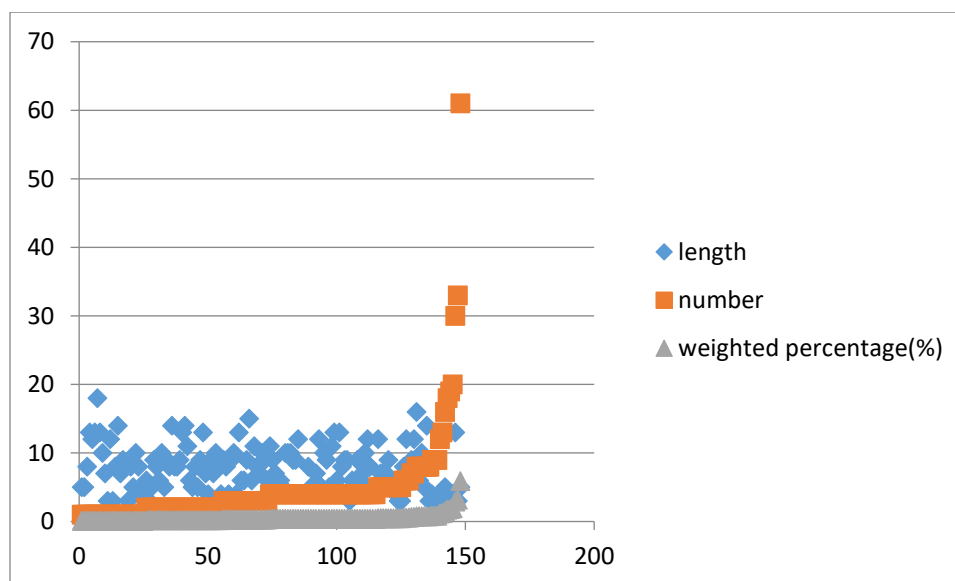
Source: authors

Table 2. Table extract from the word frequency query (NVivo 10)

words	length	number	weighted percentage(%)
strategies	10	4	0,39
information	12	5	0,48
lateral	7	5	0,48
project	6	5	0,48
control	8	6	0,58
process	9	7	0,68
transparency	12	7	0,68
crises	6	8	0,77
recognition	14	8	0,77
communication	13	30	2,90
crisis	5	61	5,89

Source : authors

From table 2, we notice that the most frequently used words in the interviewees' speeches are: crisis, communication, and strategy, with weighted percentages of 5.89%, 2.90%, and 0.87% respectively.

Thematic analysis is then carried out to organize and summarize the qualitative data extracted from the interviews, using NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software. Table 3 shows an extract from the condensed matrix (or coding matrix).

Table 3. Extract from the condensed matrix (NVivo 10)

	A : Crisis communication	B : Crisis management
Interviewee 1	- The occurrence of crises in my sector is rare -Communication is important in business - For me, crisis communication is transparent communication, or at least negotiated transparency, with the possibility of deferring the release of certain information [......]	- Characteristics of a crisis are: disruption of normal business continuity, ambiguity and time constraints - Factors that trigger a crisis are: media, unions and global crises - Crisis management requires action on The entire long-term organizational process [......]
Interviewee 2	-Crisis communication concerns all company personnel -Among the crisis communication strategies I know is the strategy of recognizing and accepting the crisis -The strategy I consider most useful for dealing with the crisis is first to recognize the characteristics of this crisis and to accept it. [......]	-Crisis is a state of emergency requiring strategic decision-making -As a manager, I decide on the state of a crisis from the moment it starts. - Taking control of the crisis can be done by ensuring the source of information and the use of appropriate communication. [......]
Interviewee 3	-In my sector, crises occur frequently -Communication is important in the company: yes, because communication It's vital in my sector of activity, which is tourism, it's a very sensitive sector - One of the characteristics of crisis communication is the control of information	-A crisis is a situation that goes beyond the usual framework of known incidents. - The characteristics of a crisis disruption of normal business continuity, ambiguity, time pressure and uncertainty - Factors triggering a crisis

	-I believe that accepting the crisis is the first step in dealing with it, and then seeing it from a different angle, which enables us to be effective as a "lateral project". [......]	Media, ineffective communication and global crises - To manage a crisis, we need to act on the elements that are disrupting the organization's ability to function properly in the short term. -As a manager, I decide on the state of a crisis from the moment it is triggered. [......]
Interviewee 4	-In my sector, crises occur frequently -Communication is important in the company: yes, because communication It's vital in my sector of activity, which is tourism, it's a very sensitive sector - One of the characteristics of crisis communication is the control of information [......]	-A crisis is a situation that goes beyond the usual framework of known incidents. - The characteristics of a crisis disruption of normal business continuity, ambiguity, time pressure and uncertainty - Factors triggering a crisis Media, ineffective communication and global crises - To manage a crisis, we need to act on the elements that are disrupting the organization's ability to function properly in the short term. -As a manager, I decide on the state of a crisis from the moment it is triggered. [......]

Source: authors

The thematic analysis of the various research themes is explained in the following sections.

4.1 CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Interviewee 1 defined a crisis as a state of emergency that goes beyond the usual framework of known incidents, bringing to light a series of malfunctions requiring strategic decision-making. on the other hand, Interviewees 2 and 3, saw it as a state of emergency requiring strategic decision-making. As for interviewee 4, for her, the crisis is a situation outside the usual framework of known incidents, in addition to its urgent nature, which obliges the manager to take strategic decisions.

For interviewee 1, the crisis is characterized by ambiguity, its time constraint and the disruption to the continuity of the company's usual activities. In addition to this disruption, interviewees 2 and 3 characterize the crisis by the notion of uncertainty. Interviewee 4 characterizes the crisis by all the elements already cited by the other interviewees.

As for the factors triggering a crisis, the majority of interviewees mentioned global crises, the media and the lack of effective communication within the company. While interviewee 1 added the presence of trade unions and interviewee 2 the lack of knowledge of information and communication techniques.

To manage the crisis, interviewee 1 and interviewee 3 insisted on the need to act on the entire long-term organizational process. Interviewee 2, emphasized the need to manage short-term disruptions to the smooth running of the organization. Interviewee 4 sees that crisis management can only be achieved by acting on both short- and long-term disruptive elements. All the interviewees also declared, as managers, to take a position on the state of a crisis as soon as it started, with the exception of interviewee 3 who took a position on the state of a crisis before it does not trigger.

According to interviewees 1 and 2, the crisis can be controlled by securing sources of information and using appropriate communication. Interviewee 3 insisted on effective communication within the company to take control of the crisis. Interviewee 4 added the importance of establishing relations with the media to ensure this control.

4.2 CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Interviewees 2 and 4 said that crises occurred frequently in their activity area, while the other Interviewees felt that crises were rare in their business. However, they all confirmed that communication is important within the company.

Interviewee 2 confirms that this importance is linked to transparency, coordination and mutual understanding (interviewee 3) and to sensitive business sectors (interviewee 4).

Interviewee 1 defined crisis communication as transparency communication, or at least negotiated transparency, where the release of certain information can be deferred. While interviewees 2, 3 and 4 defined it as a process that reduces damage to reputation, mitigates negative perceptions and protects stakeholders.

One of the characteristics of the crisis is that it concerns all the company's staff, as stated by interviewees 1 and 2. Interviewees 3 and 4, on the other hand, see these characteristics as essentially related to information control and transparency with the media and other stakeholders.

Concerning crisis communication strategies, interviewee 1 confirms that she knows two main categories of crisis: the strategy of recognition and acceptance of the crisis, and the strategy of the "lateral project", or what we call changing the angle of view of the crisis. These are the same strategies that interviewee 1 uses to cope with the crisis.

Interviewees 2 and 4 are familiar with the strategy of recognizing and accepting the crisis. While the strategies they consider useful for dealing with a crisis situation are the same as those used by interviewee 1. Interviewee 3, for his part, knows and uses the same strategy, namely crisis recognition and acceptance.

Finally, for the reasons behind the choice of different strategies, interviewee 3 uses the strategy of recognizing and accepting the crisis, as it enables him to anticipate the crisis, as he testified: "*... enables us to establish a realistic basis and take proactive measures*". Interviewee 4, on the other hand, sees this strategy as a way of avoiding management errors that could influence the company's financial state, as she states in this passage: "*That makes the most sense to me. Refusing to recognize the crisis in question would lock us into a cycle of ignorance and strategic errors due to a lack of understanding of this crisis, and consequently a loss of sales*".

5 DISCUSSION

For all four respondents, the common definition of a crisis relates to its urgent nature and specific management requirements. The notion of uncertainty and the alteration of the continuity of the company's current activities are strongly present in the minds of these entrepreneurs.

All the interviewees spoke of the important factors that trigger crisis, namely: global crises, the non-existence of effective communication within the company, the media and lack of knowledge of information and communication techniques. However, they all neglected rumors, which appear in the literature to be an important factor in triggering a crisis. This may

be explained by the size of the company; the larger it is, the more rumors can influence its brand image. The majority of respondents anticipate crisis management and communicate it before it happens, given the ease of communication within small organizations (SMEs).
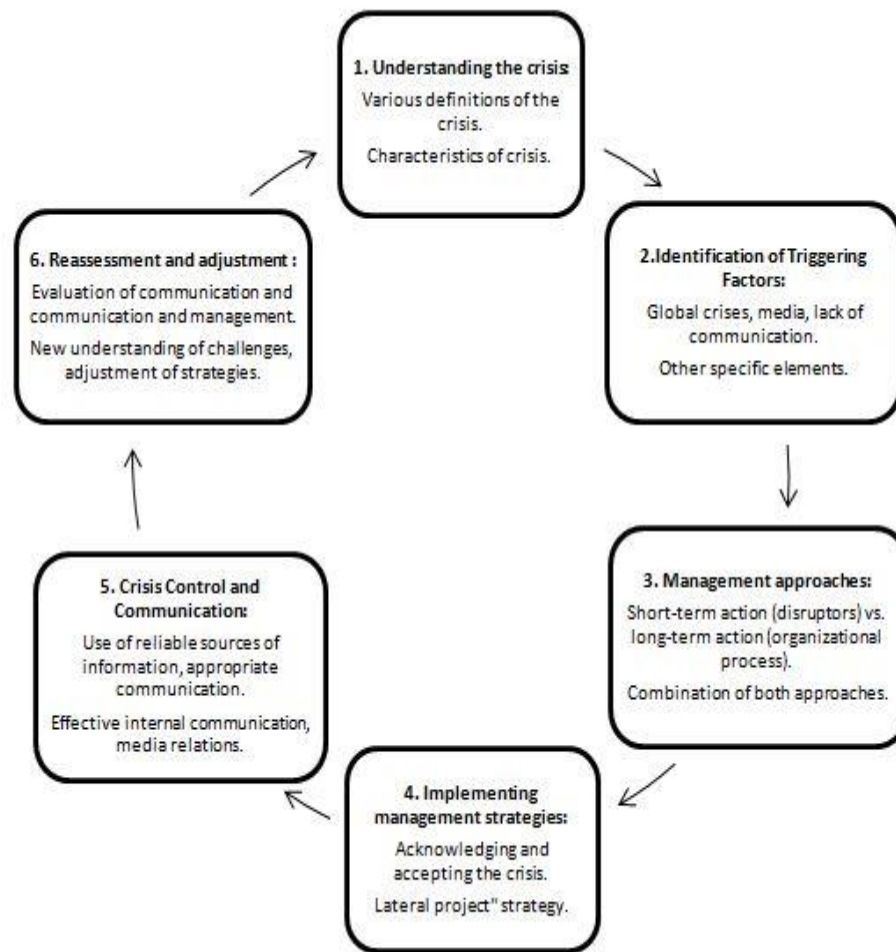
Respondents propose different approaches to crisis management. Some emphasize long-term action across the entire organizational process, while others focus on immediately managing disruptions to the functioning of the organization, or a combined approach to taking action at the both in the short and long term. Most respondents consider that the state of crisis begins as soon as it is triggered. Respondents share ideas on how to control the crisis. The majority stress the importance of reliable information and appropriate communication. This communication must be internal, to ensure better control of the crisis and to establish relations with the media.

With regard to crisis communication, respondents note the importance of crisis communication. The majority consider that crises are frequent in their sector, while a minority consider them rare. However, all agreed on the importance of communication. Transparency, coordination and mutual understanding are mentioned as key elements in crisis communication.

Different crisis communication strategies are mentioned. Some respondents identify the strategies of crisis recognition and acceptance, as well as the "lateral project" strategy. Other interviewees focus mainly on crisis recognition and acceptance. The reasons behind the choice of these strategies range from anticipating the crisis to avoiding management errors.

Crisis management and communication in these Moroccan SMEs can be summarized according to the process approach shown in figure 3.

Fig. 3 Process approach to crisis management and communication

1. Understanding the crisis:
Various definitions of the crisis.
Characteristics of crisis.

2. Identification of Triggering Factors:
Global crises, media, lack of communication.
Other specific elements.

3. Management approaches:
Short-term action (disruptors) vs. long-term action (organizational process).
Combination of both approaches.

4. Implementing management strategies:
Acknowledging and accepting the crisis.
Lateral project" strategy.

5. Crisis Control and Communication:
Use of reliable sources of information, appropriate communication.
Effective internal communication, media relations.

6. Reassessment and adjustment :
Evaluation of communication and communication and management.
New understanding of challenges, adjustment of strategies.

Source: authors

Overall, the results reflect the complexity of crisis management and communication in difficult times. The varied perspectives of the interviewees offer a more nuanced and comprehensive view of how crisis can be understood, managed and communicated within SMEs.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The processual approach to crisis management and communication offers a structured framework for managers to better understand, manage and communicate in difficult times. Thus, certain managerial recommendations can be adopted by managers of small and medium-sized Moroccan companies:

- ✓ Developing crisis awareness: managers need to develop a common understanding of crisis within the company, emphasizing its urgency and management specificity by adopting a proactive approach to crisis management.

- ✓ Establishing control: emphasize the importance of reliable information and effective internal communication to maintain better control of the crisis and establish constructive relations with the media.

- ✓ Awareness of diversity of strategies: managers need to be aware of the diversity of crisis communication strategies. They have to explore both short- and long-term strategies, by focusing on the nature of the crisis and the organization's specific needs.

- ✓ Flexibility in crisis management: understanding the complexity of crisis management and adopting a flexible approach, depending on resources and specific challenges is important for managers.

- ✓ Training and awareness: managers must participate in the development of emergency plans and training staff in crisis management, as well as putting in place mechanisms to anticipate potential crises.

- ✓ Continuous learning: managers and all company personnel should view crisis management as a continuous learning process, learning from past experience to constantly improve their crisis management responses.

- ✓ Integrate crisis management into strategic planning: managers can integrate crisis management into the company's overall strategic planning through consideration of the organization's long-term goals and plans.

In short, the manager must adopt a proactive, balanced and strategic approach to crisis management and communication. In-depth understanding, anticipation, choice of appropriate strategies, proactive communication, short- and long-term management, information control and media relations are key to guiding decision-making in a crisis situation. By considering these recommendations, managers can strengthen the resilience of their company and improve the way they manage and communicate in times of crisis.

7 CONCLUSION

This study highlights the diversity of approaches to crisis management and communication within Moroccan SMEs in difficult times. The crucial importance of communication in crisis management is recognized, with an emphasis on transparency, coordination and mutual understanding, especially in sectors sensitive to negative perceptions. A range of crisis communication strategies, from acknowledgement and acceptance to approaches such as the "lateral project", show how SMEs react to crises.

This study underlines that crisis management is not limited to a single approach or response. It requires appropriate communication and flexibility in the application of strategies to overcome challenges. The divergences and convergences among the interviewees reflect the wealth of perspectives that contribute to more effective crisis management within Moroccan SMEs.

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