

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND DIGITAL STRATEGIES ON REPUTATION MANAGEMENT: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF RHUBUSANA'S DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Reputation management shapes public confidence in any system or organisation, the department of education included. However, the relationship between reputation management practices and digital strategies is one worth exploring especially in the context of resource constrained public sector departments. This qualitative case study has evaluated how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies influence reputation management at the department of education in Rhusana, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Data is collected from semi-structured interviews with Policy implementers, educators, parents and community members as well as from document and report reviews. Thematic analysis revealed three drivers of reputation. First, regular, candid consultations improved perceptions only when officials closed feedback loops with visible action. Second, digital channels—websites, email lists and social media—boosted reach and crisis responsiveness, but inconsistent updates and poor usability eroded trust. Third, transparent resource and accountability processes underpinned credibility; opaque decisions invited negative speculation. These patterns affirm Social Exchange, Contingency and Institutional theories: reciprocity fosters goodwill, adaptable communication restores stability, and visible accountability legitimises authority. The study recommends dedicated follow-up personnel, a formal crisis communication protocol, plain-language budget summaries, publicly reported performance indicators and a hybrid mix of digital and traditional contact points. While limited to one district, the findings offer a practical framework for public education departments seeking to strengthen reputation through purposeful engagement and coherent digital strategy.

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I Dianah Nanjeho state that the study titled “An evaluation of how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies impact reputation Management.” A case study of the department of education at Rhubusana in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The research has been concluded with the guidance of Dr. Jakisa Owor at Uganda Christian University Mukono in the academic year 2025. The study has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other qualifications at this or any other university.

All the ideas, data and text taken from published or unpublished sources are cited. Ethical approval for data collection was granted by Uganda Christian University and every participant gave informed consent.



10th July 2025

Dianah Nanjeho

Signed

Date



12th July 2025

Supervisor

Date

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Almighty God, whose grace, wisdom, and strength have carried me through every step of this academic journey.

I dedicate this work to my beloved family, especially my mother Mrs. Christine Ochiengh; your unwavering love, support, and encouragement have been my foundation. Thank you, for instilling in me the values of hard work and perseverance; and to my siblings; Maria, Dorothy, Dorcas and Daniel and all close friends, thank you for your constant motivation and for standing by me through both challenges and triumphs.

In the most special way this dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my precious daughter, Abigail Taliru; your presence in my life has been a constant source of inspiration, strength, and purpose. Every late night, every sacrifice, and every step of this academic journey was driven by the desire to create a better future—for both of us. Your smile reminds me daily why perseverance and hard work matter.

May this achievement serve as a testament to the power of determination and as a foundation upon which you will build your dreams. I hope that one day you will look at this work and be inspired to pursue your goals with courage, passion, and faith. With all my love, this is for you.

Finally, to the Uganda Christian University, School of Business, and all who supported and believed in me throughout this journey, this is for you. May this work contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge and inspire further inquiry, especially within the public education sector in Africa for future scholars and professionals in the fields of stakeholder engagement, digital strategy, and reputation management.

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Chapter One: General Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The first chapter will set the foundation for the entire study by establishing the context and rationale behind the research on reputation management in public institutions, specifically focusing on the Department of Education at Rhubusana. This chapter will discuss the background of the study, highlighting the critical issues in public perception and institutional reputation management in context with departments of education. It will also define the problem statement, explaining the impact of stakeholder engagement and digital strategy implementation within the department. Furthermore, it will present the study's objectives and research questions, which will guide the exploration of reputation management practices. Finally, it will summarise the chapter's structure, providing a roadmap for the subsequent sections of the research.

1.2 Background of the Study

Reputation management is a critical function in public institutions such as the Department of Education, where maintaining a positive image is essential for institutional success. Scholars agree that reputation is a valuable intangible asset that influences stakeholder engagement and public perception. In the case of the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa, the focus of this study on reputation management offers an opportunity to explore how this department handles its public image, particularly in light of the challenges faced in public sector governance. According to Xia (2023), reputation management involves not only maintaining a positive public perception but also addressing crises and challenges that may harm the institution in question. The study of reputation management in education departments, like Rhubusana's, helps reveal the complexities of managing perceptions in a sector that directly impacts public service delivery.

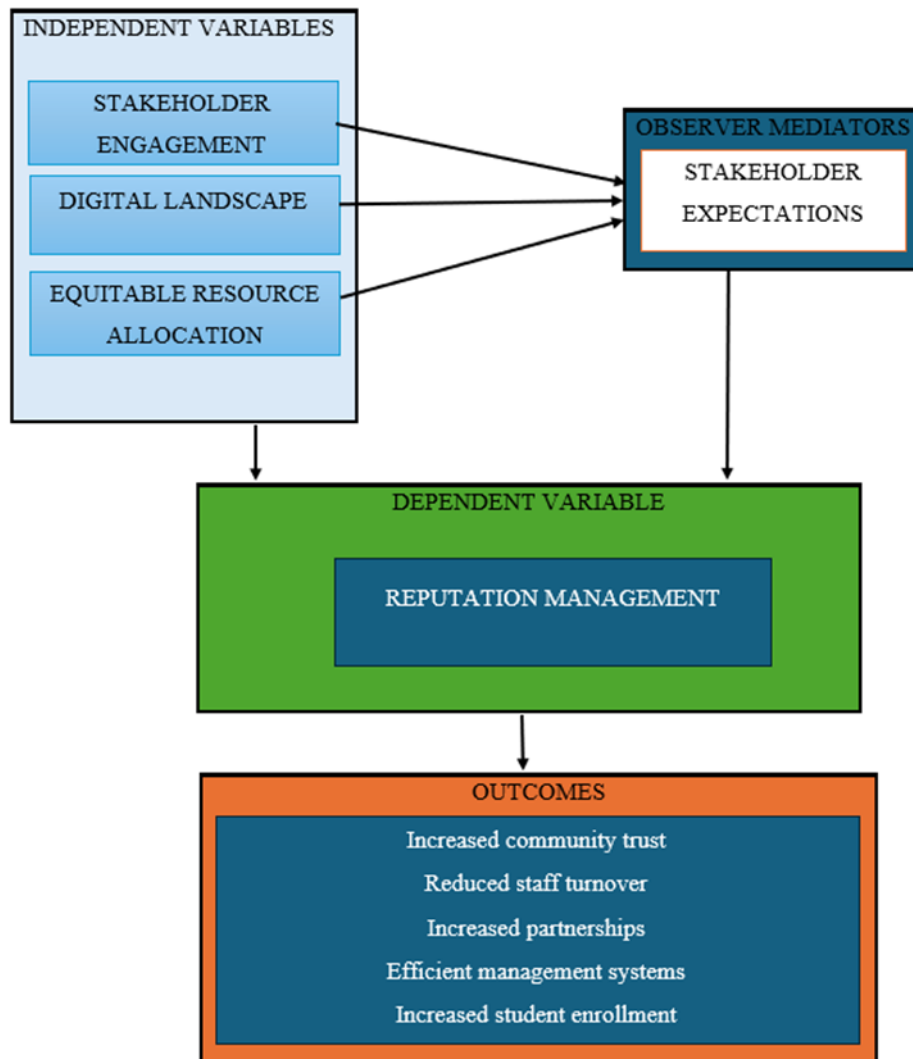
According to Tümtürk (2021), reputation in education settings can be measured through several dimensions, including social responsibility, leadership, and management efficiency. These factors become essential for assessing the

reputation of education institutions, where stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and the broader community continuously evaluate the performance and public standing of the institution. Scholars like Romiani (2024) concurs that reputation influences relationships with external stakeholders, including funders and governmental oversight bodies, which is particularly relevant for departments of education, whose funding and policy support depend on maintaining a favourable reputation. This study aims to explore these elements within the context of Rhubusana, focusing on how the department navigates the public's perception of its leadership, responsiveness, and capacity to manage education affairs in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.

The concept of reputation management in public institutions, especially within education, is closely tied to branding and identity. In higher education institutions, branding is increasingly used to shape the perceptions of stakeholders, which applies equally to public education departments. Branding, as posited by Xia (2023), goes beyond the mere promotion of services; it involves fostering a sense of trust and reliability in the eyes of the public. Departments of education, such as the one in Rhubusana, must, therefore, be proactive in shaping their brand image to ensure that they are perceived as capable and committed to delivering quality education. Scholars like Khoshtaria *et al.* (2020) agree that brand equity and reputation are interlinked, with brand management serving as a tool to enhance public perceptions of quality and reliability. This study will examine how the Department of Education at Rhubusana approaches these reputation management principles and whether they contribute to maintaining a positive reputation in the short and long run.

Discussions around reputation management also delve into crisis management and the strategies institutions employ to recover from incidents that may damage/challenge their public image. In this regard, Oyeyinka *et al.* (2020) highlight the importance of media reports and public relations efforts in mitigating the effects of negative incidents. The Department of Education, operating in a complex and often politically charged environment, faces unique challenges that can influence its reputation. Issues such as mismanagement and underperformance can quickly erode public trust. As scholars like Irawan *et al.* (2022) suggest,

effective financial and operational management plays a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing reputation, especially in public institutions that are closely scrutinized by both the government and the public. This study will explore how the Department of Education at Rhubusana manages such challenges and whether its strategies are sufficient to safeguard its reputation. The relationship between the concepts of this study is exhibited in the following Figure 1.1.



Cognisant of the above, reputation management in public institutions like the Department of Education at Rhubusana is a multifaceted topic which involves managing public perceptions, maintaining operational excellence, and responding to crises effectively. Scholars like Tümtürk (2021) argue that reputation is built over time through consistent performance and engagement with stakeholders. For the Department of Education, managing its reputation is essential not only for maintaining public trust but also for ensuring continued support from government

bodies and the community it serves. This study seeks to examine the department's current reputation management strategies, drawing from case studies, both public and higher education contexts to provide insights into how the department can improve its public image and operational efficiency in the long term.

1.3 Problem Statement

The Department of Education at Rhusana in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa, has faced persistent challenges in managing its reputation, which has adversely affected its operational effectiveness and public trust. Reputation management in public sector organizations, particularly in education, is closely tied to stakeholder engagement and the adoption of digital strategies that enhance communication and transparency (Brown, 2021). Despite various efforts to involve stakeholders and implement modern management practices, the department continues to experience a declining public image, resulting in stakeholder dissatisfaction and weakened institutional performance (Lee, 2022; Patel, 2023).

One critical issue contributing to the department's reputation crisis is its limited engagement with key stakeholders, including parents, educators, and community leaders. As Evans (2022) posits, meaningful stakeholder involvement is fundamental to successful reputation management, especially in public service institutions. However, the department's inability to effectively align its communication and management strategies with stakeholder expectations has intensified negative public perceptions. This has manifested in challenges such as reduced learner enrolments, with nearly 1,000 schools reportedly at risk of closure or mergers due to declining student numbers, as highlighted by the Eastern Cape Department of Education spokesperson in a recent Newsroom Afrika interview (2024).

Additionally, the failure to adopt and integrate modern digital strategies has further compounded the department's struggles. According to Jackson (2021), digital platforms provide vital channels for improving transparency, accountability, and real-time communication, which are essential for building a positive institutional image. The absence of these practices has created communication gaps and weakened trust between the department and its stakeholders, ultimately

limiting its ability to deliver quality Education services (Martin, 2021; Wilson, 2023).

Given these challenges, this study seeks to evaluate how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies influence reputation management at the Department of Education in Rhubusana. Drawing on the works of Harris (2020) and Lewis (2021), the research will explore the potential of integrating traditional engagement methods with digital platforms to strengthen public trust and improve service delivery. It will also provide context-specific recommendations aimed at enhancing the department's reputation management practices through innovative, community-driven approaches tailored to the unique socio-economic realities of the Eastern Cape (Thompson, 2022; Williams, 2023).

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies influence reputation management within the Department of Education at Rhubusana in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. It seeks to assess the effectiveness of communication channels, stakeholder participation, and digital platforms in shaping public perceptions and organisational credibility. The study aims to identify gaps in current practices and recommend improvements for fostering trust and transparency. By examining these dynamics, the research intends to contribute to better reputation management frameworks, ensuring more accountable and responsive governance within the education sector.

1.4.1 General Objective

To evaluate how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies contribute to building Reputation Management at the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

- i. To examine the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in fostering reputation management in the Department of Education.
- ii. To assess the role of digital strategies in enhancing Reputation management in the Department of Education.

- iii. To explore the combined influence of stakeholder engagement and digital strategies on the perceptions within the community.

1.5 Research Questions

- i. How effective is stakeholder engagement in fostering Reputation management at the Department of Education?
- ii. What role do digital strategies play in enhancing Reputation management in the Department of Education?
- iii. How do stakeholder engagement and digital strategies together shape community perceptions for better reputation management in the Department of Education?

1.6 Significance of the Study

For a number of reasons, the examination of the Department of Education at Rhusana's reputation management is crucial considering the backdrop that Education is critical in drawing in talent, collaborations, and resources. This investigation is important as it informs the understanding of stakeholder perceptions and how these perceptions influence decisions and strategy as a whole. Furthermore, recognising the obstacles and constraints the Department of Education at Rhusana is facing in maintaining its reputation provides a basis for creating stronger and more efficient plans and strategies for sustainability and establishing a competitive edge over other districts in the province. The study further seeks to add to the body of knowledge of strategic reputation management by offering best practices based on the findings.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on assessing the reputation management strategies within the Department of Education at Rhusana, located in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The scope encompasses an in-depth analysis of current practices related to stakeholder engagement and digital strategies. The research will explore how these factors influence the department's reputation all which directly affects staff turnover, partnerships, and student enrolment.

The study will be confined to the education sector, specifically targeting the Department of Education at Rhubusana. It will involve gathering data from various stakeholders, including department officials, teachers, parents, and community members, to gain comprehensive insights into the reputation management practices and their effectiveness.

Geographically, the study will be limited to Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, providing a localized perspective on reputation management in the context of South African public education systems.

1.8 Summary of the Chapters of the Study

This study will be structured into five chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of reputation management within the Department of Education at Rhubusana.

Chapter One will introduce the study's foundation, detailing the context, problem statement, objectives, and research questions. It will highlight the scope and limitations, setting the parameters for the study's analysis.

Chapter Two will provide a literature review, examining existing research on reputation management in public institutions. The chapter will explore various scholarly perspectives on stakeholder engagement and the role of digital strategies in reputation enhancement. The review will synthesise relevant findings and highlight gaps in the literature, justifying the need for this study.

Chapter Three will describe the research methodology, detailing the qualitative approach chosen for the case study of the Rhubusana Department of Education. The researcher will discuss data collection methods, sampling techniques, and ethical considerations. This chapter will also outline the procedures for data processing and analysis, ensuring a rigorous and systematic approach.

Chapter Four will present and analyse the findings from the collected data, interpreting the results in light of the research questions. It will identify key themes related to the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and digital strategies, as related to managing the department's reputation. This chapter will offer insights into the practical challenges and successes within the department.

Chapter Five will conclude the study by summarising the findings, discussing their implications for reputation management in public Education institutions, and providing recommendations. It will highlight potential areas for future research and address the limitations encountered during the study. This chapter will aim to offer actionable solutions that could enhance the Rhubusana Department of Education's reputation and community trust.

1.9 Conclusion

Chapter one provided a foundational introduction to the study by setting the context and background of the research. It explored the significance of reputation management within public institutions, specifically focusing on the Rhubusana Department of Education. The chapter outlined the research problem, emphasising issues in stakeholder engagement and digital strategy implementation that impact institutional reputation. Objectives and research questions were clearly defined to guide the study's direction. The chapter also established the study's scope, outlining limitations and setting the stage for further exploration in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In the review, the study will examine literature on reputation management within public education institutions, focusing on how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies influence institutional reputation. The review will explore the role of leadership in reputation building, considering how public trust and community are shaped by transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. Data collected will be corroborated to guide the analysis, helping to contextualize reputation management as both a strategic priority and a response to public expectations. Additionally, the review will identify gaps in current research, particularly regarding the challenges faced by education departments in managing their reputation within resource-constrained and socio-politically complex environments.

2.1 Reputation Management in Education

Reputation management within the education sector has become an increasingly relevant topic in academic discussions as Education institutions navigate the nuanced challenges of maintaining a positive public image and fostering stakeholder trust. Education institutions are not only evaluated based on their academic outcomes but also by their ability to deliver a comprehensive student experience and uphold the integrity of their faculty and administrative teams. According to Gotsi and Wilson (2019), reputation in the context of Education institutions closely correlates with the perceived quality of education, which encompasses a range of factors, including academic achievements, faculty qualifications, and student engagement. Jasen (2020) concurs, suggesting that reputation management in this sector is intrinsically linked to stakeholders' perceptions, which extend beyond students to include parents and the wider community. However, Green and Tau (2021) disagree, arguing that public education institutions, in particular, encounter unique challenges in reputation management due to their dependence on government funding and the constraints imposed by bureaucratic processes. These limitations, they propose, create inconsistencies in service delivery, ultimately eroding public confidence.

The role of leadership is important in shaping and sustaining the reputation of Education institutions. Leaders serve as the primary representatives of their institutions, and their decisions significantly influence public opinion and stakeholder satisfaction. Edwards and Burge (2022) propound that effective leadership within Education institutions necessitates clear and transparent communication, coupled with an ethical approach to decision-making and a commitment to actively engage with stakeholders. This view is endorsed by Brown (2023), who asserts that strong leadership is indispensable to reputation management, as failures in leadership often lead to significant reputational damage. However, some scholars suggest that the influence of leadership might be overstated. While leadership is undoubtedly significant, its impact on reputation can be mitigated if the institution has robust systems and practices in place to maintain quality and address stakeholder concerns independent of individual leaders (Edwards & Burge, 2022). Green and Tau (2021) argue that without dedicated and competent leaders, these systems cannot effectively function, as leadership remains central to organisational cohesion and public trust.

The strategic integration of reputation management within the broader framework of institutional planning has been a focal point in recent literature. Martin and Davies (2020) argue that reputation management should not be an afterthought but rather a fundamental component of strategic planning. They posit that proactive reputation management strategies can mitigate risks and enhance an institution's standing, allowing it to navigate crises more effectively. Edwards and Burge (2022) agree with this perspective, adding that integrating reputation management into strategic planning enables institutions to address potential reputational risks pre-emptively rather than reactively. However, Johnson (2021) presents a counter narrative, suggesting that while reputation management is essential, an overemphasis on reputation might detract from an institution's core mission of providing quality education. He further notes that institutions must carefully balance their focus on reputation with their Education objectives, cautioning against the potential pitfalls of prioritising image over substance.

Effective reputation management in education also requires a nuanced understanding of the diverse needs and expectations of stakeholders. Gotsi and

Wilson (2019) argue that institutions must cultivate a positive image among a wide range of stakeholders, each with distinct priorities and concerns. This approach necessitates tailored strategies to engage and satisfy these groups. Jasen (2020) agrees, emphasising that reputation management in education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour, as stakeholders' expectations can vary significantly. For instance, learners may prioritise academic quality and career prospects, while parents may focus on safety and institutional values. Green and Tau (2021) argue that attempting to cater to every stakeholder's preferences can lead to inconsistencies and compromise an institution's core values, particularly when resource limitations are at play. They propose that institutions should instead focus on establishing a clear identity and value proposition that resonates with their primary audience.

The debate around resource allocation and its impact on reputation management is another critical area of inquiry. Public institutions, often operating within tight budgetary constraints, face distinct challenges in their efforts to maintain a positive reputation. According to Gotsi and Wilson (2019), limited resources can hinder the institution's ability to deliver high-quality services consistently, leading to perceptions of inefficiency and diminished public trust. Jasen (2020) disagrees to some extent, arguing that effective reputation management does not necessarily require substantial financial investment but rather a strategic approach that leverages available resources efficiently. Green and Tau (2021), however, maintain that while strategic resource management is essential, it cannot wholly compensate the deficiencies that arise from financial limitations. They argue that without adequate funding, public institutions are at a disadvantage as may be compared to their private sector counterparts, who often have more flexibility in resource allocation and ultimately their reputation-management initiatives.

In addition, the impact of technological advancements on reputation management in the education sector has gained scholarly attention. According to Martin and Davies (2020), digital platforms have transformed how institutions interact with stakeholders and manage their public image. They argue that social media, in particular, enables institutions to engage directly with their audience and respond to concerns in real-time, which can enhance public trust and transparency.

Edwards and Burge (2022) give emphasis to the fact that digital engagement provides an opportunity for institutions to showcase their achievements and reinforce their reputation. However, Brown (2023) cautions that while digital platforms offer significant benefits, they also present challenges, as institutions are more exposed to public scrutiny and criticism. This heightened visibility, Brown argues, necessitates careful management to avoid reputational damage resulting from miscommunication or negative online interactions.

Another aspect of reputation management that has been explored is the role of faculty and staff in shaping the institution's public image. Gotsi and Wilson (2019) argue that faculty expertise and commitment to academic excellence are central to an institution's reputation, as they directly impact the quality of education and research output. Jasen (2020) concurs, noting that faculty members are often viewed as ambassadors of the institution, and their actions and achievements can significantly influence public perception. Green and Tau (2021), however, contend that while faculty expertise is important, it is the institution's responsibility to create an environment that supports and promotes these values. They argue that without institutional support, even the most accomplished faculty cannot positively impact the institution's reputation in a sustained manner.

In conclusion, reputation management within the Education sector is a multifaceted endeavour that requires a strategic and well-coordinated approach. The debate on this subject highlights the importance of quality education, effective leadership, resource allocation, digital engagement, and faculty support in shaping an institution's public image. As Gotsi and Wilson (2019), Jasen (2020), and Green and Tau (2021) suggest, reputation management is intricately linked to stakeholder trust and perceptions of institutional integrity. Leadership plays a crucial role, as noted by Edwards and Burge (2022) and Brown (2023), in driving these initiatives and maintaining public confidence. The strategic integration of reputation management, as argued by Martin and Davies (2020), is essential to navigate the complexities of the modern Education landscape. Ultimately, the success of reputation management in the education sector depends on an institution's ability to balance these various elements and remain committed to its core mission.

2.2 Impact of Stakeholder Engagement on the Reputation of Public Sector Organisations

Stakeholder engagement has increasingly become recognised as essential to the reputation management of public sector organisations, with particular emphasis on Education institutions. According to Freeman and Reed (2019), stakeholder engagement fundamentally involves the active participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes, which they argue is instrumental in fostering trust and enhancing the reputation of public sector organisations. This view is substantiated by Jones (2020), who noted that effective engagement yields better outcomes, as stakeholders feel valued and are thus more likely to support organisation initiatives. This process, Jones (2020) propounds, is especially pertinent in the public sector, where transparency and accountability face heightened scrutiny. Green and Holt (2021) also affirm that stakeholder involvement is integral to building public trust, arguing that without engagement, an institution's reputation may suffer due to perceptions of elitism or disregard for community voices.

The role of communication in fostering stakeholder engagement is widely recognised as fundamental, serving as a medium through which trust and expectations are both built and managed. Bryson *et al.* (2020) underscore the importance of transparent and consistent communication, noting that strategies such as regular updates and feedback mechanisms are effective in keeping stakeholders informed and involved. They further propound that clear communication aligns stakeholder perceptions with organisation objectives, an aspect vital to reputation management. McKinney and Benson (2021) reinforce this argument, suggesting that communication forms the bedrock of stakeholder engagement, and its role in reputation management cannot be overstated. According to Thomas and Evers (2022), however, while communication is crucial, it must not be nuanced and responsive to stakeholders' concerns; failing to address specific stakeholder might lead to mistrust, ultimately undermining the organisation's reputation management efforts.

Scholars have debated the methods through which stakeholder engagement can most effectively enhance legitimacy and reputation within public organisations. Yang and Northcott (2022) assert that involving stakeholders in decisions that

affect them fosters a perception of the organisation as both trustworthy and reliable. They argue that this inclusion can occur through consultations, participatory governance, or feedback loops, each contributing to stronger organisational reputation and deeper stakeholder commitment. Brown *et al.* (2023) agree with Yang and Northcott's position, positing that stakeholder involvement in decision-making not only enhances legitimacy but also signals a commitment to transparency. However, McLean and Fischer (2023) contest, suggesting that excessive stakeholder involvement could create organisation inefficiencies and lead to conflicts between competing interests, potentially harming rather than enhancing reputation.

Furthermore, the influence of stakeholder engagement on organisational transparency is widely discussed among scholars. According to Singh and Peterson (2020), stakeholder engagement practices encourage transparency by providing platforms for open dialogue between the organisation and its stakeholders. They posit that such practices allow stakeholders to hold the organisation accountable, thus ensuring that decisions made align with both the institution and public expectations. Contrary, Miller and Evans (2021) argue that transparency alone, even when achieved through stakeholder engagement, is insufficient for reputation enhancement. They propound that accountability mechanisms must accompany transparent practices, as transparency without consequences can create an illusion of openness without genuine institutional change. Williams *et al.* (2022) concur with Miller and Evans, advocating for a dual approach which combines transparency with mechanisms for accountability to maximise stakeholder trust and reinforce organisational reputation.

Another significant aspect of stakeholder engagement pertains to its ability to foster a sense of ownership and shared vision among stakeholders. According to Fitzgerald and Young (2021), stakeholders who feel that their voices matter in decision-making processes are more inclined to demonstrate loyalty and support the organisation's objectives. This sentiment of inclusion, they argue, not only strengthens stakeholder commitment but also enhances the organisation's overall reputation by projecting an image of inclusivity and responsiveness. Alongside this, Martin and Grant (2022) agree that ownership can be cultivated through frequent,

meaningful consultations, which help stakeholders feel valued. However, Collins and Harris (2023) caution against placing excessive emphasis on ownership, as it can lead to unrealistic expectations that, if unmet, may damage the organisation's credibility and ultimately affect the reputation management efforts.

The importance of adopting adaptive stakeholder engagement strategies is also recognised in the literature. According to Nelson and Farley (2020), stakeholder engagement should be an evolving process, responsive to the shifting dynamics of stakeholder needs and preferences. They argue that public sector organisations, especially Education institutions, should adopt flexible engagement frameworks that allow for adjustments in strategy based on ongoing feedback. Jenkins and Morgan (2021) agree with this view, stating that static approaches to stakeholder engagement risk becoming obsolete and may fail to address emerging concerns. However, according to Lee and Thompson (2023), while adaptability in engagement strategies is desirable, it is essential to maintain a degree of consistency to ensure trust. They argue that frequent changes in engagement approaches may create confusion and distrust, potentially undermining the organisation's reputation management efforts.

In the context of Education institutions, stakeholder engagement is particularly crucial as these organisations are tasked with upholding values of openness and public service. Scholars like Green and Jameson (2021) argue that Education institutions have a duty to engage stakeholders in ways that reflect their commitment to community development and societal advancement. Green and Jameson (2021) propose that by involving stakeholders in academic and institutional decision-making, Education institutions not only enhance their reputation management efforts but also align their objectives with broader societal expectations. Conversely, Taylor and Brown (2022) caution that Education institutions must balance stakeholder demands with academic autonomy, warning that too much external influence may compromise Education standards and institutional integrity. Watson and Reed (2023) concur with this cautionary stance, suggesting that while stakeholder engagement is essential, it should not encroach on the institution's ability to make independent, academically sound decisions.

Therefore, the discourse on stakeholder engagement in public sector organisations highlights its pivotal role in shaping and maintaining organisational reputation. Scholars agree on the critical importance of involving stakeholders in decision-making processes to foster trust, transparency, and a sense of ownership. However, debates persist regarding the extent and methods of engagement, with some scholars cautioning against excessive reliance on stakeholder input, which may lead to inefficiencies and unrealistic expectations. Through effective communication, adaptability in engagement strategies, and a careful balance between stakeholder interests and organisational autonomy, public sector institutions, including Education bodies, can reinforce their reputation and legitimacy. Stakeholder engagement, therefore, emerges not only as a means of enhancing reputation but also as a mechanism for promoting transparency, accountability, and alignment with public values, all essential for long-term organisational success.

2.3 Role of Digital Strategies in Enhancing Reputation Management

The digital age has significantly transformed how organisations, particularly the public sector, manage their reputation. The rise of social media and digital platforms has provided new tools for organisations to engage with stakeholders and shape public perception. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) argue that digital strategies have become a fundamental aspect of reputation management, allowing organisations to reach broader audiences and respond quickly to threats. Chen and Liu (2021) also highlight that digital platforms are cost-effective for public sector organisations, enabling them to enhance their visibility and build a positive reputation. The accessibility of these platforms facilitates real-time interactions, making digital tools essential in today's reputation management strategies (Brown, 2023).

According to Gotsi and Wilson (2020), public sector organisations are increasingly reliant on digital platforms to manage their reputation and communicate with stakeholders. This reliance is evident as digital platforms provide tools for monitoring public sentiment, allowing organisations to track their reputation effectively. Jones (2021) concurs, noting that digital platforms offer real-time feedback, enabling public institutions to respond swiftly to any emerging issues.

Furthermore, Morgan and Hall (2022) stress the importance of integrating digital strategies into broader organisational frameworks, ensuring that these strategies align with the overall goals of the institution. By using these platforms, organisations can enhance transparency and accountability, which are crucial in maintaining a positive reputation in the public sector (McKinney & Benson, 2021).

The role of digital strategies in crisis management has become increasingly prominent. According to Smith and Wiggins (2023), digital platforms enable public sector organisations to respond to crises in real-time, mitigating potential damage to their reputation. This capability is essential, as quick responses during crises help maintain public trust and demonstrate transparency. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) support this view, arguing that digital platforms allow organisations to manage the narrative around crises more effectively. Furthermore, Chen and Liu (2021) emphasise that integrating crisis management strategies with digital tools can significantly reduce the long-term impact of crises on an organisation's reputation. Public sector organisations, where accountability is paramount, benefit from the immediacy and reach of digital tools in addressing crises (Brown, 2023).

Digital strategies are also vital for long-term reputation building. According to Gotsi and Wilson (2020), regular engagement with stakeholders through digital platforms fosters trust and strengthens the organisation's relationship with the public. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) argue that personalised communication on these platforms allows organisations to humanise their brand, showcasing their positive contributions to the community. This approach builds goodwill, which is essential for sustaining a positive reputation over time (Smith & Wiggins, 2023). By regularly engaging with stakeholders and sharing success stories, public sector organisations can enhance their visibility and foster a strong sense of community and trust (McKinney & Benson, 2021).

Moreover, the use of digital platforms allows for continuous monitoring and evaluation of public sentiment. Brown (2023) noted that digital platforms provide analytics tools which enable organisations to track mentions, comments, and feedback from stakeholders. This allows public sector organisations to identify potential threats to their reputation early and take proactive steps to address them. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) suggest that public institutions which invest in

social listening tools can better understand public perception and respond more effectively to any reputation challenges. By leveraging these tools, organisations can ensure that they remain aware of public sentiment and can adjust their communication strategies accordingly (Jones, 2021).

The importance of aligning digital strategies with overall reputation management goals cannot be overstated. Morgan and Hall (2022) argue that digital strategies must be integrated into the organisation's broader reputation management framework to be effective. This ensures that the use of digital platforms is consistent with the organisation's mission and values. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020) suggest that clear guidelines and policies should govern the use of social media to prevent missteps that could harm the organisation's reputation. Moreover, Jones (2021) emphasises the need for continuous training for public sector employees on the appropriate use of digital tools, ensuring that all communications reflect the organisation's core values and objectives (McKinney & Benson, 2021).

As such, digital strategies have revolutionised how public sector organisations manage their reputation. The advent of social media and other digital platforms has enabled organisations to engage with stakeholders more effectively, monitor public sentiment, and respond swiftly to crises. Kaplan and Haenlein (2020), Chen and Liu (2021), and Brown (2023) all underscore the importance of these platforms in shaping public perception and maintaining a positive reputation. As public sector organisations continue to navigate the complexities of digital engagement, integrating these strategies into their broader reputation management frameworks will be crucial for long-term success. By leveraging the power of digital tools, public institutions can enhance transparency, build trust, and sustain a positive reputation in the digital age (Morgan & Hall, 2022; McKinney & Benson, 2021; Smith & Wiggins, 2023).

2.4 Research Gap

Despite the growing body of knowledge on reputation management as a practice specifically relating to how it is affected by stakeholder engagement and digital strategies, a significant research gap remains in understanding how these factors specifically impact the Department of Education at Rhubusana in Buffalo City,

Eastern Cape, South Africa. While many studies, such as those by Johnson and Moore (2019) and Williams and Green (2023), have explored the broader relationship between equitable resource allocation and reputation management, limited research has focused on the unique challenges faced by Education institutions within localised contexts, especially as a region constrained by political and budgetary pressures. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical studies that assess the combined influence of stakeholder engagement and digital strategies on reputation management in the South African public education sector. This gap highlights the need for targeted research that explores how these factors interplay to affect the reputation and performance of public Education institutions in specific socio-political environments like Buffalo City. Addressing this gap can provide valuable insights for improving stakeholder trust and overall institutional success.

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review has covered an extensive range of studies relevant to reputation management in public sector, with inclination to education. It examined the critical role of stakeholder engagement, highlighting how active involvement of parents, educators, and the community in decision-making processes can enhance trust and departmental reputation. Digital strategies were also explored, emphasizing their impact on real-time communication and crisis management. Furthermore, the review assessed the influence of equitable resource allocation on public perception and operational effectiveness. Insights from institutional and stakeholder theories underpinned the discussion, demonstrating the necessity for public institutions to balance regulatory adherence with community-focused strategies. Lastly, the review identified a need for empirical studies focused on reputation management within the unique challenges of local education departments.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 of this study has detailed the research methodology used to investigate the influence of stakeholder engagement and digital strategies on the Department of Education at Rhubusana's reputation management efforts. The chapter has described the qualitative case study approach chosen for its capacity to capture the complex dynamics at play within this public institution. It has outlined the study area, highlighting the unique socio-economic context of Buffalo City, Eastern Cape, South Africa, which shapes the department's reputation management efforts. Additionally, it covered data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis, ensuring a rigorous examination of stakeholder perceptions and institutional challenges. Ethical considerations and methodological constraints have been addressed, with the aim of enhancing the study's reliability and accuracy. Finally, the chapter has specified the protocols for data processing and analysis, which guided the systematic exploration of the research questions.

3.2 Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach, rooted in grounded theory, to explore the dynamics of stakeholder trust within the Department of Education at Rhubusana. A qualitative case study provides the depth and context necessary for understanding complex social phenomena, while grounded theory offered a systematic method for developing a theoretical framework based on the data collected. According to Yin (2019), case studies were particularly suitable for studying real-life phenomena within their contexts, which aligned with the study's aim to examine stakeholder trust as shaped by social, cultural, and political factors at Rhubusana.

Grounded theory, as described by Charmaz (2019), emphasised the iterative process of data collection and analysis, allowing the researcher to develop theories directly from the patterns and themes emerging in the data. This approach guided the study, ensuring that findings were firmly rooted in stakeholders' lived experiences and interactions with the department. Stakeholders' perceptions and

attitudes, as expressed during interviews, served as the foundation for generating theoretical insights.

The study began with purposive sampling to select a diverse group of stakeholders, including educators, parents, policymakers, and community members, who interacted with the department and could, provide valuable insights into its reputation management practices. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews encouraging participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words.

As the research progressed, data was analysed using open, axial, and selective coding, following grounded theory principles outlined by Strauss and Corbin (2015). During open coding, initial themes and categories emerged from the data. Axial coding identified relationships between these categories, such as links between stakeholder engagement practices and trust levels. Finally, selective coding focused on refining and integrating these categories into a cohesive theoretical framework.

The iterative nature of grounded theory allowed the researcher to adapt the data collection process as new themes arose. For instance, if early findings indicated that equitable resource allocation was a significant factor in building trust, subsequent interviews and focus groups explored the aspect in detail.

By combining the qualitative case study method with grounded theory, the research generated rich, context-sensitive insights into how the Department of Education at Rhusana fostered reputation management. This approach ensured that the findings were not only comprehensive but also grounded in the perspectives and experiences of those directly affected.

3.3 Area of Study

The area of study was the department of Education located at Rhusana District, located within Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The department presented a unique context for exploring reputation management in the Education sector, as it was characterised by a diverse population with varying socio-economic backgrounds among the many attributes. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2021), understanding the local context was

crucial in qualitative research, as it allowed the researcher to interpret findings within the relevant cultural and social frameworks. The department at Rhubusana faced significant challenges, including resource constraints, varying levels of stakeholder engagement, and differing perceptions of Education quality across the schools under its supervision. These factors made it an ideal case for studying how reputation was managed within the Department of Education.

The choice of the department of education at Rhubusana as the study area was also influenced by the need to examine reputation management in a setting that was representative of similar departments of education in South Africa. Scholars agreed that studying such a context could provide valuable insights into broader trends and issues within the national education system (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The study focused on the Department of Education's interactions with various stakeholders, including educators, parents, and policy implementers, as well as the broader community. This focus allowed for a detailed exploration of the factors that influenced reputation management in this specific setting, while also contributing to the broader body of knowledge on the subject.

3.4 Sources of Information

The study relied on multiple sources of information to ensure a comprehensive understanding of reputation management within the Department of Education. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the various duty bearers and observations, while secondary data were gathered from existing publications, media reports, and official documents relating to the department's reputation. According to Flick (2020), the use of multiple data sources in qualitative research enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings by providing a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, the combination of primary and secondary data allowed for a triangulation of findings, thereby increasing the credibility of the results.

Scholars agree that the use of multiple sources of information was essential in qualitative research, as it allowed the researcher to cross-validate findings and reduce the risk of bias (Bryman, 2021). The primary data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations provided insights into stakeholders'

perceptions and attitudes, while the secondary data offered contextual information on the department's reputation as reflected in the media and official communications documents. This approach enabled the researcher to explore both the internal and external factors that influenced reputation management, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

3.5 Population and Sampling Techniques

The population for this study comprised of stakeholders who interacted and worked directly or indirectly with the Department of Education at Rhubusana. These stakeholders included educators, parents, policy implementers, and community members. The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing purposive sampling to select participants who were most likely to provide relevant and insightful data.

Purposive sampling was appropriate in qualitative research, particularly when the aim was to select participants with specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research question. As noted by Palinkas et al. (2019), this method enabled the researcher to identify individuals who could provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. In the context of this study, participants were selected based on their involvement with the Department of Education and their ability to offer perspectives on the department's reputation management practices.

This sampling approach was further supported by scholars such as Mason (2020), who highlighted its effectiveness in case study research. By targeting participants with direct experience or knowledge, purposive sampling ensured that the data collected was rich and contextually grounded. To capture the complexity of reputation management, the study included a diverse range of respondents, such as educators, parents, policy implementers, and community members. Their varying roles and interactions with the department helped uncover multiple perspectives.

The sample size for this qualitative study was determined by the principle of data saturation, a well-established criterion in qualitative research indicating that data collection ceases when no new themes or insights emerge from additional

interviews. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich, context-specific insights into the reputation management practices of the Department of Education at Rhubusana. This included educators, parents, policymakers, and community members, ensuring a diversity of perspectives relevant to the research objectives. The final sample was deemed sufficient once thematic redundancy was achieved, ensuring depth and comprehensiveness without unnecessary expansion. This approach aligns with qualitative methodological standards and ensures the findings are both credible and transferable within the study's context.

3.6 Variables and Indicators

In this qualitative research, variables and indicators were conceptualised differently from their use in quantitative studies. For the study, the key variable was Reputation Management in the Department of Education at Rhubusana. This variable was examined through indicators such as stakeholder perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to their interactions with the department. These indicators provided a structured approach to exploring how the department fostered trust within the community.

Specific indicators included the frequency and quality of stakeholder engagement activities, the transparency and responsiveness of the department in addressing stakeholder concerns, and the perceived contribution of digital strategies. According to Miles et al. (2019), the use of indicators in qualitative research was essential for operationalising abstract concepts like trust, enabling more focused data collection and analysis.

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) also emphasised that identifying relevant variables and indicators provided a robust framework for guiding data collection and thematic analysis. In this study, the indicators supported the coding process and helped identify patterns and trends related to trust-building efforts. For instance, the frequency of positive interactions between stakeholders and the department could indicate the effectiveness of engagement strategies, while perceptions of digital responsiveness might reflect the department's commitment to inclusivity.

By using these indicators, the researcher achieved a detailed understanding of the dynamics influencing reputation management practices in the Department of Education. This approach ensured that the abstract concept of reputation was systematically explored, providing meaningful insights into the department's interactions and strategies.

3.7 Measurement Levels

Although the qualitative research did not typically involve the same level of measurement as quantitative studies, it was important to consider the levels of measurement when designing the research. In this study, the primary level of measurement was nominal, as the data was categorised into themes and patterns based on stakeholders' perceptions and experiences. According to Creswell and Creswell (2020), nominal measurement is appropriate in qualitative research when the aim is to classify data into distinct categories without assigning numerical values. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the different dimensions of reputation management practices without reducing the complexity of the data.

Scholars concur that nominal measurement is often the most suitable approach in qualitative research, as it aligns with the interpretive nature of the methodology (Flick, 2019). In this study, the data was analysed at the nominal level to identify themes related to stakeholder perceptions, media coverage, and the department's communication strategies. For example, the data was categorised into themes such as "positive perceptions," "negative perceptions," and "neutral perceptions," allowing the researcher to explore the range of stakeholder attitudes towards the Department of Education. This approach enabled the researcher to capture the opulence of the data while maintaining a focus on the research objectives.

3.8 Procedure/Protocols for Data Collection

The data collection process followed a structured protocol to ensure consistency and reliability across different data sources. According to Yin (2019), a well-defined data collection protocol is essential in case study research, as it helps to standardise the process and reduce the risk of bias. In this study, the data collection protocol included detailed guidelines for conducting interviews and

observations, as well as procedures for reviewing and analysing secondary data sources.

Scholars agree that the use of a structured protocol is crucial in qualitative research, as it ensures that data is collected systematically and consistently (Patton, 2020). The protocol for this study included guidelines for selecting participants, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality. During the interviews, the researcher used a semi-structured approach, allowing for flexibility while still ensuring that key topics were covered. The researcher took detailed notes to capture the context and dynamics while conducting data collection. The secondary data collection process involved a systematic review of media reports, social media interactions, and official communications related to the Department of Education.

3.9 Data Collection Instruments and Equipment

The primary data collection instruments for this study included semi-structured interview guides and an observation checklist. According to Roulston (2019), semi-structured interviews were effective in qualitative research as they allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while providing enough flexibility to follow up on emerging themes. The interview guides were developed based on the research objectives and the literature on reputation management practices, ensuring that they were relevant and comprehensive.

Scholars agree that the selection of appropriate data collection instruments was critical in qualitative research, as it influences the quality and depth of the data collected (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2019). In this study, the semi-structured interview guides included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their experiences and perceptions in detail. The observation checklist was used to systematically record the key elements of interactions, focusing on aspects such as stakeholder engagement, mention of communication strategies, and the overall atmosphere at the time of interview. The researcher also used digital recording devices to capture interviews ensuring that all data was accurately recorded and available for analysis.

3.10 Quality/Error Control

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research was critical to validate the study's findings and establish credibility. In this study, trustworthiness was ensured through the following strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility

Credibility referred to the confidence in the truth of the findings and their representation of participants' experiences. To ensure credibility, triangulation was used by using multiple data sources including interviews and document reviews to cross-check and corroborate findings. According to Patton (2015), triangulation enhances the richness and depth of qualitative research.

Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm that their perspectives had been accurately captured and interpreted. Birt et al. (2016) argue that member checking strengthens credibility by reducing misinterpretation and ensuring alignment with participants' intended meanings. Prolonged engagement with participants allowed the researcher to build trust and gain a deeper understanding of the context. By spending sufficient time in the field, the researcher immersed themselves in the community or in the world of the interviewee, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2020).

Transferability

Transferability pertained to the extent to which findings could be applied to other contexts. To enhance transferability thick description was provided by detailing the research setting, participant demographics, and contextual factors. According to Geertz (1973), thick description allows readers to understand the context and assess the applicability of findings to their own settings.

The study purposefully included a diverse range of stakeholders, such as educators, parents, policy implementers and community members, ensuring that multiple perspectives were represented and the findings captured the complexity of reputation management practices dynamics.

Dependability

Dependability focused on the consistency and replicability of the research process. To ensure dependability an audit trail was maintained, documenting all stages of the research process, including sampling decisions, data collection methods, and data analysis steps. Koch (2006) emphasises the importance of an audit trail in providing transparency and enabling external reviewers to verify the research process.

Peer debriefing involved sharing findings and interpretations with colleagues or supervisors to identify potential biases and validate the analysis. According to Nowell et al. (2017), peer debriefing fosters critical reflection and enhances dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensured that findings reflected the participants' views rather than the researcher's biases. To achieve confirmability, reflexivity was practiced, with the researcher maintaining a reflexive journal to document personal assumptions, biases, and reflections throughout the study. Berger (2015) highlights that reflexivity helps researchers remain aware of their influence on the research process. The audit trail also supported confirmability by providing evidence of how conclusions were drawn from the data, ensuring that interpretations were data-driven rather than subjective.

3.11 Strategy for Data Processing and Analysis

The data analysis process involved coding and thematic analyses, well-established techniques in qualitative research that aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2019) conceptualization of thematic analysis as a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative datasets. Guided by the research objectives and predefined indicators related to reputation management (e.g. stakeholder perceptions, digital responsiveness, accountability measures), the researcher systematically coded and analyzed the collected data—comprising interview transcripts, field notes, and departmental documents—to identify key themes pertinent to the Department of Education's reputation dynamics. Thematic analysis was selected as the primary analytical strategy,

consistent with scholarly consensus that it enables systematic organization and interpretation of complex qualitative data (Miles et al., 2019). This approach unfolded through four iterative stages.

During the familiarisation stage, the researcher comprehensively reviewed all transcripts, observational notes, and secondary documents to immerse in the dataset, noting preliminary patterns and contextual nuances. Subsequently, the coding stage entailed assigning descriptive labels to data segments relevant to the research questions—for instance, tagging participant descriptions of consultation experiences as "consultation frequency" or "feedback follow-through." These initial codes were then consolidated during theme development into broader thematic categories reflecting core findings, such as "Stakeholder Participation" and "Digital Crisis Responsiveness." Finally, the interpretation stage contextualized these themes against the study's objectives and the extant literature on reputation management, refining their conceptual boundaries and significance.

To enhance methodological rigor and manage the dataset efficiently, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was employed. This tool facilitated a structured coding process aligned with grounded theory principles, operationalizing the three-stage approach detailed in Chapter 3. Open coding identified initial concepts from raw data (e.g., "delayed responses to parent queries" or "social media rumor management"), which were then grouped into provisional categories. Axial coding established relationships between these categories—for example, linking "transparency in resource allocation" to "trust erosion" based on recurrent participant narratives. Finally, selective coding integrated and refined these linkages into a cohesive framework, culminating in core themes like "Internal Processes and Accountability Measures." NVivo enabled visual organization of data into hierarchical nodes (see Appendix F), such as the parent theme "Stakeholder Participation" with sub-themes "Frequency of Consultations" and "Shared Decision-Making," while supporting triangulation across data sources (e.g. comparing interview excerpts with policy documents). The software's memo function further maintained reflexivity by documenting analytical decisions and researcher biases in a reflexive journal (Appendix G), ensuring an auditable trail throughout the iterative analysis. This systematic process, combining manual interpretive depth

with digital precision, ultimately enabled the robust thematic structuring of findings presented in Chapter 4.

The resultant themes—Stakeholder Participation, Digital Strategies, and Internal Accountability—emerged not as predetermined constructs but through inductive engagement with the data, wherein participant experiences and contextual complexities directly shaped the analytical framework. Sub-themes like "Transparency in Resource Allocation" crystallized from repeated accounts of inequitable distributions, while "Crisis Handling" reflected patterns in departmental responsiveness during disruptions, demonstrating how the analysis remained grounded in the empirical realities of Rhubusana's educational governance.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout this qualitative research investigation into the sensitive domain of reputation management, conducted under the oversight of Uganda Christian University (UCU). Adherence to fundamental ethical principles, including respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, honesty, integrity, objectivity, openness, transparency, confidentiality, and data protection, was rigorously maintained. The study received formal approval from the Uganda Christian University Research Ethics Committee (UCU-REC), ensuring alignment with both international standards and institutional requirements. Several key ethical measures were implemented to safeguard participants.

Respect for Persons

Respect for persons emphasizes the autonomy of individuals and the protection of those with diminished autonomy, involving informed consent, privacy respect, and harm minimization (British Psychological Society, 2018). This principle was upheld primarily through stringent informed consent procedures, universally acknowledged as foundational (Orb et al., 2020). Prior to participation, individuals received comprehensive verbal and written information detailing the study's nature, purpose, procedures, potential risks (e.g., discomfort discussing sensitive reputational issues), benefits (contributing knowledge), and their unequivocal right

to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written consent was obtained from every participant, confirming their voluntary and fully informed agreement. The information sheet and consent process were designed to be accessible, ensuring participants, including any potentially vulnerable individuals identified during recruitment, could make autonomous decisions. Privacy was respected by conducting interviews in private settings chosen by participants.

Beneficence and Non-Maleficence

This principle requires maximizing potential benefits while minimizing risks and harms. The research design inherently sought benefit through contributing valuable insights into reputation management practices within the study context. Potential risks, primarily psychological discomfort from discussing potentially damaging reputational events, were minimized proactively. This involved: 1) Training researchers in sensitive interviewing techniques and recognizing participant distress; 2) Clearly stating the voluntary nature and right to skip questions or withdraw during the consent process; 3) Providing participants with information on accessing local support services if discussion caused undue distress; 4) Ensuring the interview guide avoided unnecessarily provocative or intrusive questions. The risk-benefit ratio was judged favorable by the UCU-REC, with significant efforts focused on preventing harm.

Justice

Justice demands fair participant selection and equitable distribution of research benefits and burdens. This study employed a purposive sampling strategy designed to capture diverse perspectives relevant to reputation management within the specific population under investigation. Recruitment methods aimed to provide equitable opportunity for participation among eligible individuals meeting the pre-defined criteria, avoiding the targeting of specific vulnerable groups unless central to the research question (which was not the case here). The burdens of participation (time, potential discomfort) were distributed fairly among volunteers. The benefits of the research, primarily the generation of new

knowledge, were disseminated through academic channels and a summary report offered to the participating community, aiming for broader societal benefit.

Honesty, Integrity, and Objectivity

Researchers must be truthful, avoid fabrication/falsification/plagiarism, and strive to minimize bias. Honesty and integrity were maintained through accurate and truthful reporting of all research processes, data, and findings in the final thesis and any publications. All sources were properly cited to avoid plagiarism. Objectivity was pursued through several strategies: 1) Utilizing a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility; 2) Employing reflexivity practices where researchers documented and critically examined their own potential biases and preconceptions throughout the research process; 3) Using established qualitative data analysis techniques (e.g., thematic analysis) systematically applied to the anonymized transcripts; 4) Maintaining detailed audit trails of data collection and analysis decisions to ensure the findings were grounded in the data.

Openness and Transparency

This principle advocates for responsible sharing of data, methods, and findings. The research methodology, including recruitment strategies, data collection tools (e.g., anonymized interview guide), and analytical approach, were described transparently in the research documentation and thesis. Findings were reported accurately and disseminated appropriately. While the full anonymized dataset cannot be publicly shared due to confidentiality commitments and the sensitive nature of the discussions, aggregated findings and the methodology were made available. Appropriate credit was given to all sources and contributors throughout the research process and reporting.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Protecting participant privacy is paramount. Confidentiality was strictly maintained. All collected data underwent immediate and thorough anonymization: personally identifiable information (PII) like names, specific unique job titles, and organizational details were removed or altered. Pseudonyms were consistently used in transcripts, analysis notes, and final reporting. Raw data (audio recordings,

signed consent forms, identifiable notes) were stored securely separate from anonymized transcripts. Digital files were encrypted and stored on password-protected university servers; physical documents were kept in locked cabinets accessible only to the principal investigator. Data retention and destruction protocols, approved by UCU-REC, were strictly followed; ensuring data was securely destroyed after the mandated retention period.

Ethical Approval

Formal ethical review is essential for research involving human participants. A comprehensive application detailing the research protocol, informed consent process, recruitment strategy, data management plan (including anonymization, storage, and destruction), and risk mitigation strategies was submitted to the Uganda Christian University Research Ethics Committee (UCU-REC). Formal written approval was obtained prior to any participant contact or data collection. All procedures were conducted in strict accordance with the approved protocol and the ethical guidelines stipulated by UCU-REC and the British Psychological Society (2018).

3.13 Methodological Constraints

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of reputation management practices within the Department of Education at Rhusana, but encountered several methodological constraints. One significant constraint was the reliance on self-reported data gathered through semi-structured interviews. This approach was potentially subject to social desirability bias, a recognized challenge in qualitative research where participants might present themselves more favourably, particularly on sensitive topics, potentially affecting the accuracy of the findings. To mitigate this issue, the researcher took measures including ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality, creating a comfortable interview environment, and employing neutral, non-leading questions.

Another constraint faced was the potential for limited generalisability of the findings. This limitation stemmed directly from the chosen case study design and the focus on a single department. While the case study approach proved valuable for generating rich, in-depth insights specific to that context, the findings were not readily applicable to other departments or educational settings. It was acknowledged that the core objective of this case study research was not statistical generalisation to a wider population, but rather to achieve a deep, contextualised understanding of reputation management practices within the specific environment of the Rhusana Department of Education.

3.14 Conclusion

Chapter 3 provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology applied in this study. It began by explaining the selection of a qualitative case study approach, deemed most suitable for examining the intricate factors influencing reputation management practices within the Department of Education at Rhusana. The chapter then described the study's geographical focus on Buffalo City in the Eastern Cape, elaborating on how its socio-economic characteristics informed the research design. Detailed explanations of data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and document reviews, highlighted the study's commitment to gathering diverse stakeholder perspectives. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality, ensured participant protection and data integrity. Finally, the chapter addressed the analysis procedures, including thematic coding and triangulation, which allowed for a robust interpretation of the findings.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis, Presentation, and Interpretation of Results

4.1 Introduction

Stakeholder engagement appears repeatedly in discussions about how Education departments sustain their credibility among the public. This chapter presents findings from participants who contributed insights about the Department of Education at Rhusana in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The analysis centres on their perspectives and experiences, emphasising how various forms of collaboration, digital communication, and internal processes might shape perceptions of institutional standing. The chapter is organised into specific thematic areas, each featuring subthemes informed by the key topics raised in the collected data. Quotations from participants are used to substantiate the interpretations, and each extract is followed by a concise analysis. A final synthesis concludes each subtheme to highlight the core points emerging from the participants' statements. The chapter ends with a summary of the major trends identified in the data.

4.2 Participants Demographics

Study participants were drawn from educators, parents, policymakers, and community members associated with the Department of Education at Rhusana. Their involvement varied considerably, ranging from frontline teaching roles and administrative tasks to occasional input through community forums. Educators included classroom instructors and heads of department who dealt with curriculum implementation, staff coordination, and, in some cases, direct parent interactions during official meetings. Parents varied in their level of engagement with departmental activities. Some attended regular feedback sessions at schools, while others mostly connected with the department through digital channels, such as email or short message services. Policymakers included a few local government representatives and school board officials who oversaw budgeting, compliance, and resource distribution. Community members encompassed local residents who had a shared interest in education and had been invited to departmental events as observers or grassroots advisors.

The recruitment approach targeted individuals who could share detailed insights about the department’s reputation. The average length of engagement with department activities was about four years, though several participants had been involved for longer periods. This demographic variety contributed to a wide range of opinions. Some were highly familiar with department policies, while others had interacted only occasionally. The diversity of roles and experiences revealed different vantage points, illustrating how the department’s initiatives might be perceived by multiple categories of stakeholders.

Stakeholder Group	Number of Participants	Role Description
Educators	4	Classroom teachers, department heads involved in curriculum and parent interactions.
Parents	4	Varied engagement levels; some attended meetings, others relied on digital channels.
Policymakers / SGB	3	Local government reps, school board officials overseeing budgets and compliance.
Community Members	2	Residents with interest in education; invited as observers or grassroots advisors.
Total	13	

Summary of Participants

4.3 Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes	Key Findings
Stakeholder Participation	Frequency and Quality of Consultations	Regular but inconsistent follow-up; desire for deeper, more interactive sessions.
	Shared Decision-Making	Mixed experiences; some collaboration seen as tokenistic, others genuine.
Digital Strategies	Accessibility and Usability of Digital Platforms	Inconsistent updates and technical issues reduce trust; hybrid models recommended.
	Digital Responsiveness and Crisis Handling	Effective in crises (e.g., COVID-19), but slow response times erode trust.
Internal Processes & Accountability	Transparency in Resource Allocation	Perceived inequities; calls for clear, public rationales behind decisions.
	Mechanisms of Accountability and Follow-through	Complaint systems exist but lack timely resolution; need for visible accountability.
Summary of Themes		

4.3.1 Stakeholder Participation in Departmental Initiatives

Participants repeatedly referred to the significance of genuine collaboration between the department and the broader community. This thematic area sheds light on specific facets of how stakeholder participation materialises in formal and informal activities.

4.3.1.1 Frequency and Quality of Consultations

The first sub theme under stakeholder participation considers how often the department engages different groups and the level of seriousness displayed in seeking feedback. Several participants underscored that frequent, meaningful consultations shape impressions of reliability and authenticity. They pointed to regular forums, one-on-one meetings, and school-level assemblies as possible channels for sharing concerns. Others mentioned that inadequate feedback loops deter trust because participants feel as though their contributions might not be taken seriously. The responses in this sub theme revolve around how transparent these consultations are, how swiftly the department responds to issues, and how participants gauge the consistency of the engagement process.

“In the past year, we were invited to a few meetings that addressed curriculum changes and infrastructure updates. These gatherings were spaced about two months apart, giving us a chance to raise concerns. The department would start by sharing official notices, and then open the floor to our questions. I appreciated the scheduling, but I sometimes wished they gave us more time to discuss issues in smaller, more focused breakout groups.”(P3: Educator)

Participant 3’s statement highlights a structured effort by the department to reach out periodically. Although the meetings occurred at regular intervals, the desire for more in-depth group interactions indicates that a standard format can limit deeper discussion. The mention of smaller breakout groups’ points to a potential improvement for more personalized and engaged exchanges. The schedule of every two months appears systematic, but additional informal channels could reinforce trust.

“We often receive text messages about upcoming discussions, usually once every three or four months. The attendance is sometimes low, possibly because these messages do not give enough advance notice. Parents with busy routines may require more lead time. When I am able to attend, I find the platform helpful, but the limited heads-up makes it difficult for many families to coordinate their schedules around these important gatherings.”(P1: Parent)

Participant 1’s underscores the idea that communication frequency alone does not guarantee quality engagement. Sufficient notice can boost attendance and support stakeholders in making arrangements. The reflection also suggests that better planning could raise involvement by parents who have external commitments. It implies that while an outreach system exists, adjustments in timing or frequency may enhance participant turnout and overall satisfaction with departmental consultations.

“There was a feedback session last term where community leaders were invited. It was quite interactive because we shared local challenges, like safety concerns. The department officials listened patiently, but afterwards, there was limited follow-up about the action steps they had promised. We had hoped for monthly bulletins summarising what they accomplished, but that never happened. Without consistent updates, confidence in the engagement process can diminish over time.”(P5: SGB Member)

As noted by Participant 5; the importance of follow-up. Being heard in a single session is a start, but stakeholders also expect updates on how matters raised are being addressed. When these follow-ups are missed, the openness demonstrated in a meeting might lose momentum. This observation ties quality consultations to ongoing accountability. Without well-structured updates or transparency in subsequent actions, trust may waver.

“I see consultation as an ongoing conversation, but it sometimes feels one-directional. We get official briefs and a chance to submit feedback forms, yet the department’s responses come late or barely at all. Frequent contact

is encouraging at first, though it needs to be backed by timely acknowledgement or action to build real credibility.”(P6: Educator)

The words from Participant 6 underlines the fact that consistent contact must be paired with responsiveness. The experience of delayed replies can undermine the entire consultative process, suggesting that frequency should go hand in hand with prompt feedback. Being listened to but not answered adequately can lead to disillusionment, thereby weakening the perception of a department’s dependability.

“I attend consultations about once every term, especially when they focus on issues that affect my children’s academic paths. The department staff is often polite, but they stick to scripted updates. I think we need more of an exchange of views, rather than just scripted messages. When they genuinely involve us, it fosters a sense of partnership. If they appear rushed or only read from official papers, it feels like a box-ticking exercise.”(P2: Parent)

This participant’s feedback draws attention to the significance of conversational tone and authenticity. Stakeholders seem to value sincerity, not just the formality of a scheduled meeting. The tension between formal briefings and genuine engagement reveals a potential gap in practice. A purely top-down approach may feel impersonal, while interactive methods can cultivate trust.

Findings of this study reveal that consultations occur with a degree of regularity, but they vary in depth and effectiveness. Participants expressed a collective desire for well-planned sessions that facilitate genuine conversations, timely departmental feedback, and ongoing updates. Some see improved notice periods and smaller group interactions as possible enhancements. The perceived credibility of these consultations rests on meaningful follow-through, ensuring that feedback loops close with clear departmental responses.

4.3.1.2 Shared Decision-Making and Collaborative Solutions

Shared decision-making involves the department taking active steps to bring stakeholders into the process of shaping outcomes. While the first sub theme explored the frequency of consultations, this sub theme explores how far the department goes in integrating suggestions and forging collaborative solutions.

Many participants described examples of department-led committees or working groups that incorporated parents and educators in planning. Yet, certain respondents expressed hesitancy about how genuine this participation might be. Some participants remarked that, despite invitations, final decisions were often made unilaterally, diluting the essence of shared ownership. Others pointed out encouraging scenarios in which the department honoured community-driven proposals. These varied experiences show the broad spectrum of practices shaping how shared decision-making influences overall perceptions of the department's stature.

“When we were asked to form a local advisory group to discuss school security, I felt hopeful. We met with department representatives, brainstormed solutions, and submitted a plan. But eventually the decision seemed pre-set. Our input was acknowledged verbally, but the final approach looked nothing like what we proposed. It left me questioning if the committee was assembled only to meet a requirement, rather than to genuinely shape the final outcome.”(P7: SGB Member)

Participant 7's perspective points to a contrast between being invited to weigh in and having no tangible influence on the final resolution. Although the formation of an advisory group signals openness, ignoring or sidelining input causes stakeholders to doubt the department's intentions. The sense of a “pre-set” course of action can erode trust more significantly than no consultation at all because it raises concerns about sincerity.

“I was part of a curriculum enhancement task team. We actually integrated teacher feedback into the final guidelines for subjects like Mathematics. That was a significant step. It showed the department can incorporate real classroom experiences into policy. Once the revised curriculum was rolled out, we felt ownership because we had contributed. That sense of inclusion boosted our respect for the department's approach.”(P3: Educator)

The words from Participant 1 highlights a contrasting experience, where the department not only invited feedback but acted upon it. The inclusion of teacher input in shaping curriculum guidelines exemplifies genuine collaboration. Observing one's contributions materialise in official directives can create a sense

of ownership among stakeholders. This fosters a positive reputation for the department, demonstrating that their processes can be responsive and iterative.

“There was a special committee on student transportation. Several parents suggested a coordinated drop-off and pick-up system to address safety. The department eventually adopted our basic outline. We saw the results quickly, with clearer routes and trained volunteers. That felt like a big win. You could tell the department was open to solutions that actually came from our lived experiences.”(P8: Parent)

This account from Participant 8 affirms that when suggestions translate into tangible policy or operational changes, it signals a partnership model. The success of the transportation plan likely strengthened the department’s standing among local families, showcasing an example of practical follow-through. A direct link between parent contributions and the final outcome helps maintain a communal attitude of trust.

“From my perspective, we do strive to incorporate local voices when we refine resource allocations or new guidelines. However, we balance a range of constraints, including funding timelines. Some participants may feel sidelined if their ideas appear to conflict with financial or legal requirements. The process is collaborative, but there are broader compliance standards we have to manage as well.”(P9: Department Rep)

The words from Participant 9 offers a nuanced view, explaining that while there is an effort to incorporate ideas from the grassroots, external constraints such as budgets and regulations can impede the extent of stakeholder-driven changes. This perspective suggests that some disappointment among participants might stem from structural limitations rather than from a lack of desire to involve community voices.

“A few years ago, there was a shift in how we plan extracurricular activities. The department introduced a pilot group made up of teachers, parents, and local sports volunteers. Our group designed a few programmes, and the department actually approved most of them. There was a real sense of partnership. However, once the pilot ended, the momentum fizzled. The

department didn't seem to allocate resources to keep those programmes going long-term, which sent mixed signals about actual commitment.”(P5: *Educator*)

The observation from Participant 5 conveys the highs and lows of shared decision-making. The initial pilot group represented a promising example of joint planning. Yet, the subsequent lack of resource commitment highlights how a positive start might not endure if follow-up support or funding is inconsistent. This discrepancy between short-term achievements and long-term support affects how stakeholders judge the authenticity of collaborative efforts.

Experiences ranged from constructive shared decision-making that shaped curriculum or practical logistics, to disappointment triggered by apparent tokenism. Genuine collaboration emerged when the department incorporated suggestions directly into outcomes, reinforcing a sense of shared ownership. Constraints such as budgets and regulations, however, can hamper the transformation of stakeholder suggestions into final practice. Overall, participants gave a mixed verdict: they valued the department's gestures of collaboration but critiqued instances where the actual decision-making power remained concentrated. The possibility of sustained partnership hinged on consistent support, transparent communication about limitations, and a clear demonstration of how stakeholder feedback shaped final decisions.

4.3.2 Digital Strategies and Communication Channels

Participants frequently referred to the department's use of digital tools to manage information flow and keep communities informed. Conversations focused on how these technologies either foster real-time interaction or contribute to occasional breakdowns when not managed effectively.

4.3.2.1 Accessibility and Usability of Digital Platforms

This sub theme addresses the extent to which the department's digital engagement methods are easy to navigate, widely available, and reliable. Participants spoke about official websites, social media profiles, and mobile messaging as channels the department employed for announcements. Several

highlighted limitations stemming from inconsistent updates or content that lacked clarity. Others commended the move to digital platforms for immediate notifications about meetings and urgent policy changes. The breadth of experience ranged from enthusiastic acceptance of modern technology to criticism about poor design or complicated processes for retrieving useful information.

“The website has a decent layout, but sometimes the links to registration forms do not work. I tried to sign up for a session once, and it kept giving me an error message. That experience made me rely more on text messages or printed notices from my child’s school.”(P1: Parent)

Participant 1 underscores that even if the department invests in an online presence, technical hiccups can frustrate users. Broken links diminish trust in the reliability of official channels. A single poor experience can push stakeholders to revert to traditional forms of communication, suggesting that digital convenience must be paired with consistent maintenance.

“There is a group email list that sends out PDF updates every Friday. It is helpful because we don’t need to search for information; it arrives in our inbox. Occasionally, the files are too large or not mobile-friendly. Despite that minor annoyance, the weekly updates keep staff in the loop effectively.”(P3: Educator)

This participant appreciates direct email notifications as a convenient method for staying updated. The mention of occasional formatting issues highlights that digital solutions sometimes overlook user-friendliness on different devices. Still, the consistency of receiving information weekly indicates a degree of reliability that fosters confidence in the department’s communication efforts.

“I follow the department’s social media page, but the posts can be inconsistent. One week, they post every day about local events or policy announcements, and then there’s total silence for a month. It’s hard to rely on it as the main information source. When they do post timely details, it is quite valuable, especially for those in remote areas.”(P5: SGB Member)

This comment from Participant 5 signals that while social media can be a powerful outreach tool, irregular updates reduce stakeholders’ reliance on that platform.

Having sporadic content disrupts expectations of continuity, causing potential confusion among the community. Regular posting schedules might enhance the department's digital credibility and keep local readers engaged.

“We adopted a digital noticeboard, aiming to replace bulletin boards that often went unread. The idea was to have a single hub for department-wide news, event schedules, and emergency alerts. Adoption rates have been moderate. Some older parents or those with limited data coverage still prefer phone calls or in-person communications. It's a transitional phase. The department is trying to simplify the interface to address accessibility concerns and ensure everyone, regardless of tech-savviness, can find essential information.”(P6:Department Rep)

The perspective from Participant 6 situates digital engagement within a broader transition. Not all stakeholders have the devices or digital literacy required to interact seamlessly with an online noticeboard. The department appears aware of these challenges and aims to adapt. The reference to simplifying the interface indicates that beyond launching digital platforms, sustaining inclusivity and ease of use is critical to success.

Participants highlighted how digital channels can streamline announcements and boost real-time communication. However, consistent functionality, timely content, and user-friendly design emerged as deciding factors in perceived effectiveness. Technological barriers, from broken links to large file sizes, sometimes eroded trust. Some stakeholders still relied on more traditional means, indicating that the department might need a hybrid model that caters to varying technical abilities. Regular updates and an intuitive interface are important in securing long-term support for digital engagement solutions.

4.3.2.2 Digital Responsiveness and Crisis Handling

The next sub theme explores how swiftly and effectively the department reacts to urgent matters via digital platforms. Crises in Education settings can include sudden policy shifts, teacher shortages, or safety incidents. In these moments, stakeholders look to official online channels for clarity. Many participants commented on times when immediate updates were needed but not always

forthcoming. Others recalled effective communication in the face of emergencies or controversies. Responsiveness hinges on departmental readiness to supply prompt statements, gather feedback, and refute inaccuracies. Equally significant is how the department handles negative commentary on social media or other public platforms. Such responsiveness can either uplift or undermine the institution's reputation, depending on the consistency and thoroughness of its digital actions.

“One morning, there was an unexpected teacher strike. I checked the department's official website, but there was no announcement. My child's school was practically closed, and the only update I saw came from a local social media group started by parents. The lack of an immediate statement from the department made me wonder if they monitor real-time problems closely.”(P2: *Parent*)

This observation from Participant 2 pinpoints a gap in urgent communication protocols. Stakeholders expect official bodies to confirm or clarify disruptions promptly. Relying on unofficial channels for information can undermine confidence in departmental oversight. The question of whether the department actively monitors emerging incidents is raised, suggesting the need for a more proactive strategy in crisis contexts.

“When COVID-19 restrictions were introduced, the department did a commendable job posting guidelines on social media, email, and text alerts. We had day-by-day updates on safety measures and timetables. In that scenario, the digital response was very impressive. Teachers felt supported because, in uncertain conditions, they received timely data about new protocols. That level of rapid coordination showed us they can be responsive when they treat the event as urgent and centralise the messaging.”(P3: *Educator*)

Participant 3's experience offers a contrasting case where departmental channels were synchronised and rapidly updated. It underlines that in highly disruptive circumstances, the department can deliver cohesive guidance. Such swift action fortifies the view that the department possesses the resources to handle crises proactively, providing a model for how future emergencies might be managed.

“There was a rumour circulating online about possible school fee increases. Some parents panicked, especially during uncertain economic times. The department was quick to post an official statement on their Facebook page, clarifying that no such increments were planned. They also listed a number parents could call if they had further questions. That calm clarification really helped reduce anxiety. It showed they are aware of the potential for misinformation to spread swiftly and those will respond openly to quell concerns rather than waiting for confusion to escalate.”(P7: SGB Member)

This statement from P7 highlights how a prompt digital clarification can quell speculation and maintain public trust. By tackling rumours directly, the department demonstrates awareness of how fast misinformation travels. Rapid, transparent communication of facts allows for a sense of accountability and helps preserve a stable departmental image, turning a potential crisis into a moment of reassurance.

“I have seen times when negative social media comments about departmental policies spiral into heated arguments online. On one occasion, the department’s communication officer stepped in, not with a defensive tone, but with clarifications about what was actually decided and how. That defused a lot of tension. However, there have also been episodes when no one from the department responded, leaving frustration to build unchecked. The contrast between these two approaches is striking. Quick engagement can help people feel heard, while silence can fuel criticism and damage the department’s standing.”(P6: Educator)

The remarks from Participant 6 demonstrate the dual impact of digital responsiveness. Stepping in with clarifications can defuse online tension, while ignoring or delaying a response can magnify negativity. The key takeaway is that sustained vigilance on social platforms and a balanced tone can protect departmental credibility. Inconsistency, however, might lead stakeholders to see official silence as either indifference or disorganisation.

“My child’s school bus route was suddenly cancelled one morning due to mechanical problems. The department quickly shared an SMS update with alternative transport details. Although it was inconvenient, we appreciated

that they took the time to inform us rather than leaving families in the dark. That kind of responsiveness can really shape positive impressions.”(P1: Parent)

A minor crisis—an unexpected service cancellation—was handled by an immediate notification. Timely action alleviated bigger disruptions and signalled that the department respects families’ schedules. Being kept “in the loop” fosters a sense of partnership, reinforcing a view that the department prioritises clarity and swift action.

“When negative press surfaces about resource mismanagement, we sometimes rely on official statements to clarify the facts. In an ideal situation, these statements are posted on all digital platforms simultaneously to reach various audiences. Recently, we had to address a procurement scandal. By releasing a consistent message on Twitter, Facebook, and our website within a few hours, we prevented rumours from dominating. Transparency at that crucial juncture actually helped restore some faith. However, it also took considerable internal coordination. Without a streamlined chain of approval, such prompt messaging might not have been possible.”(P7: Department Rep)

The example from Participant 7 shows how a rapid, multi-platform approach can help contain reputational risks. Aligning internal resources for immediate communication demonstrates organisational efficiency. The narrative indicates that coordinated teams and predefined approval processes can empower departments to engage swiftly and coherently. Delaying such responses allows speculation to overshadow facts.

Instances of proactive digital engagement, especially during emergencies or rumour-related anxieties, can positively influence how the department is viewed. Quick statements, transparent clarifications, and simultaneous multi-platform update highlight competence. On the contrary, when official channels remain silent in a tense moment or update too slowly, trust is eroded. Stakeholders see real-time responsiveness as an indicator of the department’s readiness to handle complex situations. Streamlined internal coordination and consistent monitoring of online discussions play significant roles in managing crises. Ultimately, digital

responsiveness shapes the immediate perception of the department's reliability and fosters long-term confidence when maintained consistently.

4.3.3 Internal Processes and Accountability Measures

Although stakeholder engagement and digital channels gained substantial attention from participants, many pointed out that an institution's reputation also depends on internal processes such as how resources are allocated, the staff is supervised, and promises are tracked for follow-up.

4.3.3.1 Transparency in Resource Allocation

This sub theme delves into participant impressions of how departmental funds, materials, and other assets are distributed. Fairness and openness in these procedures can raise regard for the department. A lack of clarity, on the other hand, fosters suspicion of favouritism or negligence. Participants spoke about which schools received new textbooks first, how quickly repairs were done, and how teacher shortages were addressed in certain areas. Perceived inequities sometimes led to doubts about leadership priorities. Others felt confident that, despite constraints, the department's methods at least aimed for even-handedness. The quotes below illustrate how resource distribution influences trust.

“I remember waiting months for updated science materials. Meanwhile, a nearby school that is better connected received theirs early. It made us wonder if personal ties or politics sometimes override official queues. Nobody ever explained how the distribution list was generated, which felt unfair. If the department published clear guidelines, we would at least know the rationale behind priorities. The lack of transparency was the main frustration, even more than the delay. Knowing the process, even if it might not favour us, would still feel more honest and easy to understand.”(P3: *Educator*)

Participant 1's account reveals that missing clarity about how resources are assigned can spark questions of partiality. The underlying dissatisfaction stems

more from uncertainty than from the resource delay itself. Providing transparent criteria could temper potential allegations of biased decision-making.

“We hold allocation briefings for head teachers to communicate next year’s budget plans. We also highlight why certain schools may get extra funds (like an unforeseen infrastructure crisis). However, the department sometimes does not post these briefing summaries publicly. If we made that documentation accessible to parents and community leaders, we might reduce the rumour mill. I suspect that by not sharing complete details, we unintentionally create an impression that only insiders know the real situation.” (P7: *Department Rep*)

Participant 7 acknowledges efforts to explain allocation decisions to key insiders. Yet, the limited disclosure to the broader public fosters an information gap. Wider public access to official rationales might prevent speculation and affirm the department’s dedication to openness.

“My children attend a smaller school that lacks many basic upgrades, like a modern science lab. We keep hearing that the department’s funds are tight, but we see other schools in more affluent neighbourhoods receiving renovations. It’s not that we expect miracles, but an explanation of how these decisions are made would help. Right now, it just feels like we’re left behind due to less influence or fewer connections.” (P1: *Parent*)

Participant 1’s viewpoint highlights a perceived imbalance linked to socio-economic disparities. The department’s silence on how prioritisation works can intensify a sense of marginalisation for those in under-resourced areas. Transparent explanations might help families accept temporary setbacks if they know the reasons, whether driven by budget constraints or urgent infrastructure issues elsewhere.

“Once we found out that certain textbooks were in short supply, the department shared a summary of the distribution timeline by region. That act of being forthright, with real numbers and schedules, eased our frustrations. We knew we had to wait, but at least we understood the plan. It showed that they can be open about constraints.” (P3: *Educator*)

Here, Participant 3 shows that proactivity in explaining the short supply offered reassurance. Even in a shortage, clarity about who gets what and when can defuse anger and align expectations. This example underlines how sharing facts, even if the news is less than ideal, may reinforce departmental credibility.

“There was a public hearing about the next budget cycle. The department promised it would make the final breakdown accessible online. Several months passed without an update. Then, a partial report surfaced, but it was heavily summarised and lacked detail about specific school allocations. The promise of openness was appreciated, but not fulfilling it or sharing an incomplete version only triggered speculation. People started wondering if funds were shifted quietly or if there were issues with the data. Better to disclose everything, or at least explain why there is a delay.”(P5: *SGB Member*)

Words from Participant 5 shows that incomplete follow-through on transparency pledges can backfire, creating a vacuum for rumours. The participant highlights that a partial or overdue report can be almost as damaging as no report at all. Clarity in the form of timely and detailed disclosures fosters trust, while mixed signals feed suspicion.

“Many times, the department does act in good faith with resource allocations, but the communication can lag behind. We might distribute textbooks based on urgent requests or data about need, yet the public only learns about the outcome much later. By then, dissatisfaction has brewed. A structured, ongoing update process could stop these misunderstandings and affirm that decisions are made with legitimate factors in mind.”(P7:*Department Rep*)

This policymaker reiterates that practical steps are sometimes overshadowed by slow communication. The lack of parallel efforts to inform the public leads to speculation. A more fluid update mechanism would mitigate confusion and preserve trust in the fairness of departmental decisions.

Resource allocation is a tangible test of the department’s commitment to openness. Delays and perceived inequalities irritate stakeholders less if the

rationale and processes are spelled out clearly. Participants reported that publicly accessible explanations and real-time updates could reduce suspicions of favouritism. Efforts to highlight legitimate constraints or justifications appear to soothe frustration, whereas missing or incomplete disclosure can amplify mistrust. Hence, consistent transparency is seen as bedrock for building enduring confidence in departmental operations.

4.3.3.2 Mechanisms of Accountability and Follow-through

This sub theme addresses how the department monitors its own promises, evaluates policy outcomes, and handles staff or policy breaches. Many participants mentioned that statements and commitments are abundant, but the litmus test lies in visible follow-up. Topics ranged from how performance appraisals are conducted to how complaints about unprofessional behaviour are processed. Some praised newly introduced feedback portals for logging complaints and tracking their resolution status. Others expressed dissatisfaction with the department's slow or opaque approach in responding to reported issues. Ultimately, the presence or absence of robust checks influences how the public sees the department. Processes that appear to safeguard accountability reinforce trust, while a lack of concrete follow-up fosters cynicism.

“In the past, raising a complaint about missing materials meant writing letters to multiple offices. Now, we have a central portal. It creates a ticket for each complaint, and we can track it. That is a leap forward, but it only works if they actually close tickets promptly. I've seen some issues remain unresolved for months.”(*P3: Educator*)

Participant 3 acknowledges a step toward modern complaint management. However, the complaint portal's credibility hinges on timely action. An unresolved backlog suggests that technology alone does not address the need for sustained attention to the substance of each complaint.

“I once reported an incident of teacher misconduct through a hotline. There was an investigation, and the department later informed me that corrective training would be provided. I appreciated that they took it seriously. Yet, I never got an update afterward to confirm what actually changed. Did the

teacher attend the training? Was there improved supervision? Without a conclusion, I'm left unsure if my concern mattered in the long run. A follow-through statement would have given me confidence that they are truly resolving these issues and not just filing paperwork.”(P1: Parent)

Participant 1's story underscores the pivotal role of post-investigation feedback. Even when the department initiates inquiries, stakeholders remain watchful for closure. Regular updates on disciplinary measures or remediation steps reflect a transparent approach. In the absence of final updates, the impression is that serious concerns might be buried in administrative loops.

“There was a project to renovate sports fields. The department announced timelines and budgets, but after the first phase, no one shared progress for nearly six months. We kept seeing half-finished grounds. Later, we heard the contractor had some legal issues. If the department had kept us informed about these complications, we could have understood. The abrupt communication gap made everyone suspicious. Some folks started guessing there was corruption or that the project had been abandoned.”(P5: SGB Member)

Participant 5's experience shows how silence in the face of unexpected setbacks can breed mistrust and speculation. Though external hurdles might cause delays, ongoing updates and explanations can mitigate rumours. Regular progress reports reassure stakeholders of the department's intention to see a project through to completion.

“I know there's an internal audit process for finances, but it isn't publicly visible unless there's a big scandal. If the department openly released summary audit findings or compliance reviews, people would see they're keeping themselves accountable. Right now, it seems these things only surface when trouble arises in the media.”(P3: Educator)

Participant 3's words highlight how official audits and reviews remain behind closed doors, diminishing the chance for the public to appreciate proactive oversight. Sharing some level of audit outcomes could build the impression that

the department monitors itself carefully. Transparency fosters trust, while secrecy can leave room for suspicion.

“We encourage staff evaluations, training sessions, and feedback loops for leadership. Yet, it’s an ongoing process. Some administrators resist openly sharing results, worried about reputational fallout. The department is trying to normalise these evaluations. Our vision is that if issues are identified, we fix them immediately and let stakeholders see that improvement is happening. In practice, it takes persistent effort to build that culture.” (P7: *Department Rep*)

Participant 7’s viewpoint highlights an internal culture shift required for transparent accountability. The reluctance of some administrators to publish performance details may stem from fear of negative publicity. However, consistent improvements and visible progress reporting can help normalise a climate of openness, indicating to the public that the department actively addresses shortcomings.

“Something that changed my view was hearing that a principal who misused school funds was actually disciplined. The department circulated a memo explaining the violation and the steps taken, without naming the individual. That transparency showed they won’t protect anyone who breaks trust. It was an unusual move, but it sent a strong message that no one is untouchable. If they kept it secret, we would have assumed no consequences happened.” (P2: *Parent*)

This parent highlights the value of publicised accountability measures. Even without disclosing personal details, disclosing the nature of disciplinary action reassures the community that dishonest or unethical practices carry repercussions. Observing tangible disciplinary steps fosters a shared belief in fairness and integrity within the system.

“We had an agreement for community-led after-school programs that the department pledged to support. A year later, we asked about the funds and status. Nobody knew who was overseeing it. Each office directed us elsewhere. It felt like passing the buck. Finally, we discovered the project

lead had left, and the initiative stalled. If the department had a straightforward tracking system, we could have spotted that gap earlier. Instead, we wasted time chasing answers. That kind of confusion damages their reputation even if the initial idea was promising.”(P5: *SGB Member*)

This case indicates that accountability extends to project oversight. A high turnover or vague responsibility lines can create black holes where initiatives vanish. Stakeholders interpret disorganisation as a lack of genuine commitment. Seamless project management frameworks, inclusive of staff transitions, could reassure participants that departmental support endures beyond any single individual’s tenure.

“It is clear that the department wants to make a difference, but bigger accountability steps, like publishing an annual performance scorecard, would help. For instance, metrics on how many teacher vacancies are filled on schedule, or how many open complaints are resolved each quarter, would give a more concrete picture of progress. Right now, it is hard to see overall results.”(P4: *Educator*)

Participant 4 advocates for quantitative performance indicators to be shared systematically. Regularly publishing data-driven metrics on key activities can demonstrate ongoing improvement and responsiveness. An annual or quarterly accountability report might make outcomes more tangible and highlight departmental progress in real numbers.

“In many respects, the department is evolving. We’ve begun pilot audits of certain policies to see if they actually achieve the goals we set. These audits involve teachers, parents, and external evaluators. The next step is to share these findings widely, not just shelve them in an internal archive. Some members hesitate, thinking that revealing flaws will tarnish the department. But from a broader perspective, acknowledging shortcomings and addressing them openly can have a stronger positive impact on our long-term image than pretending everything is fine.”(P9: *Department Rep*)

This viewpoint reveals a tension between fear of negative publicity and the potential trust gained from openness. Disclosing a project’s weaknesses or

misalignment with initial goals might be unsettling, but the public is often more forgiving when authorities take ownership of mistakes and demonstrate a plan for improvement. Such candour aligns with modern governance expectations of transparency and accountability.

Participants' comments spotlight the importance of robust accountability frameworks for sustaining a positive departmental image. While complaint portals, audits, and public statements are steps forward, these mechanisms must be followed through with prompt and visible action. Gaps in communication, unresolved issues, and limited performance metrics feed doubts. Conversely, clear procedures for responding to misconduct, sharing progress updates, and acknowledging setbacks tend to strengthen stakeholder trust. Overall, the department's reputation benefits when it moves beyond promises, adopting verifiable actions and transparent reporting on outcomes.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how participants perceive and assess the Department of Education at Rhubusana. The findings revolved around three core thematic areas: stakeholder participation, digital engagement, and internal accountability. Throughout the discussions, participants advocated for sustained, meaningful consultations that go beyond perfunctory meetings. They urged consistent digital updates, especially during emergencies or policy transitions, and called for user-friendly platforms. Finally, they highlighted that transparent resource allocation and robust accountability measures can sustain credibility, as stakeholder's value tangible evidence of follow-through. The analysis revealed that a department's reputation is shaped not merely by public statements but by ongoing demonstrations of reliability, openness, and responsiveness. The subsequent chapter discusses these findings in relation to broader theory and previous research.

Chapter Five: Discussion of Results

5.1 Introduction

This section addresses the findings by placing them in the context of established research and theoretical propositions about Education reputation, stakeholder involvement, and digital engagement. It offers comparisons with prior studies, highlighting how the outcomes in Rhubusana either align with or deviate from existing perspectives. It also interprets how these patterns relate to the assumptions formulated earlier in the investigation. Finally, it comments on the extent to which the data confirms or contradicts the study's opening propositions.

5.2 Linking Findings to Existing Literature

5.2.1 Stakeholder Engagement and Institutional Image

Participants in the current study consistently emphasised that meaningful stakeholder consultation is beneficial for institutional reputation. This conclusion resonates with research that underscores community participation as a foundational aspect of public sector trust (Rowley, 2017; Roberts & Caldwell, 2020; Jensen, 2022). For instance, Rowley (2017) posits that when Education authorities actively integrate community insights into policy decisions, perceptions of authenticity improve. The accounts documented in Chapter Four provide direct evidence of how consistent meetings and transparent feedback loops reinforce that sense of partnership.

However, not all aspects of engagement in Rhubusana matched the ideals depicted in the literature. While Roberts and Caldwell (2020) stressed the importance of predictable follow-up mechanisms for maintaining credibility, certain participants observed that their input did not appear in final decisions. That discrepancy aligns with findings by Jensen (2022), who discovered that tokenistic consultations can inadvertently spark more dissatisfaction than no consultation at all. These parallels suggest that bridging the gap between stakeholder input and concrete outcomes is essential for robust institutional image (Rowley, 2017; Roberts & Caldwell, 2020; Jensen, 2022).

Moreover, tension between institutional limitations and community expectations was a recurring theme. Challenges such as budget constraints or legal requirements impacted how far collaboration could go. Prior empirical work notes that governmental entities often face external pressures, which limit their ability to accommodate broad input (Johnson & Liu, 2018; Adane, 2019; Poole *et al.*, 2021). This study's findings confirm that such structural elements must be communicated to stakeholders to avoid mistaken impressions of disregard.

5.2.2 Digital Engagement and Crisis Responsiveness

When participants spoke about the department's online channels, they highlighted the dual potential of digital media as a fast information source and a possible point of frustration if updates were inconsistent. This duality echoes prior research, which identifies timely and well-coordinated digital responses as catalysts for trust-building (Zlateva & Guo, 2019; Morgan & Quick, 2020; Yadav, 2021). Indeed, Morgan and Quick (2020) found that prompt digital communication can lessen anxiety during unforeseen disruptions, matching the educator experiences in the COVID-19 context or the unplanned transportation setbacks discussed in Chapter Four.

Conversely, certain participants encountered silence or delayed posts from official channels. This supports the argument by Zlateva and Guo (2019) that gaps in online engagement create an environment ripe for misinformation. In the case of Rhubusana, rumours about school fees or resource mismanagement thrived when official responses lagged. Such episodes illustrate Yadav's (2021) assertion that an active online presence is vital to counteract speculation promptly, as it ensures that the official narrative can outpace hearsay. The synergy between these scholarly insights and participant perspectives indicates that digital responsiveness is a critical pillar in safeguarding an Education entity's reputation.

Crisis management emerged as a strong dimension in the data, corroborating earlier research on how public perception is affected by how institutions handle disruptions (McDonnell & Jones, 2018; Evans *et al.*, 2019; Ross, 2022). McDonnell and Jones (2018) argue that immediate, consistent messaging during emergencies helps quell panic and builds trust. The department's prompt clarifications during

teacher strikes or budget rumours illustrate that principle, revealing how agile communication can enhance or restore confidence.

5.2.3 Internal Processes, Resource Allocation, and Accountability

The third thematic block uncovered participant concerns regarding fair distribution of supplies and consistent follow-up on departmental promises. These aspects resonate with longstanding analyses of how procedural fairness affects public attitudes (Hibbert & Semple, 2019; Watson *et al.*, 2020; Chen & Bae, 2021). For instance, Hibbert and Semple (2019) wrote that the real or perceived fairness of resource distribution influences stakeholders' trust more substantially than the absolute quantity of resources. That line of reasoning is supported by the accounts of parents who felt overshadowed by larger or better-connected schools. Similarly, Watson *et al.* (2020) concluded that making allocation frameworks transparent can mitigate frustration, a recommendation that fits the demands for published decision rationales mentioned by multiple participants.

Processes of accountability also surfaced prominently. Chen and Bae (2021) have explored how public institutions that communicate openly about disciplinary actions or project setbacks garner respect, even if the underlying issues are negative. This principle materialises in the parent's story about the disciplined principal who misused funds, demonstrating that a department's willingness to share corrective steps can instil confidence. The emphasis that participants placed on publicly accessible audits, systematic complaint resolution, and performance tracking aligns neatly with the scholarship urging open accountability as a way to shield institutional reputation (Hibbert & Semple, 2019; Watson *et al.*, 2020; Chen & Bae, 2021).

5.3 Comparing Findings with Theoretical Assumptions

5.3.1 Social Exchange Theory and Stakeholder Involvement

Social Exchange Theory (SET) indicates that trust and loyalty develop when participants perceive reciprocal benefits (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Venter & Moody, 2021). In an Education context, this translates to stakeholders

investing time or resources in departmental initiatives while expecting recognition, responsiveness, or tangible outcomes. The data suggests that when participants feel their contributions have shaped policies (like extracurricular planning or transportation routes), their trust escalates—a conclusion that affirms SET predictions. Conversely, when engagement appears tokenistic, the “exchange” breaks down, leaving individuals feeling short-changed.

Participants’ experiences align with Cropanzano *et al.* (2017), who stress that a balanced exchange fosters stronger relationships. The repeated mention that follow-up is as significant as initial consultation reflects the reciprocity dimension in SET. By neglecting to update participants on the fate of their suggestions, the department potentially undermines the reciprocal goodwill that fosters positive ties. That dynamic is also observed in Venter and Moody (2021), who emphasise that continuous mutual benefits create enduring partnerships in institutional contexts.

5.3.2 Contingency Theory and Digital Responsiveness

Contingency Theory proposes that organisational strategies, including communication, should adapt to situational variables (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Galbraith, 1973; Child, 2019). In line with that perspective, participants described times when the department excelled in digital responsiveness—particularly in crisis moments—and times when no single channel seemed to be systematically monitored. These divergent outcomes indicate that the department’s approach to digital engagement is not yet fully integrated. Nonetheless, the success stories from crises, such as the pandemic or rumours about school closures, prove that a well-deployed, responsive digital framework can address situational demands effectively.

Child (2019) contends that institutions thrive when they can fluidly shift their communication methods based on emerging conditions. The data suggests that the Department of Education has pockets of contingency-based adaptations—enacting real-time updates for urgent matters—but also lapses into rigid or absent approaches during day-to-day affairs. This inconsistency implies that adopting a

more formal contingency plan for communication (with designated teams and timelines) might consolidate best practices and reduce unpredictability.

5.3.3 Institutional Theory and Accountability Mechanisms

Institutional Theory highlights how shared norms and rules within an organisation shape legitimacy in public contexts (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014; Greenwood *et al.*, 2017). The references to unpublicised audits, staff evaluations, and unclear lines of responsibility indicate that certain internal norms may lack openness. Meyer and Rowan (1977) emphasise that institutions often create “ceremonial” practices to appear legitimate externally. Some participants felt that announcements about committees or project support might serve such ceremonial roles without backing them with consistent operational follow-through.

Scott (2014) and Greenwood *et al.* (2017) underscore that genuine legitimacy arises when organisations incorporate both external expectations and internal accountability standards. In Rhubusana, even though the department has begun digital complaint portals and introduced accountability frameworks, the partial or inconsistent execution noted by participants signals an incomplete institutionalisation of these standards. The feedback about unresolved project leads or partly disclosed budgetary details reveals a gap between declared norms and real practice. Bridging that gap likely involves embedding transparency in the department’s formal processes so that the demonstration of accountability moves beyond surface gestures to become a routine expectation.

5.4 Relating Findings to Prior Assumptions and Expectations

At the outset, the investigation proposed that stakeholder engagement and digital strategies influence public perception. This assumption is substantially supported by data indicating that frequent consultation sessions, authentic input-integration, and timely online communication create a positive impression of competence and trustworthiness (Rowley, 2017; Roberts & Caldwell, 2020; Jensen, 2022). Yet, the results also demonstrate that even the best strategies can underperform if missing consistent follow-up or overshadowed by structural constraints. The second assumption held that the synergy of stakeholder involvement and digital strategies would amplify the department’s reputation. Evidence from participants confirms

that an integrated approach—merging on-ground engagements with swift online clarifications—can indeed fortify trust, especially in crisis moments (Morgan & Quick, 2020; Yadav, 2021).

Additionally, the study hypothesised that accountability frameworks, specifically transparency in resource distribution and explicit resolution of reported issues, are integral to sustaining confidence (Hibbert & Semple, 2019; Watson *et al.*, 2020; Chen & Bae, 2021). The findings strongly corroborate this view, as multiple participants cited a direct link between visible oversight mechanisms and an ongoing sense of institutional trust. Conversely, a lack of published performance metrics, unclear complaint-tracking, and undisclosed audit outcomes diminish faith in departmental processes.

5.5 Extent of Support or Refutation of the Study's Propositions

Each proposition in this research found varying degrees of validation. The premise that stakeholder engagement significantly affects reputation is reinforced by participant experiences. The proposition regarding digital channels as pivotal in shaping perceptions also stands robustly affirmed, as both negative and positive experiences pivoted on the department's online responsiveness. Finally, the link between accountability measures and long-term confidence emerges as a central factor in how participants judge departmental legitimacy.

In some ways, the findings add nuance by illustrating that even a well-intentioned action can falter without thorough communication. Many participants expressed that the department genuinely attempts open forums and advanced digital tools, yet shortfalls in execution hamper the full potential of these efforts. This nuance does not contradict the main propositions but reveals the complexity of implementing them effectively. Thus, the data predominantly supports the study's central claims while underscoring that consistent attention to follow-up, budget transparency, and official feedback loops is critical for realising the theoretical ideals laid out at the beginning.

5.6 Practical and Theoretical Implications

The results hold practical relevance for the Department of Education at Rhusana and similar Education bodies seeking a more solid public image. They clarify that a single consultation or random social media update cannot in itself transform stakeholder perceptions—sustained, transparent action is paramount (Rowley, 2017; Jensen, 2022; Yadav, 2021). Ensuring that staff, from policy-level managers to school-based administrators, follow standard protocols for engagement, crisis management, and accountability can unify departmental messaging and outcomes (McDonnell & Jones, 2018; Watson *et al.*, 2020; Chen & Bae, 2021).

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the synergy among Social Exchange Theory, Contingency Theory, and Institutional Theory in explaining how public sector institutions maintain or lose credibility (Blau, 1964; Child, 2019; Scott, 2014). Genuine reciprocity fosters loyalty, adaptive responses enhance resilience, and embedded accountability norms confer legitimacy. Understanding how these frameworks intersect might guide future inquiries into the operational realities of public education institutions in different socio-economic settings.

5.7 Chapter Summary

This section placed the findings of Chapter Four within established theoretical and empirical contexts. Analysis revealed that active, ongoing stakeholder engagement substantially boosts the department's public image, harmonising with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Venter & Moody, 2021). Additionally, the department's capacity to adapt digital strategies in crisis moments, consistent with Contingency Theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Child, 2019), had a strong bearing on how quickly trust could be restored. Institutional legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014) was also shaped by transparent internal processes, highlighting that accountability systems must go beyond rhetoric. By comparing data from Rhusana with prior scholarship, it emerges that while the department's efforts are substantial, they remain undermined by gaps in execution. Addressing these shortfalls could yield sustained trust and reflect the ideals of openness championed in modern public administration research.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This study set out to evaluate how stakeholder engagement and digital strategies shape reputation management in the Department of Education at Rhubusana. In the course of the study, the researcher has found that while the department has made meaningful progress in adopting public participation practices and digital tools, there are several weaknesses in execution which have hindered progress. Regular consultation sessions, community forums, and digital outreach were common, but their effectiveness was often undercut by poor follow-up, unclear resource allocation and slow responsiveness during crises. These shortcomings impact reputation directly and several respondents shared a feeling of being heard or disengaged. These findings support the study's propositions.

The study has shown that Stakeholder engagement influences public perception, especially when communication channels are transparent and feedback loops are kept open. Digital strategies played a role in expanding reach and managing public relations during emergencies. Equally, accountability systems—when visible and actively enforced—boost the department's credibility. The research further highlights that intention alone is not enough; the reliability of implementation of policy play a critical role as well. For reputation management to be effective, the department must embed follow-through, clarify budget decisions, and consistently relay information through accessible channels. In this way, the theoretical ideals underpinning Social Exchange Theory, Contingency Theory, and Institutional Theory are confirmed even when practicality at the department of education at Rhubusana remains a task to be carried on by all stakeholders involved.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the gaps identified in practice, this section outlines targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening the department's stakeholder engagement and digital communication practices. These proposals respond directly to concerns raised by participants and align with principles of transparency, responsiveness, and institutional accountability. Each recommendation is designed

to be practical, context-sensitive, and capable of enhancing public trust through consistent, measurable action.

6.2.1 Strengthen Follow-up Mechanisms

Educators, parents, and community members stressed the need for post-consultation updates. Departments could designate specific personnel for each region or project to track progress and relay results to stakeholders (Rowley, 2017; Roberts & Caldwell, 2020; Jensen, 2022). By systematically closing the feedback loop, the department can demonstrate consistency and respect for participants' input, aligning practice with the reciprocity principle (Blau, 1964).

6.2.2 Formalise a Crisis Communication Protocol

The research highlights that a robust digital strategy pays dividends during controversies or emergencies. It is thus advisable for the department to create a standardized protocol outlining channels, content guidelines, and timelines for official statements (Zlateva & Guo, 2019; Morgan & Quick, 2020; Yadav, 2021). This protocol should be rehearsed periodically, ensuring swift coordination across teams (McDonnell & Jones, 2018; Ross, 2022).

6.2.3 Offer Transparent Resource Allocation Summaries

A recurring concern was ambiguous distribution processes. Publishing clear, user-friendly documents showing allocation timelines, criteria, and budget rationales would reassure stakeholders that the department acts systematically (Hibbert & Semple, 2019; Watson *et al.*, 2020; Chen & Bae, 2021). Even if decisions deviate from community suggestions, presenting the objective basis can mitigate negative assumptions.

6.2.4 Embrace Public Performance Indicators

Regularly publishing metrics on issues such as teacher vacancy fill-rates, complaint resolution times, and facility upgrades can illustrate the department's achievements and identify problem areas (Watson *et al.*, 2020). This approach addresses participants' requests for concrete proof of progress and aligns with the

open culture advocated by Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014; Greenwood *et al.*, 2017).

6.2.5 Maintain Hybrid Communication Channels

Not all users access digital platforms equally, meaning the department should retain traditional outreach (such as printed announcements) alongside online systems. Maintaining multiple channels ensures that older or less digitally literate stakeholders can still participate effectively (Zlateva & Guo, 2019; Yadav, 2021). This hybrid approach underscores a contingency-based stance, adapting the method to suit various contexts (Child, 2019).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet

Study Title:

Evaluation of Stakeholder Engagement and Digital Strategies in Reputation Management: A Case Study of the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City, South Africa

Researcher:

Dianah Nanjeho, MBA Candidate

Uganda Christian University (UCU)

Contact: [Researcher's Email/Phone]

Supervisor: Dr. Jakisa Owor (UCU)

Purpose:

This study examines how the Department of Education at Rhubusana (Eastern Cape, South Africa) manages its reputation through stakeholder engagement (e.g., consultations with parents, educators) and digital strategies (e.g., social media, websites). Your insights will help improve public trust and institutional accountability.

What Participation Involves:

- A 30-45 minute interview at a time/place convenient for you.
- Questions about your experiences with the department's communication, decision-making, and crisis responsiveness.
- Voluntary participation—you may skip questions or withdraw anytime without penalty.

Confidentiality:

- Your identity will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms (e.g., "Parent 1") will replace names in transcripts/reports.

- Audio recordings (if made) will be stored on a password-protected device and destroyed after transcription.
- Data will be aggregated to prevent identification.

Risks and Benefits:

- **Risks:** Minimal discomfort discussing frustrations (e.g., delayed departmental responses). Support resources are available upon request.
- **Benefits:** Your input will directly inform recommendations to strengthen community engagement and transparency in public education.

Ethical Approval:

Approved by Uganda Christian University Ethics Committee (Ref: UCU Approval Number- I will still need this after submitting the proposal to UREC)

Questions?

Contact Dianah Nanjeho: nanjehod@gmail.com

or Dr. Jakisa Owor: jowor@ucu.ac.ug

Appendix B: Consent Form

Study Title:

Evaluation of Stakeholder Engagement and Digital Strategies in Reputation Management: A Case Study of the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City, South Africa

Researcher:

Dianah Nanjeho, Uganda Christian University

By signing below, I confirm:

1. I understand the study's purpose and my role as a participant.
2. I voluntarily agree to participate and may withdraw anytime without consequence.
3. I consent to audio recording (if applicable).
4. I understand my responses will be anonymized in reports/publications.
5. I am aware that while confidentiality is prioritized, absolute anonymity in small communities cannot be guaranteed.

Participant Signature: _____

Name (Printed): _____

Date: _____

Researcher

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Parents

Study Title: An Evaluation of How Stakeholder Engagement and Digital Strategies Impact Reputation Management - A Case Study of the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. We are interested in your experiences and perspectives on how the Department of Education at Rhubusana engages with parents and how its reputation affects your interactions with schools. Your responses will be confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed in the final report.

Section 1: General Perceptions on Reputation Management

1. How would you describe the reputation of the Department of Education at Rhubusana?
2. What do you think contributes to the department's reputation, both positively and negatively?
3. How does the department's reputation impact your confidence in the education system and the schools in this area?

Section 2: Stakeholder Engagement

4. How often do you engage with the department on matters related to your child's education?
5. In what ways does the department involve parents in decision-making and policy discussions?
6. Do you feel that the department values parents' input? Why or why not?
7. Can you share an example of a time when you felt the department listened to or ignored parental concerns?
8. What would you suggest to improve the engagement between the department and parents?

Section 3: Digital Strategies and Communication

9. How does the department communicate with parents about school policies, events, or important announcements?
10. Have you used digital platforms such as emails, SMS, websites, or social media to access information from the department? If so, how effective have these been?
11. Have you faced any challenges in getting timely and clear information from the department?
12. Do you feel that digital communication has improved transparency and accountability? Why or why not?
13. What improvements would you recommend in the way the department uses digital communication with parents?

Section 4: Challenges in Reputation Management

14. What do you think are the main challenges the department faces in maintaining a good reputation?
15. Have there been instances where the department's reputation has affected your decisions or perceptions about your child's education?
16. How does the department respond to issues such as school closures, curriculum changes, or complaints?
17. What do you think the department should do to enhance its reputation among parents and the community?

Section 5: Recommendations and Closing Thoughts

18. If you could recommend one change to improve communication and engagement between the department and parents, what would it be?
19. What role do you think parents should play in ensuring better engagement and reputation management in education?
20. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the department's reputation, stakeholder engagement, or communication practices?

Appendix D: Interview Guide for Teachers

Study Title: An Evaluation of How Stakeholder Engagement and Digital Strategies Impact Reputation Management - A Case Study of the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Introduction

- Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this interview is to understand your perspectives on stakeholder engagement and digital strategies in reputation management within the Department of Education at Rhubusana. Your responses will be confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed in the final report.

Section 1: General Perceptions on Reputation Management

1. How would you describe the reputation of the Department of Education at Rhubusana?
2. In your view, what are the key factors that contribute to the department's reputation, both positively and negatively?
3. Do you think the reputation of the department affects your work as a teacher? If so, in what ways?

Section 2: Stakeholder Engagement

4. How do you feel the department engages with teachers in decision-making processes?
5. Can you describe any initiatives or programmes where the department has actively sought input from teachers?
6. Do you believe the department values the opinions and concerns of teachers? Why or why not?
7. Have there been any instances where you felt your input as a teacher was ignored or undervalued?

8. What do you think could be done to improve engagement between teachers and the department?

Section 3: Digital Strategies and Communication

9. How would you assess the department's communication with teachers regarding policies, curriculum changes, and other updates?
10. What digital platforms (e.g., emails, social media, websites) does the department use to communicate with teachers? How effective are these platforms?
11. Have you encountered challenges in accessing information from the department? If so, can you describe them?
12. Do you think the use of digital platforms has improved transparency and accessibility of information? Why or why not?
13. What digital communication strategies would you recommend for better engagement between the department and teachers?

Section 4: Challenges in Reputation Management

14. What are some of the major challenges facing the department in maintaining a positive reputation?
15. Have you ever encountered situations where the department's reputation has negatively impacted schools, teachers, or students?
16. How do you think the department handles public criticism or negative media coverage?
17. What strategies do you believe the department should adopt to enhance its reputation among teachers and the wider community?

Section 5: Recommendations and Closing Thoughts

18. If you had the opportunity to advise the department on improving its stakeholder engagement and communication strategies, what recommendations would you make?

19. What role do you think teachers can play in supporting the department's reputation management efforts?
20. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the department's reputation, engagement, or communication practices?

Appendix E: Debrief Form

Title of Study: Evaluation of Stakeholder Engagement and Digital Strategies in Reputation Management: A Case Study of the Department of Education at Rhubusana, Buffalo City, South Africa

Researcher: Dianah Nanjeho

Institution: Uganda Christian University (UCU)

Thank You for Participating

Your participation in this study is sincerely appreciated. This research aims to understand how stakeholder engagement and digital communication influence institutional reputation and community trust within Rhubusana's Department of Education.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigates the approaches used by the Department of Education in engaging stakeholders and communicating digitally with the public. Your insights will help shape practical recommendations for strengthening governance, transparency, and community relations in the education sector.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

- Your responses are confidential and will not be linked to your identity in any published material.
- Data collected is securely stored on password-protected devices and cloud storage restricted to the researcher.
- All data will be permanently deleted after the thesis is submitted and examined (by May 2026).
- Any identifiable information has been anonymised or excluded.

Right to Withdraw

You have the right to withdraw from the study without giving a reason. If you choose to withdraw your responses, you may do so up to **two weeks after your**

participation date. To withdraw, please contact the researcher using the contact details below.

Access to Research Findings

A summary of the research findings will be made available by **December 2025**. You may request this summary by emailing or calling the researcher at the contact provided below, or visit <https://ucudir.ucu.ac.ug>

Questions or Concerns?

If you have any concerns about the study or how your information has been handled, you can contact the following:

Primary Contact - Researcher:

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Ethics Oversight - UCU Research Ethics Committee:

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