

Safeguarding the Cinque Terre Trail: A Crisis Communication Plan for Liguria Tourism Board after a Rock-Fall Incident

Name: Manpreet Brar

Student ID: DE240069

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Abstract

This report presents a comprehensive crisis communication plan for the Liguria Tourism Board following a rock-fall incident on the renowned Cinque Terre Trail in Italy. The unexpected geological event, which resulted in injuries to international hikers, has triggered widespread safety concerns, prompted intense media scrutiny, and disrupted tourism operations in one of Italy's most iconic destinations. The communication strategy developed here employs best practices in crisis response, including the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and intercultural business communication frameworks. The plan includes three strategic communications: an internal memo for operational coordination, a public-facing press release to reassure visitors and media, and a formal stakeholder letter to partners such as cruise lines and tour operators. The analysis also explores broader implications for labour-market stability, overtourism challenges, and regional economic resilience. By balancing transparency with reputation management and applying culturally sensitive language, the report aims to restore trust among diverse global audiences while advocating for sustainable destination recovery.

Introduction

The Cinque Terre Trail, stretching along the rugged coastline of Italy's Liguria region, is one of Europe's most iconic and fragile tourism assets. Known for its panoramic views, cliff-hugging footpaths, and the charming quintet of pastel-coloured villages it connects—Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola, and Riomaggiore—the trail has become a global symbol of sustainable, slow-paced tourism. However, this picturesque path is increasingly under strain from both environmental vulnerabilities and rising tourist footfall. On [Insert Date Placeholder], a sudden rock-fall on one of the most trafficked segments of the trail resulted in injuries to several international visitors. The event quickly escalated from a safety incident to a regional crisis, with widespread media coverage questioning crowd management protocols, geological risk assessments, and the region's overall tourism readiness.

This report responds to that incident by developing a full-spectrum crisis communication plan tailored to the needs of the Liguria Tourism Board. The objective is to stabilize public perception, provide clear and accurate information, and safeguard the economic and reputational future of the Cinque Terre region. Beyond managing the immediate crisis, the plan addresses the operational complexities of working in a multicultural tourism environment. It examines the cross-cultural risk perceptions of key markets—including English-speaking, German-speaking, and Asian outbound travellers—each of whom interprets safety, trust, and accountability differently. The report also assesses the economic ramifications for the region's labour market, especially the micro-enterprises and seasonal workers whose livelihoods are tethered to uninterrupted trail access.

By applying a mix of crisis communication theories, intercultural messaging principles, and sustainable tourism policy insights, this communication plan serves as both a practical response to the rock-fall event and a model for future crisis preparedness. It aims to uphold transparency, foster collaboration, and ultimately reinforce Liguria's standing as a responsible and resilient tourism destination.

Literature Review

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), introduced by Coombs (2007), provides a strategic framework for organizations responding to crises based on the perceived responsibility of the organization and the type of crisis at hand. In the context of the Cinque Terre rock-fall, SCCT categorizes the event as a “victim crisis”, where the organization (Liguria Tourism Board) is not directly at fault but still expected to take responsibility for managing the aftermath.

According to SCCT, victim crises generally attract less reputational threat compared to preventable crises, yet stakeholders still demand transparency, empathy, and reassurance (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Coombs suggests three core response strategies for victim crises: instructing information, adjusting information, and bolstering. These strategies aim to first ensure public safety, then express concern and compassion, and finally reinforce the organization’s commitment to prevention and resilience. The Liguria Tourism Board, therefore, must avoid defensive rhetoric and adopt an accommodative tone, acknowledging the incident while reinforcing ongoing mitigation measures.

Additionally, SCCT emphasizes the importance of stakeholder expectation alignment. In high-tourism regions like Cinque Terre, diverse international audiences may perceive responsibility and response adequacy differently, especially across cultures with varying trust levels in public institutions. Thus, while applying SCCT, it is essential to incorporate culturally adaptive messaging techniques that resonate with global visitors.

Tourism is inherently intercultural. When crises arise, communication strategies must account for how different cultures interpret safety, risk, and trust. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) is useful for understanding how national culture affects public responses to crises. For instance, German tourists, often characterized by a high uncertainty-avoidance index, are likely to demand highly detailed, factual updates and expect visible safety controls before resuming travel. In contrast, Asian visitors, especially from collectivist cultures like Japan or China, may place greater emphasis on group safety, social responsibility, and harmony in messaging.

Effective intercultural crisis communication also involves managing media narratives in different regions. Studies by Reisinger and Mavondo (2005) show that trust and risk perception vary significantly across international audiences. A single English-language press release, if translated without cultural nuance, may fail to convey the intended message. Therefore, multilingual messaging tailored to core outbound markets is vital, not only linguistically but also in framing, tone, and delivery channel.

Moreover, modern crisis communication must move beyond basic translation to transcreation, where messages are culturally rewritten to maintain emotional impact and resonance. This is particularly important for destinations like Cinque Terre, whose global brand identity is deeply tied to aesthetic, emotional, and symbolic representations. Communication must balance clarity with cultural empathy, reassuring all segments of the international tourist base without undermining local identity.

Crisis communication in a business and tourism context must also meet the standards of Business English—a register that combines precision, persuasion, and professionalism. According to Nickerson (2005), Business English must adapt to varying levels of emotional intensity, especially in high-stakes situations. In victim crises, language should be accommodative, meaning it acknowledges the impact of the crisis, expresses empathy, and outlines corrective or preventive action.

Words matter in crises. Phrases like “We regret...” and “Our thoughts are with those affected...” signal compassion and responsibility without admitting legal liability. The syntax and tone must be controlled: using active voice, avoiding hedging, and favouring clarity over jargon. In international tourism contexts, this also includes using globally comprehensible language—short sentences, transparent structure, and high readability scores.

Moreover, the tone ladder—a concept from business communication—can help frame messages across a scale from assertive to empathetic. For instance, internal memos to staff can adopt a more operational tone, while public-facing documents should adopt a more human, audience-focused voice. During the Cinque Terre crisis, different audiences (park staff, media, stakeholders) require tailored messaging levels that still reflect a unified brand voice.

The rock-fall incident must also be contextualized within broader academic debates around overtourism and visitor-carrying capacity, especially in UNESCO-protected landscapes. As UNWTO (2018) notes, destinations experiencing high tourism volumes often operate beyond their ecological and infrastructural thresholds, increasing the likelihood of incidents and degrading the visitor experience. Cinque Terre, often cited in overtourism discourse, has long struggled with trail erosion, congestion, and infrastructure fatigue.

Visitor-carrying capacity refers to the maximum number of people that a destination can sustainably accommodate without causing environmental degradation, social conflict, or safety issues (Saveriades, 2000). In the case of Cinque Terre, trail safety is directly linked to overuse. The rock-fall incident underscores the fragile balance between tourism growth

and environmental integrity. Communication strategies must, therefore, position the Liguria Tourism Board as both a responsive crisis manager and a long-term steward of sustainable tourism.

Scholars like Peeters et al. (2019) advocate for cap-and-distribute systems, digital reservation platforms, and real-time trail-use data to manage tourism flows. Communicating these policies transparently is key—not only for crisis response but also for managing future expectations among stakeholders. Importantly, the crisis presents a critical policy window—a moment when reform is more likely to gain public and political support (Kingdon, 1995). Framing the crisis communication around both immediate safety and future sustainability can help pivot the narrative from liability to leadership.

Methodology

The development of this crisis communication plan for the Liguria Tourism Board in response to the Cinque Terre rock-fall incident is grounded in a qualitative, strategic communication design approach. The goal of the methodology is to create targeted, theory-informed messaging that addresses the needs of multiple stakeholders in a culturally sensitive, operationally sound, and brand-protective manner. This section outlines the processes used to select communication tools, determine message content and tone, and identify appropriate channels and audience segmentation strategies.

The plan is underpinned by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs (2007), which categorizes the Cinque Terre incident as a “victim crisis” requiring an accommodative communication strategy. SCCT was selected due to its clarity in recommending response styles based on stakeholder attribution of responsibility and perceived reputational threat. It offers a structured response template that emphasizes transparency, empathy, and responsibility—crucial components in a high-profile tourism crisis involving public safety.

Additionally, intercultural communication frameworks, especially Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (2010), were used to tailor language tone and content for international audiences. This intercultural lens allowed for adjustments in phrasing, emotional appeal, and risk framing across target markets, including English-speaking North America, Germany, and key Asian outbound regions. These regions were selected based on historic arrival data from Cinque Terre tourism reports and market share relevance.

Three distinct communication artifacts were developed for this plan:

1. Internal Memo – Directed at park rangers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), outlining emergency safety procedures and staff responsibilities.
2. Press Release – A public document balancing factual transparency with reputation management, aimed at international media and public audiences.
3. Stakeholder Letter – A formal communication for cruise lines, regional mayors, and tour operators explaining the phased reopening plan and refund policy.

Each document was constructed using business communication principles drawn from Business English conventions (Nickerson, 2005), including the use of active voice, concise paragraphs, consistent brand voice, and audience-centric tone. The documents also followed the “tone ladder” approach, adapting formality and emotionality depending on the audience’s proximity to the crisis and role in recovery operations.

The crisis communication plan uses a segmented stakeholder approach, where different messages are constructed for internal staff, business partners, media, and international

tourists. This segmentation allows the Tourism Board to better meet the needs and expectations of each group.

Audiences were profiled using:

- Power-interest matrix (Eden & Ackermann, 1998): to determine who needs close engagement (e.g., local mayors) versus low-intensity updates (e.g., walk-in visitors).
- Cultural risk perception models (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005): to assess how various groups understand and respond to tourism safety issues.
- Digital channel preferences by region (e.g., Asian markets rely more heavily on official WeChat/LINE channels, while European travellers prefer email and web portals).

This profiling ensured that communication materials not only reached the right audiences but did so in a form and tone appropriate to their cultural expectations and communication norms.

Ethical communication during crises requires truthfulness without causing panic, and accountability without legal overexposure. All statements were carefully worded to avoid blame-shifting while still clarifying the Liguria Tourism Board's role as coordinator rather than sole operator of the trails. Legal terminology was avoided in public communications to reduce the risk of liability escalation.

From an operational standpoint, the plan was designed to align with existing tourism governance structures in Liguria, involving both public and private sector partners. All communication procedures were mapped to emergency response timelines provided by Italy's Civil Protection Department and local park authorities.

Due to the hypothetical nature of this assignment, the plan relies on simulated data and theoretical modelling rather than real-time field data. However, destination-specific information was inferred from:

- Previous overtourism research on Cinque Terre (e.g., Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019)
- Regional tourism economic reports from Liguria's Tourism Observatory
- International crisis communication case studies in heritage tourism (e.g., Nepal Earthquake, Machu Picchu Trail closures)

While these sources provide a robust foundation, the lack of live stakeholder interviews or survey data limits the empirical grounding of message testing and audience sentiment assessment. Future studies could strengthen the plan through mixed-method research involving real-time feedback, sentiment analysis of social media data, and crisis simulation testing with local operators.

Findings

This section presents the core outputs of the crisis communication plan designed in response to the rock-fall incident on the Cinque Terre Trail. Each document targets a specific audience segment and demonstrates a distinct tone, channel, and purpose. Together, they form a cohesive strategy that prioritizes operational coordination, public trust, and stakeholder confidence.

1. Internal Memo

To: Cinque Terre National Park Rangers, Trail Staff, and Local SMEs
From: Liguria Tourism Board – Emergency Coordination Unit
Subject: Urgent Protocols and Staff Briefing Following Rock-Fall Incident

As you may be aware, a rock-fall incident occurred on [insert trail segment] on [insert date], resulting in injuries to several hikers. Immediate safety protocols were activated. To ensure safety and uphold our duty of care, the following measures are now in effect:

- Trail Access and Closure: Affected segments are temporarily closed.
- Repair and Inspection Teams: Engineers will conduct inspections.
- Safety Briefings: Mandatory daily briefings at 9:00 AM and 3:00 PM.
- Visitor Management: Frontline staff must clearly communicate closure notices.
- Media Contact: All inquiries must be directed to the Communications Office.

2. Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Liguria Tourism Board Communications Office

Rock-Fall Incident on Cinque Terre Trail – Safety Measures Activated and Investigation Underway

Liguria, Italy – The Liguria Tourism Board confirms that a natural rock-fall occurred on a section of the Cinque Terre Trail resulting in injuries. Emergency services responded immediately. The affected segment of the trail has been temporarily closed for inspection and repairs. Visitors are advised to check official updates. Other trail segments remain open and accessible.

3. Stakeholder Letter

To: Cruise Line Representatives, Regional Mayors, Tour Operators
Subject: Update on Cinque Terre Trail Access and Refund Policy

The affected trail segment is expected to remain closed for 7–10 days. Other segments remain open. Refunds or date transfers are available. Bulk claims may use the Partner



Service Form in Appendix A. Daily bulletins will be provided. We reaffirm our commitment to transparent communication and sustainable recovery.

Discussion

The communication plan developed for the Liguria Tourism Board in response to the Cinque Terre trail rock-fall demonstrates how crisis messaging must not only provide accurate and timely information but also resonate with the emotional, cultural, and economic dynamics of its audience. This section analyzes the effectiveness of the selected communication strategies and explores the wider implications for regional tourism management and labour-market sustainability.

Using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the communication approach aligns with the expectations of a “victim crisis.” Each communication artifact reflected SCCT’s three core tenets: instructing information, adjusting information, and bolstering.

The plan integrated Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to adapt tone and content for different audiences. German tourists respond to factual messaging; English-speaking visitors value clarity; Asian travellers appreciate messages emphasizing group safety.

The rock-fall incident had immediate implications for the tourism labour market. Many SMEs rely on trail traffic. The phased reopening plan and refund policies helped to stabilize these businesses and worker livelihoods.

The incident brings renewed attention to overcrowding and environmental strain. The communication plan thus also served as a vehicle for promoting sustainability. Future messaging should focus on educating visitors about capacity management tools.

The document formats—memo, press release, and formal letter—align with crisis communication best practices, though they should be complemented by digital updates and social media.

While informed by credible theory, the hypothetical nature of this plan means it lacks live feedback. A review unit, staff training, and digital analytics are recommended for future enhancements.

Conclusion

The rock-fall incident on the Cinque Terre Trail presents a compelling case study for the application of strategic crisis communication in a tourism context. Through targeted messaging, this plan has shown how culturally sensitive communication helps mitigate reputational damage, preserve visitor trust, and stabilize local economies.

Guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the response avoided defensive tones and emphasized empathy and recovery. The strategy addressed international audiences through tailored messaging and recognized the economic impact on micro-enterprises and seasonal workers.

The incident has highlighted the broader issue of overtourism. By responding transparently and offering a vision for sustainable management, the Liguria Tourism Board can position itself as a responsible leader.

Crisis communication, when executed with professionalism and empathy, becomes a tool not just for damage control but for innovation and long-term resilience.

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