



From Rumour to Response: A Netnography of Organisational Sensemaking and Crisis Communication in the Age of Misinformation

Dorcas Kebenei¹ & Amon Kipyegon Kirui^{1,2}

¹Kabarak University, Kenya

²University of Venda, South Africa

Article History

Received: 14.07.2026

Revised: 10.10.2026

Accepted: 20.10.2026

Published: 29.10.2026

Keywords

African epistemologies

Crisis communication

Netnography

Rumour

How to cite:

Kebenei, D., & Kirui, A. K. (2026). From Rumour to Response: A Netnography of Organisational Sensemaking and Crisis Communication in the Age of Misinformation. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Communication Studies*, 5(2), 78-93.

Abstract

Organisations increasingly treat damaging rumours as misinformation to be corrected. This article argues that such responses fail when organisations mistake public sensemaking for falsehood, including those cases in which a rumour is simultaneously an authentic act of public sensemaking and an objectively false or malicious claim, so that the organisational task is to disaggregate the two layers of a rumour rather than to collapse one into the other. Drawing on organisational sensemaking theory, situational crisis communication theory and African scholarship that treats rumour as a form of public knowledge, it develops a framework of epistemic misclassification and borrowed authority, in which the type and framing of an organisational response makes its implicit classification of a rumour publicly visible. The framework is examined through a comparative netnography of three Kenyan rumour episodes that vary in epistemic status: a fabricated claim about Mount Kenya Milk (2025), a politicised allegation of contaminated sugar against the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS, 2025) and contested claims about Safaricom's handling of customer data during the 2024 Finance Bill protests. Across the three cases, denial backed by borrowed regulatory authority settled the fabricated claim, where the authority invoked stood outside the dispute; denial backed by the regulator's own procedures failed to persuade the opposition actors who had made the sugar claim; and legal denial of the Safaricom allegations coincided with documented influencer defections and the recurrence of the claim four months later. The study relocates crisis sensemaking to the point where organisational and public interpretations collide, shows that the effectiveness of denial depends on the trust environment of the authority invoked, and grounds crisis communication theory in African epistemologies of rumour. It closes with implications for relational, rather than purely corrective, responses to contested rumours.

Copyright © 2026





Introduction

A damaging rumour can reach millions within hours, and false claims often spread further than accurate ones (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Organisations have responded by adopting the vocabulary of the fight against misinformation: rapid denials, fact-checks, regulators and influencers enlisted to vouch for them. A substantial body of research supports this turn (Jin et al., 2020; Liu & Zhang, 2025; Lu & Jin, 2025). Yet the misinformation frame assumes the organisation knows the rumour to be false and that the public's problem is an information deficit. In many crises neither condition holds. Some rumours are fabricated; others are politically motivated and unverified; still others are grievances about matters the organisation cannot or will not fully disclose. This article argues that the decisive error in crisis communication under conditions of misinformation is not failing to correct falsehood but failing to recognise when public talk is something other than falsehood: a form of collective sensemaking about institutions that publics have reason to distrust.

Three qualifications sit at the heart of this argument. First, the framework does not treat rumours as either sensemaking or falsehood: a damaging rumour is often both at once, in that an objectively false or malicious specification becomes the vehicle through which publics also articulate a grounded concern about institutional conduct. The analytical move the paper develops is therefore not to decide whether a rumour is sensemaking or falsehood but to disaggregate the two layers in the organisational response, correcting the factual claim where it can be corrected while engaging the sensemaking the claim carries. Second, the account recognises that a rumour's objective falsity does not immunise it from this disaggregating step: a fabricated hoax typically travels because an underlying trust failure makes it plausible to publics, so the relational dimension of response applies even where the factual dimension is clear. Third, the framework does not advise organisations to validate false or malicious claims under the guise of relational engagement; the discipline of distinguishing the specific proposition from the sensemaking it carries is itself the operational safeguard against doing so, and the practical implications in the Discussion state this safeguard in operational terms.

Kenya provides a compelling setting. Kenyans participate in a dense digital public in which misinformation is woven into everyday news practice (Tully, 2022) and circulates through WhatsApp networks (Mudavadi et al., 2025). The 2024 Finance Bill protests showed the capacity of digitally networked citizens to contest official narratives in real-time (Ndone & Carpenter, 2026). At the same time, Kenyan publics encounter organisational and state communication against a background of contested institutional trust (Mare et al., 2019; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). In this environment the question of who holds the authority to declare a claim false is political, not technical.

The study's theoretical starting point is organisational sensemaking: the ongoing process through which actors notice cues, bracket them from the flow of experience and enact plausible accounts that make action possible (Weick et al., 2005). Crises trigger sensemaking at speed. On social media, organisational sensegiving enters an arena already crowded with public sensemaking in which users post, mock, verify and contest claims (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Mirbabaie et al., 2022). The classic sociology of rumour already defined rumour as improvised news, the meaning people construct together when institutional channels fail (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Shibutani, 1966). African scholarship extends this reading by theorising rumour's relationship to power: Ellis's (1989) account of radio trottoir describes rumour as popular knowledge production under institutional opacity, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) frames the authority to declare claims false as a contested exercise of epistemic power.



The framework's reliance on an independent determination of each rumour's epistemic status, through verification, source and motive, and evidential residue, requires explicit reconciliation with the decolonial reading of classification that informs it. The analytical move is not to arrogate to the researcher an epistemically privileged position from which to settle the truth of each claim and so to replicate the organisational classification practice the paper critiques. It is to perform the determination transparently, with reasoning and sources that any reader can audit, and to hold it analytically separate from the organisation's own classification, so that the two can be compared. The decolonial commitment is honoured not by refusing to make epistemic judgements, which would be its own form of evasion, but by refusing to make them in a mode that forecloses other readings and by making the apparatus of the judgement open to challenge. The methodological consequence, set out in full in the Methods, is that the paper's independent-verification procedure is reported in detail and that each case's epistemic status is treated as the researcher's defeasible reading rather than as a fact, following Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) insistence that epistemic authority is itself contested and that the task is to make its exercise accountable, not to pretend it has been suspended.

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) recommends denial when organisations are the target of rumour (Coombs, 2007). The present study qualifies this recommendation in three ways, developed as sensitising propositions. Proposition 1 holds those rumours and corrections both trade in borrowed authority: rumours gain force by appropriating institutional signatures, and responses reclaim them. Proposition 2 holds that borrowed authority works only when the authority invoked is trusted at that moment and in relation to that claim; the trust environment is distinct from SCCT's intensifiers, which concern the organisation itself. Proposition 3 holds that when an organisation classifies a contested rumour as settled misinformation, it addresses a question of fact while the public asks a question of allegiance, converting a credibility problem into a legitimacy crisis. Figure 1 traces the sequence: the type and framing of a response make the organisation's implicit classification publicly visible, publics read the response through their trust in the authority invoked, and where the two frames diverge, correction becomes a source of escalation.

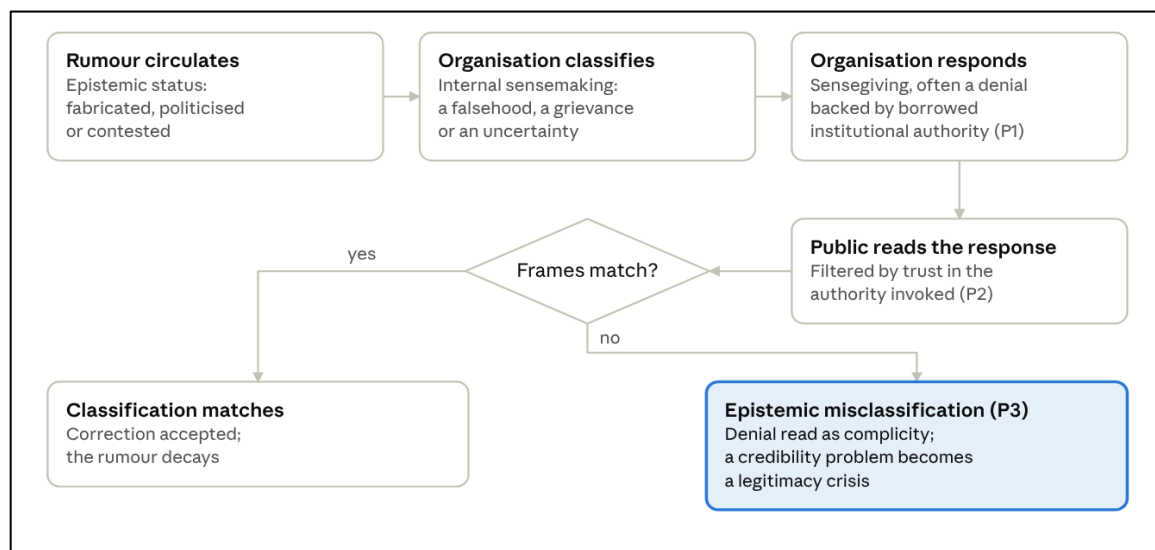


Figure 1: Responses fail where organisations misread the status of a rumour



The study pursues three questions. RQ1: How is the organisation's classification of a rumour visible in the type and framing of its response? RQ2: How do online publics make sense of rumours and of organisational responses to them? RQ3: Under what conditions does an appeal to institutional authority restore or erode organisational legitimacy?

Methods

Research design

The study adopts a comparative, multiple case netnography of three Kenyan rumour episodes selected to vary systematically in epistemic status. Netnography adapts ethnographic principles to the study of digital social life (Kozinets, 2020, 2023) and preserves the sequential, interactive character of rumour episodes that single-post sampling would lose. The design treats the type and framing of each organisational response as the observable trace of its implicit classification of the rumour, so organisational and public sensemaking can both be examined from the digital record without privileged access to internal deliberation.

Case selection

Cases were selected through theoretical sampling along two dimensions: evidential status (disproven or unresolved) and origin (interested source or affected public). Three of the four quadrants are occupied by cases that meet four criteria: a damaging rumour about a named Kenyan organisation; a dated organisational response; a visible public reaction on open social media; and occurrence in 2024 to 2025, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The three rumour episodes

Case	Organisation	Rumour	Status	Window
1	Meru Central Dairy Cooperative (Mount Kenya Milk)	A graphic bearing a news outlet's branding claimed that KEBS tests had found harmful chemicals in the milk	Fabricated	March to April 2025
2	Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS)	Opposition leaders alleged that 25,000 metric tonnes of unfit sugar had entered the market for repackaging	Politicised	July to August 2025
3	Safaricom	Users claimed that the company shared customer data and location information with security agencies during the 2024 protests	Contested	June to November 2024

Table 1 lists the three cases individually; Figure 2 below maps them onto the two sampling dimensions, evidential status and origin of the claim, and shows the unoccupied fourth quadrant that a future case could fill.

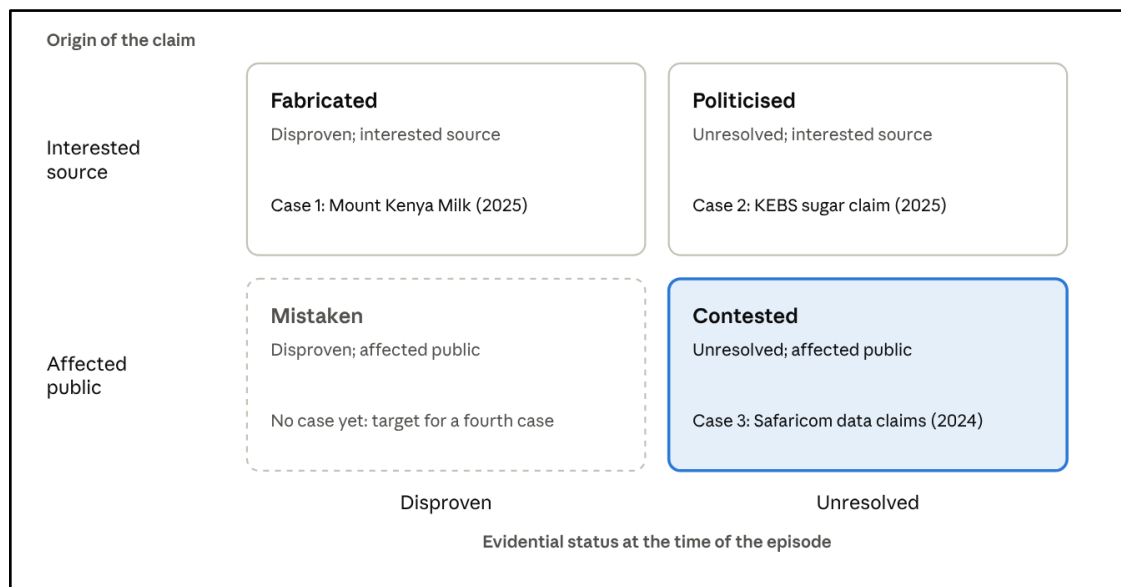


Figure 2: Two dimensions of epistemic status and the position of each case

The fourth quadrant, mistaken; disproven; affected public, is unoccupied for substantive rather than accidental reasons. Rumours originating with affected publics and later disproven do occur in the Kenyan digital environment, often around health or safety alarms; in the 2024 to 2025 window, however, they tended either to be absorbed quickly through voluntary correction within the originating community, and thus did not generate a named organisational response amenable to the design's inference, or to be absorbed into one of the other three quadrants once an interested actor amplified them. The absence of a case in this quadrant imposes two concrete limits on the framework's explanatory power. First, the framework's predictions for a rumour that is both popularly originated and demonstrably false, where the authority to disprove it is diffused across the originating community rather than concentrated in an institution, remain untested; the account of borrowed authority offered in Propositions 1 and 2 is likely to need revision in such a case because there is no obvious signature to reclaim. Second, the framework cannot speak directly to the conditions under which affected publics self-correct, which is a theoretically important case for any decolonial reading of popular knowledge production. Future comparative work should prioritise cases in this quadrant precisely because they would most sharply test the framework's assumption that borrowed authority is the dominant resource in rumour correction.

Data generation and analysis

The corpus comprises investigative data (public posts, replies, organisational statements, press coverage and independent fact-checks for each episode), collected manually and in platform-compliant ways from X, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube and news comment sections on *The Star*, *Capital FM* and *Nation* online. Platform selection followed four criteria applied to each case: (a) a documented role in the circulation of the rumour, established from preliminary scans of news coverage and fact-checks; (b) public accessibility of content without login circumvention; (c) support for the three traces the analysis required, namely organisational posts, replies and quote-posts, and reposts of fact-checks or press reports; and (d) terms of service compatible with non-commercial academic observation of public content. Search strategies combined organisation names, product or policy keywords and dated



hashtags: for Mount Kenya Milk, '#MountKenyaMilk', 'KEBS milk' and 'Tuko milk' between 20 March and 30 April 2025; for the sugar case, '#KEBS', 'contaminated sugar', 'Kalonzo sugar' and 'Mombasa sugar' between 24 July and 15 September 2025; and for Safaricom, 'Safaricom', '#RutoMustGo', 'data-sharing', 'court-order' and 'network outage' between 18 June and 30 November 2024. Private groups, closed WhatsApp channels and age-gated spaces were excluded a priori. The collection windows opened seven days before the first detectable trace of each rumour and closed thirty days after the final response. The researcher's immersive field journal, kept throughout collection and analysis, documents situated interpretation. WhatsApp content enters the corpus only where re-posted publicly.

The windows differ in length because the three episodes have different lifecycles rather than because the design treats them inconsistently. The Mount Kenya Milk and KEBS sugar episodes conform to a short, single-wave pattern in which a response was issued within days and public circulation subsided within four to six weeks; a window of around a month captures the full arc of each. The Safaricom case has a two-wave structure: a first wave in late June 2024, coincident with the Finance Bill protests, and a second wave in late October 2024, when a media report alleging real-time location sharing without court orders reactivated the claim and prompted a second company statement (Safaricom denies sharing data, 2024). To preserve the comparative logic, the Safaricom window was extended to close thirty days after the October statement rather than after the June one, so that both waves and the organisational response to each are included. The second wave is treated analytically not as a continuation of the first but as a distinct episode under the same classification, which allowed the design to test whether the June legal denial had settled the matter or merely paused it. This procedure keeps the day-window rule internally consistent across cases while registering that a contested rumour's lifecycle is longer than a fabricated or politicised one.

Each organisation's implicit classification is inferred from four features of its response: strategy (denial, correction, explanation, acknowledgement, silence), authority invoked, vocabulary used to characterise the claim, and audiences addressed. These inferences are triangulated against media coverage, executive remarks reported in the press and corporate disclosures. Each rumour's epistemic status is established independently of the organisation's account, using three tests: independent-verification, source and motive, and evidential residue. Analysis proceeds through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with abductive coding against three sensitising frameworks: SCCT response strategies (Coombs, 2007), paracrisis dynamics (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) and connective sense-breaking (Mirbabaie et al., 2022); themes are compared across cases using a case-ordered matrix.

Coding was undertaken by a single-researcher; to mitigate the resulting single-coder risk, each inferred classification was cross-checked against the triangulating sources listed above (media coverage, executive remarks, corporate disclosures) and against alternative readings recorded in the reflexive journal, rather than relying on inter-rater reliability statistics, which a single-researcher netnography of this kind does not support. A specific inferential risk follows from the design: the researcher must infer the organisation's implicit classification from public-facing texts without access to internal deliberation, and such inference is exposed to the standard dangers of hermeneutic over-reach, confirmation bias and retrospective coherence. Three safeguards address this risk directly rather than at the general level of coding reliability. First, the inference is anchored in four observable features of the response (strategy, authority invoked, vocabulary and audiences addressed) and not in any attempt to reconstruct intention, with disagreement among the four anchors recorded as such rather than resolved in favour of a dominant reading. Second, each inferred classification is triangulated against media coverage, executive remarks and corporate disclosures, which function as



external checks on the researcher's reading. Third, the reflexive journal records competing interpretations considered and set aside, so that the trace of alternative readings is available for scrutiny. The analysis therefore does not claim to have recovered an organisation's internal view; it claims only that the response as issued is consistent with a particular classification and inconsistent with others, which is a weaker and more defensible claim.

Rival explanations, ethics and limitations

Epistemic status is confounded with organisational type and political moment; the design addresses this through within-case comparison, exploiting the Safaricom case, where on 25 and 26 June 2024 the same organisation issued a legal denial of the data allegations and an apology for the network outage, holding organisation, moment and audience constant. The study follows AoIR Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (franzke et al., 2020) and complies with Kenya's Data Protection Act, 2019. No private spaces are entered; ordinary users are paraphrased rather than quoted verbatim; verbatim quotation and attribution are reserved for organisations, public officials and public figures acting in a public capacity. In the Safaricom case, no personal accounts of surveillance or detention are quoted or paraphrased, even where publicly posted. The researcher is a Kenyan health communication scholar whose doctoral research examined provider-patient communication in a major Kenyan referral hospital (Kebenei, 2025); a reflexive journal documents situated interpretation. Three principal limitations apply: the design cannot observe internal deliberation; open-platform data under-represent WhatsApp sensemaking; and three cases cannot support statistical generalisation, only analytical generalisation about the conditions under which responses to rumour succeed or fail.

Results

Case 1: A fabricated rumour and borrowed regulatory authority

The circulating graphic bore the branding of Tuko, a familiar Kenyan news outlet, which lent it initial credibility until Tuko disowned the graphic and the KEBS communications team flagged it as fake (Kamau, 2025). The claim circulated widely enough on Facebook and X to warrant both a formal regulator statement and an independent fact-check within days.

The cooperative issued a correction underwritten by borrowed authority. Rather than issue a text of its own asking the public to take the brand's word, it circulated signed statements from the Kenya Bureau of Standards and the Kenya Dairy Board, dated 24 March 2025, confirming that its products met the required safety standards (Kamau, 2025). The vocabulary was procedural and regulatory: KEBS flagged the circulating graphic as fake, and the brand owner's social post framed the matter around testing and compliance rather than reputation. The authority invoked was not the cooperative itself but two institutions outside the dispute, one of which (KEBS) was the body the forged graphic had impersonated. Audiences addressed were consumers through the brand's Facebook page and retailers through documents designed to be forwarded intact. Read against the four inference anchors, these choices are consistent with a classification of the rumour as fabricated misinformation whose falsity could be settled by trusted third parties.

Reception, as traceable from the public record, is consistent with this classification succeeding. The signed statements posted on 24 March 2025, together with the Africa Check verification shortly afterwards, are the point at which the circulation of the claim visibly subsided in Kenyan media coverage (Kamau, 2025); no further waves of the claim, organised consumer boycott or renewed regulatory action have been documented since. Within the limits of what secondary sources can show, the subsidence of coverage is consistent with the regulator-backed correction having settled the rumour, in line with Propositions 1 and 2: authority borrowed from institutions outside the dispute



reclaimed the signatures the forged graphic had impersonated. Absence of further documented circulation is not direct evidence of resolution, particularly given the corpus's acknowledged underrepresentation of WhatsApp traffic, and this reading should be treated as the best available inference rather than a confirmed outcome.

Case 2: A politicised rumour against a regulator

The sugar claim originated in a statement by opposition leader Kalonzo Musyoka on 31 July 2025, naming a specific tonnage (25,000 metric tonnes) and a specific routing (Mombasa port to a Western Kenya factory for repackaging) that lent the allegation an air of forensic specificity (Mwende, 2025). The claim was repeated in opposition press briefings over the following week and amplified on X.

KEBS combined denial with redirection. Its statement of 31 July 2025 asserted that no consignment of sugar unfit for human consumption had been cleared for release, described its testing processes as mandatory and rigorous, urged the public to disregard unverified and alarming information and directed concerns to its Wajibika na KEBS reporting platform (Mwende, 2025). The vocabulary characterised the claim as information to be verified, not as a grievance to be addressed. The authority invoked was KEBS's own procedure; no higher or independent body was cited, because none was available: in this dispute KEBS was both subject and arbiter. Audiences addressed were the general public and whistle-blowers; the opposition leaders who originated the claim were not addressed directly. These features are consistent with a classification of the rumour as politicised misinformation to be rebutted procedurally, without engagement with its political origin.

Reception, as traceable from secondary sources, shows no retraction by the originating political actors and no documented acceptance of the KEBS denial beyond the regulator's own circle. The claim continued to be referenced in opposition commentary in the weeks that followed. Within the limits of secondary evidence, this is consistent with Proposition 2: an appeal to the regulator's own procedures, in a dispute where the regulator was itself an object of partisan suspicion, could not settle the matter. Where no outside authority was available, procedural assurance did not displace a politically motivated allegation.

Case 3: A contested rumour and the limits of denial

Public talk during the 25 June outage and the days that followed treated the network outage, the documented abductions of protesters and the data-sharing allegation as a single pattern of institutional conduct rather than as separate incidents. Prominent Kenyan commentators with long-standing commercial relationships with Safaricom, including Mike Muchiri and the writer Magunga, publicly severed ties with the company via X, citing its perceived alignment with state agencies during the protests (Ngina, 2024). The ethical rule stated in the Methods applies throughout: no personal accounts of surveillance or detention are quoted or paraphrased here.

The influencer defections are reconstructed here from secondary-source reporting (Ngina, 2024) rather than from primary platform data: the public severance posts of Mike Muchiri and Magunga are referenced in the news report but were deleted or made otherwise unavailable before direct platform observation could archive them. Secondary-source reconstruction is adequate for establishing that the defections occurred and that they were publicly read as consequences of the data allegation, but it is not adequate for interpretive claims about tone, follower reactions or subsequent repair, which the present analysis therefore does not advance.

Safaricom's response unfolded in two moments that illuminate each other. In the statement of 25 June 2024, the company denied sharing customer data, framed the question in legal terms and invoked the



court-order requirement: We respect our customers' privacy and strictly adhere to Kenya's data protection laws and no court-order has been presented (Safaricom denies sharing customers' private data, 2024). The vocabulary was legalistic; the authority invoked was the law and, implicitly, the courts; the audiences addressed were customers through the media, regulators and legal observers. These features are consistent with a classification of the allegation as a settled falsehood refuted by a statement about legal preconditions. A second response in late October 2024 followed a media report alleging that real-time location data had been supplied without court orders; Safaricom supplemented the legal denial with a technical explanation, distinguishing call data records (generated after calls for billing) from live location tracking (Safaricom denies sharing data, 2024). The vocabulary moved from legal to technical; the audiences expanded to include technically literate critics. The classification implicit in this second response was of a resurgent misunderstanding requiring technical correction, rather than of a grievance whose political and personal stakes had deepened in the four months since the first denial. A third response in the same June week offers a within-case contrast. CEO Peter Ndegwa apologised for the network outage, acknowledged its scale and expressed condolences for those killed in the protests (Ngina, 2024). The outage was publicly classified as acknowledged service failure; the data allegation was publicly classified as misinformation to be denied. The two responses, held constant for organisation, moment and audience, make the organisation's classification choices unusually legible.

Reception diverged sharply across the two responses. The apology for the outage was reported with a measure of sympathy; the simultaneous denial of data-sharing precipitated the public severance of ties by influencers documented above (Ngina, 2024). The recurrence of the data allegation in October 2024, prompting the second company statement with a technical rather than legal frame (Safaricom denies sharing data, 2024), shows that the June denial did not settle the matter. Consistent with Proposition 3, publics appear to have read the legal denial as a statement about jurisdiction rather than about conduct, and the second statement did not retrieve the ground lost by the first. The within-case comparison supports the account: the organisation that was credible when it apologised for a service failure in its own voice was not credible when, in the same week, it answered an unresolved allegation as settled misinformation.

Three plausible rival explanations for the trajectory of the Safaricom response during the Finance Bill period require explicit treatment. First, the volatility of public sentiment on X during the protests may itself have driven the influencer defections and the subsequent recurrence of the claim, independently of how Safaricom classified or framed its response; the design cannot rule this out, and the within-case comparison of the apology and the denial issued in the same week, to the same audience and against the same sentiment backdrop, is the primary device by which the analysis attempts to hold public sentiment constant across the two responses. Second, behind-the-scenes public relations interventions, including backchannel engagements with influencers or paid repair work, may have shaped any recovery observed later; such interventions are not visible on the digital record and the analysis therefore makes no claim about them beyond noting the limit. Third, state pressure on both Safaricom and the originating critics may have shaped what was said publicly during the protest window, and in a context of contested institutional trust the possibility that an organisational statement is itself constrained by state actors is part of what publics appear to read into it; the paper's argument about epistemic misclassification does not depend on ruling this possibility out, but is strengthened by acknowledging that the trust environment of the authority invoked is itself shaped by such constraints.



Table 2: Cross-case matrix

Dimension	Mount Kenya Milk	KEBS sugar	Safaricom
Epistemic status	Fabricated	Politicised	Contested
Classification inferred from the response	Fabricated misinformation	Politicised misinformation	Unverified allegation treated as settled misinformation
Response strategy	Correction via borrowed regulatory authority	Denial plus redirection	Legal denial (June); technical explanation plus legal denial (October)
Authority invoked	KEBS and Kenya Dairy Board	KEBS's own procedures	Court-order requirement; industry technical standards
Vocabulary	Procedural and regulatory	Unverified and alarming	Legal in June; technical in October
Audiences	Consumers; retailers	Public; whistle-blowers	Customers; regulators; later, technically literate critics
Public trust in authority invoked	KEBS and Kenya Dairy Board trusted in the public record	Partisan contestation of KEBS's standing	Trust in courts invoked at a moment of mass protest against state conduct
Dominant public reading of the response	Correction accepted; rumour subsided	Denial contested along partisan lines	Legal denial read as deflection; influencer defections
Outcome	Rumour decayed within the window	Claim persisted in opposition discourse	Allegation recurred in October 2024; second statement issued

Taken together, the three cases are consistent with Propositions 1 and 2 in Case 1, where authority borrowed from unsuspected regulators appears to have settled a fabricated rumour. The sugar case qualifies Proposition 2: where no outside authority was available because the regulator was itself the object of suspicion, procedural assurance did not persuade the originating political actors. The Safaricom case is consistent with Proposition 3: an unresolved allegation answered as settled misinformation coincided with the escalation the framework predicts, with the within-case comparison (apology accepted, denial rejected in the same week) making the mismatch between organisational and public frames unusually legible. No case observed in this study contradicted the framework, though with three cases this is best read as absence of disconfirmation rather than confirmation.

Discussion

The analysis supports treating organisational and public sensemaking as processes that collide, rather than as parallel streams, and treating the organisation's response as the point at which its implicit classification of the rumour becomes publicly visible (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). This move makes the classification moment analytically available without privileged access to internal deliberation. Across the three cases, what the response treated the rumour as (fabricated, politicised, or settled) was legible from the response's four features, and the Safaricom within-case comparison showed that an organisation can classify two publicly adjacent events quite differently in the same week.

The findings are consistent with refining SCCT in two ways, subject to the limits of a three-case design noted above. First, the appropriateness of denial appears to depend on the epistemic status of the rumour. Denial backed by borrowed regulatory authority was effective in Case 1, where the rumour was demonstrably fabricated; the same strategy, backed by the organisation's own procedures, failed to settle the politicised claim in Case 2; and legal denial of an unresolved allegation in Case 3 coincided with documented influencer defections and the recurrence of the claim four months later. A rumour is not a single crisis type; it spans a range of situations, and the response repertoire must be matched



to the situation as well as to attributed responsibility. Second, the findings are consistent with the proposition that rumours and responses alike trade in borrowed authority, and that the value of such authority depends on the trust environment in which it is invoked. The milk rumour drew its force from forged institutional signatures, and the cooperative's response reclaimed those signatures through the regulators themselves. This pattern of authority laundering appears to work when the authority invoked stands outside the dispute, as in Case 1. It falters when the institution invoked is itself suspected (Case 2) or when it is bound up with a state whose conduct is the subject of public protest (Case 3). This complements experimental research on the source of corrections (Jin et al., 2020; Lu & Jin, 2025; van der Meer & Jin, 2020) by specifying a contextual condition that such designs typically hold constant and refines SCCT's prior-reputation intensifier: what mattered in these episodes was less the organisation's own standing than the standing of the institution it borrowed.

The contested case carries the paper's most important theoretical implication. When an organisation answers an unresolved allegation as though it were settled misinformation, it addresses a question of fact while publics ask a question of allegiance (Case 3). Under these conditions, epistemic misclassification converts a credibility problem into a legitimacy crisis. The paracrisis concept captures the public visibility of such challenges (Coombs & Holladay, 2012); the present finding is that what escalates a paracrisis may be less the visibility of the accusation than the mismatch between the organisation's classification and the publics. The within-case comparison in the Safaricom episode is instructive on this point: an apology spoken in the CEO's own voice for a service failure, issued the same week to the same audience, was received differently from a legal denial of a conduct allegation.

Within this account, a further distinction merits explicit treatment. A communication strategy that fails to persuade is one whose evidential or relational quality is insufficient for the audience to adopt the position offered, but which remains within the ordinary bounds of corporate dispute; a rumour that has mutated into an unresolvable political myth is a narrative that has been incorporated into publics' durable account of how an institution behaves, such that it functions as an element of political identity rather than as an open empirical question. The former can in principle be corrected by better framing and better evidence; the latter is prospectively unreachable by any single organisational response, because its persistence does not depend on the current state of the evidence. The Safaricom case sits between these two conditions. In October 2024 the technical reframing moved the dispute back onto evidential ground and extracted it, at least for the technically literate audience addressed, from the symbolic register of state-collusion. This suggests that the mythological reading is partial rather than complete, and that relational response can retard but not reliably prevent later resurrections of a politically motivated narrative. The theoretical implication is that organisations in contested political moments should expect contained reactivations and plan for sustained relational communication across cycles, rather than treating any single response as inoculation (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021).

The possibility that Safaricom's legitimacy crisis was structurally predetermined by public suspicion of state-collusion, independently of its classification choices, requires direct engagement. The within-case comparison is the strongest internal evidence against this reading. On 25 and 26 June 2024, in the same week, to overlapping audiences, Safaricom issued an apology that was publicly received with a measure of sympathy and a legal denial that precipitated the documented influencer severances. If structural predetermination fully explained the response trajectory, the apology should have failed in the same terms as the denial, because the structural condition of state-collusion suspicion was identical for both. The fact that the two responses were received differently suggests that classification choices operated on top of the structural condition rather than being overwhelmed by it. This does



not displace the structural condition: the ceiling on how far trust could be restored was almost certainly set by prior suspicion. But the floor from which the denial descended was set by the classification choice, and the framework's claim is about movement within those bounds rather than about the bounds themselves.

The decision to apply a single relational framework to both fabricated hoaxes and politically motivated institutional grievances also deserves explicit justification. The framework does not treat the two conditions as substantively equivalent, nor does it recommend the same response for each. What it treats as equivalent is the analytical move: in both conditions the organisation's response makes its classification of the rumour publicly visible, and in both conditions publics read that classification against the trust environment of the authority invoked. The framework's relational commitment therefore operates at the level of diagnosis, not at the level of prescription. For a fabricated hoax, the diagnosis authorises borrowed authority correction, because the relational task is to reclaim an institutional signature that has been impersonated. For a politically motivated grievance, the same diagnostic move authorises relational response, because the relational task is to engage with the public sensemaking the claim carries without legitimising the particular falsehood or exaggeration it may contain. The common framework thus unifies the diagnostic step while preserving the asymmetry of the practical responses it generates.

Much misinformation research treats belief in false claims as an informational problem amenable to correction (Ecker et al., 2022). The findings support a different reading in contexts of institutional distrust. Consistent with Shibutani's (1966) account of rumour as improvised news, and with Ellis's (1989) account of pavement radio, Kenyan publics in Cases 2 and 3 appear to have used rumour as a means of collective sensemaking about power, inferring from fragments and shared experience how institutions were likely to behave. Such sensemaking can be inaccurate in its particulars while remaining grounded in plausible perceptions of institutional conduct; treating it as an information deficit misreads the communicative situation. This gives empirical substance to arguments that misinformation research in Africa must be recentred (Mare et al., 2019; Tully et al., 2022) and to decolonial claims that the authority to define valid knowledge is itself contested (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Reading media culture from the vantage point of the Global South (Willems, 2014) is thus a methodological commitment, not a contextual note.

Practical implications. The first question in a rumour crisis should be what kind of rumour is this, and how are publics making sense of it, not how do we correct this. Three steps follow. Organisations should make rumour classification an explicit, documented step in crisis protocols, distinguishing fabricated from politicised and contested claims. Borrowed authority should be used with attention to its trust value in that moment: endorsements from unsuspected institutions may settle a fabricated rumour, while appeals to authorities implicated in the controversy may deepen it. Contested rumours call for relational rather than purely corrective responses: acknowledging the concern underlying the rumour, stating clearly what can and cannot be verified, and engaging publics in dialogue, an orientation that resonates with Ubuntu-based public relations (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2023). A safeguard follows directly from this orientation. Relational engagement with the concern beneath a rumour does not oblige organisations to validate claims that are demonstrably false or dangerous; its discipline is to engage the sensemaking rather than to endorse the specific proposition. For a fabricated hoax, the relational step is to engage the trust failure that made the hoax plausible to begin with, while unambiguously correcting the particular false claim through borrowed authority. For a politicised rumour that packages a false specification around a plausible concern, the relational step is to acknowledge the concern, correct the specification and name the asymmetry openly. For a contested



allegation whose factual status cannot yet be settled from the organisation's current knowledge, the relational step is to disclose what is known, what is not and what the organisation is doing to find out, without pre-emptive denial of what has not yet been investigated. The common thread is that engaging a concern is not the same as conceding a claim, and the discipline of distinguishing the two is itself the operational safeguard against legitimising falsehood or endangering operational survival.

Future research. The epistemic status classification should be tested across more cases, sectors and African countries. WhatsApp sensemaking warrants dedicated, ethically designed study (Mudavadi et al., 2025). As generative tools make institutional signatures cheaper to forge, research should examine how authority laundering evolves (Wack & Prochaska, 2026).

Conclusion

In an age preoccupied with misinformation, organisations face a subtler danger than falsehood: the temptation to treat every damaging rumour as a falsehood. Through a comparative netnography of three Kenyan episodes, this article has shown that correction backed by borrowed institutional authority can settle a rumour when the authority invoked stands outside the dispute, but can accelerate a legitimacy crisis when the authority is itself suspected or is bound to a state whose conduct is being contested. Rumours differ in epistemic status, and the same strategy, denial backed by institutional authority, can settle a fabricated claim while deepening a contested one. Authority laundering names how credibility is borrowed through institutional signatures and why outcomes depend on whether the invoked institution is trusted; epistemic misclassification names the error of answering a question of allegiance with a statement of fact. The lesson for organisations in Kenya and comparable contexts is not to abandon correction but to precede it with a harder question about what kind of rumour they face. Where the answer is a contested grievance, the more durable response is relational: candour about what is known and not known, and engagement with the concern beneath the rumour. In environments where institutional trust cannot be assumed, the authority to declare something false must be earned before it can be borrowed.

For organisations that currently lack pre-existing trust and therefore cannot credibly borrow authority at the moment a rumour breaks, the framework does not imply that communication is futile; it implies that the time horizon of communication must be extended. An intermediate strategy, deployable immediately in a given episode, has three steps. The first is restraint in classification: refusing to publicly settle, in the heat of the first wave, whether the rumour is fabricated, politicised or contested, and issuing instead a short public statement that acknowledges the circulation of the claim, names what the organisation can verify at that moment and what it cannot, and commits to a dated update. The second is targeted engagement with the publics most able to adjudicate the claim locally, through conversations that are documented but not performative, so that the organisation's reasoning is traceable without its uncertainty becoming a further object of ridicule. The third is a public dated update that reports what has been learned, including where the organisation's initial reading was wrong. This three-step sequence does not borrow authority the organisation does not have; it builds, within a single episode, the small reserve of credibility that future episodes can draw on. It is the shortest route from a position of no trust to one in which authority could, in principle, later be borrowed.

Declarations

Ethics. The study is a netnographic analysis of publicly available online content for each episode: organisational posts and statements, press coverage, independent fact-checks and comment threads on open platforms. It involves no interviews, no human-subjects experimentation and no entry into



private online spaces. It follows the Association of Internet Researchers' Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (franzke et al., 2020) and complies with Kenya's Data Protection Act, 2019. Verbatim quotation and attribution are reserved for organisations, public officials and public figures acting in a public capacity; ordinary users are paraphrased rather than quoted. In the Safaricom case, no personal accounts of surveillance or detention are quoted or paraphrased, even where publicly posted.

Data availability. The study draws on publicly available online content. To comply with platforms' terms of service and to minimise the exposure of ordinary users, the data-collection log is not publicly deposited. The anonymised codebook, case protocols, the researcher's dated reflexive journal and references to each archived item are available from the author on reasonable request.

Use of generative AI. The authors used Claude (Anthropic) to support literature search and bibliographic cross-checking against the Crossref and OpenAlex registries, and to copy-edit draft prose for clarity and consistency. All intellectual content, interpretive claims, methodological decisions and conclusions are the authors' own; the tool was not used as a source of substantive scholarly claims, to generate the response-side case analyses, or to draft the theoretical framework. The authors take full responsibility for the manuscript.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organisation reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, J. S. (2012). The paracrisis: The challenges created by publicly managing crisis prevention. *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 408-415.
- DiFonzo, N., & Bordia, P. (2007). Rumor psychology: Social and organisational approaches. *American Psychological Association*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11503-000>
- Ecker, U. K. H., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., Schmid, P., Fazio, L. K., Brashier, N., Kendeou, P., Vraga, E. K., & Amazeen, M. A. (2022). The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(1), 13-29. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-021-00006-y>
- Ellis, S. (1989). Tuning in to pavement radio. *African Affairs*, 88(352), 321-330. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a098185>
- franzke, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Jin, Y., van der Meer, T. G. L. A., Lee, Y.-I., & Lu, X. (2020). The effects of corrective communication and employee backup on the effectiveness of fighting crisis misinformation. *Public Relations Review*, 46(3), Article 101910. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101910>
- Kamau, W. (2025, April 9). *No, popular Kenyan milk brand did not fail toxic chemicals test*. Africa Check.
- Kebenei, D. J. (2025). Healthcare provider-patient communication and cervical cancer prevention and management in Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital, Kenya [Doctoral thesis, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology].
- Kozinets, R. V. (2020). *Netnography: The essential guide to qualitative social media research (3rd ed.)*. SAGE.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2023). Immersive netnography: A novel method for service experience research in virtual reality, augmented reality and metaverse contexts. *Journal of Service Management*, 34(1), 100-125. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-12-2021-0481>
- Lewandowsky, S., & van der Linden, S. (2021). Countering misinformation and fake news through



- inoculation and prebunking. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 32(2), 348-384.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983>
- Liu, J., & Zhang, L. (2025). Strengthening corporations' crisis readiness: The roles of corrective communication, employee backup and social media influencer in debunking crisis misinformation. *Journal of Communication Management*, 30(3), 461-485.
- Lu, X., & Jin, Y. (2025). Prebunking crisis misinformation online: The mediation effect of spokesperson connection and perceived correction quality on publics' communicative responses. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 33(2), Article e70048.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.70048>
- Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M. (2014). Sensemaking in organisations: Taking stock and moving forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), 57-125.
- Mare, A., Mabweazara, H. M., & Moyo, D. (2019). "Fake news" and cyber-propaganda in sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the research agenda. *African Journalism Studies*, 40(4), 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1788295>
- Mirbabaie, M., Marx, J., & Reimann, A. (2022). Rumor correction in social media crisis communication: A case of connective sense-breaking. *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction*, 14(2), 150-184. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1thci.00165>
- Mudavadi, K. C., Tully, M., & Lomoywara, D. B. (2025). Exploring Kenyans' interactions with misinformation on WhatsApp. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 13(1), 69-87.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579241269651>
- Mwende, S. (2025, August 1). KEBS dismisses opposition claim of contaminated sugar import. The Star. <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2025-08-01-kebs-dismisses-claim-of-contaminated-sugar-import>
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2018). *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429492204>
- Ndone, J., & Carpenter, N. (2026). Hashtags, protests, and polycrisis: A machine learning analysis of Kenyans' sentiments on the 2024 Finance Bill protests using X data. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2026.2617236>
- Ngina, F. (2024, June 26). *Kenyan influencers sever ties with Safaricom amid Finance Bill backlash*. The Standard.
- Ngondo, P. S., & Klyueva, A. (2023). Inviting an Ubuntu-based approach to public relations theory building in Sub-Saharan Africa. In C. H. Botan & E. J. Sommerfeldt (Eds.), *Public relations theory III* (pp. 374-392). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003141396-25>
- Safaricom denies sharing customers' private data. (2024, June 25). The Star. <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/realtime/2024-06-25-safaricom-denies-sharing-customers-private-data/>
- Safaricom denies sharing data without court orders. (2024, October 31). Capital FM. <https://capitalfm.africa/safaricom-denies-sharing-data-without-court-orders/>
- Shibutani, T. (1966). *Improvised news: A sociological study of rumor*. Bobbs-Merrill.
- Tully, M. (2022). Everyday news use and misinformation in Kenya. *Digital Journalism*, 10(1), 109-127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1912625>
- Tully, M., Madrid-Morales, D., Wasserman, H., Gondwe, G., & Ireri, K. (2022). Who is responsible for stopping the spread of misinformation? Examining audience perceptions of responsibilities and responses in six Sub-Saharan African countries. *Digital Journalism*, 10(5), 679-697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1965491>
- van der Meer, T. G. L. A., & Jin, Y. (2020). Seeking formula for misinformation treatment in public



- health crises: The effects of corrective information type and source. *Health Communication*, 35(5), 560-575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2019.1573295>
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146-1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>
- Wack, M., & Prochaska, S. (2026). Making sense of AI-generated disinformation: How audience interpretations influence the impact of deepfakes in Kenya. *Social Media + Society*, 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051261462092>
- Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2019). An exploratory study of "fake news" and media trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. *African Journalism Studies*, 40(1), 107-123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2019.1627230>
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>
- Willems, W. (2014). Beyond normative dewesternization: Examining media culture from the vantage point of the Global South. *The Global South*, 8(1), 7-23.