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 <https://doi.org/10.38140/com.v30i.9870>

ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)  
Communitas 2025 30:  
119-135

Date submitted:  
26 August 2025

Date accepted:  
27 November 2025

Date published:  
31 December 2025

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# A PUBLIC SECTOR REPUTATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S EASTERN CAPE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

## ABSTRACT

Reputation management was synonymous with the private sector until recently when public sector organisations, particularly in Europe and America, adopted the concept. This study's aim is to contribute to the scant body of knowledge on public sector reputation management, specifically in South Africa's Eastern Cape province. The study adopted a qualitative approach to gain an understanding of the public perceptions of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation. The findings were based on two participant observations and a purposively selected sample of 15 participants who were recruited from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media institutions, government departments, youth structures, and business organisations. The study utilised semi-structured interviews and participant observations as data collection techniques. The collected data was analysed thematically through categorisation and Leximancer software analysis. The results of the study show that the Eastern Cape Provincial Government lacks the capacity to manage its reputation strategically, resulting in increasingly discontented communities. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the public held negative views of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation. The Public Sector Reputation Management Framework, which was developed in this study, provides an understanding of how the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation could be strategically and sustainably managed.

**Keywords:** corporate reputation, public sector, public views, media publicity, stakeholder emotional attachment, leadership, legitimacy, social contract, SDG 16

## INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that a strong reputation has positive implications for public sector organisations (Wæraas & Maor, 2014). Luamo-aho, Canel and Hakola (2021) corroborate this viewpoint and posit that a good public sector

reputation is invaluable as public sector reputations affect larger entities, such as provincial or national government departments and entities that operate on a national or global scale that are characterised by huge revenue and workforce. However, most public sector organisations are characterised by persistently negative reputations (Munyoro & Magada, 2016), and are often depicted as slow, wasteful, too large, rigid, not sufficiently transparent and inefficient (Wæraas & Maor, 2014). While reputation plays an integral role in private organisations, Luoma-aho (2015) argues that public sector reputation remains an underused resource, as most reputation literature focuses on corporations. Konieczna (2010) concurs that the topic of corporate reputation within the public sector is new, and that it has not been discussed or researched much. In this regard, Luoma-aho and Makikangas (2014) argue that there are challenges in building reputation in the context of public sector organisations, which include the inherently political nature of public organisations, an inability to connect with stakeholders at an emotional level, and the difficulties complex public organisations face in trying to communicate a coherent message.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the reputation management of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government by answering the primary research question:

- ◆ How can the reputation of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government be strategically managed?

Furthermore, to answer the primary research question, three secondary research questions were formulated, namely:

- ◆ RQ 1: What are the publics' views of the corporate reputation of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government?
- ◆ RQ 2: What is the effect of media coverage on the Eastern Cape Provincial Government?
- ◆ RQ 3: What is the public's emotional attachment to the Eastern Cape Provincial Government?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation is one of the most important intangible assets of an organisation, and scholars such as Guru, Sanjeevaraja, Gopala and Parashivamurthy (2013) posit that its sustainability is contingent on the prevailing corporate communication practices of the organisation. In reference to the pivotal role of corporate communication, Luoma-aho, Olkkonen and Canel (2020) argue that expectations about the nature of communication within public sector organisations are changing from one-way information provision toward ongoing interaction and engagement. However, most public sector organisations have not been able to sustain these new demands.

While reputation remains understudied within the public sector environment, there is consensus among scholars (Fombrun & Low, 2011; Mazzola, 2006) that each organisation has a reputation, whether good or bad. To this end, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) argue that for many public sector organisations that struggle with a negative image related to rule-orientation, bureaucracy and inefficiency, reputation management is a promising tool. However, although corporate reputation has been a common thread in literature, Lange, Lee and Dai (2011) contend that a conclusive definition of organisational reputation as a construct has yet to emerge, despite numerous attempts to describe and integrate the definitions in use. This limitation in the conceptualisation of the concept still exists although academic and practitioner interest in corporate reputation is growing. For example, since the inception of the *Corporate Reputation Review Journal* in 1997, the number of scholars active in the field of corporate reputation has grown substantially, with heightened research outputs. However, scholars such as De Castro, López and Sáez (2006) state that without a uniform definition, the construct of organisational reputation has been assessed and applied in so many different ways that theory development has been weakened and generalisation across studies is limited.

The research undertaken by Fombrun and Van Riel (1997) appears to be the first effort in unifying the disparate knowledge base surrounding the concept of corporate reputation, by searching for a comprehensive definition to mitigate salient fragmentation in the conceptualisation of corporate reputation. These authors (*ibid.*) propose an integrative view on the conceptualisation of corporate reputation, which has been used across various literature studies, namely:

Corporate reputation is a collective representation of a firm's past actions and results that describe the firm's ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders. It gauges a firm's relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments.

## Public sector reputation

Public sector organisations have more difficulty in managing reputations because these organisations have trouble in connecting with the relevant publics emotionally, in presenting the organisations as unique, and in communicating as coherent organisations (Valentini, 2013). This challenge supports Luoma-aho's (2015) findings, which indicate that better-reputed public organisations would benefit society through public trust, attractive business, increased legitimacy, more fluent fulfilment of public policies guaranteed, enhanced public participation, empowered citizens and increased engagement.

Past studies have used the RepTrak® System to measure corporate reputation which, according to Fombrun, Ponzi and Newburry (2015), evolved from studies conducted by Reputation Institute since 2000. The RepTrak® System dimensions such as product and services, innovation, citizenship, governance, leadership, workplace environment and performance are positively associated with corporate reputation (Tay, Chan & Hasan, 2020) and have a practical relevance for tracking and analysing the reputations of public sector organisations. In addition, Fombrun *et al.* (2015) state

that all stakeholders and customers can be expected to develop perceptions of a company based on its performance, products and services. For example, Nixon and Mallet (2017) postulate that service delivery is one of the many factors that shape people's perceptions of government, and that service delivery has the potential to damage the perceptions of government; thus, compromising its reputation.

In this regard, Fourie and Poggenpoel (2017) state that the various factors that impede service delivery include incompetent public servants, a lack of accountability and innovation, poor human resources practices, inadequate procurement practices, as well as a lack of leadership. However, to offset these service delivery challenges, Luoma-aho (2008) postulates that reputation, as a concept, can be beneficial for public sector organisations as it interweaves stakeholder assessments with a record of past deeds, and offers a way to assess intangible assets that are valuable for organisational legitimacy. In highlighting the theoretical significance of public sector reputation, Luoma-aho (2008) adds a caveat – that public sector organisations should not aim at merely improving reputation, but also grassroots daily practices, which eventually shape reputation. According to Edwards (2015), these grassroots practices may be realised through citizen engagement in decision-making processes, improvements in public services, public sector integrity, anti-corruption measures, a professional civil service, and open government.

While organisations generally strive for a positive reputation, Fombrun and Low (2011) argue that when damaged, a weak reputation drives away customers and investors, and it also diminishes performance. Findings from a study by Bahr, Warburton, Gellecum and Shapiro (2010) suggest that different stakeholders bring different perspectives to corporate reputation, and that differences between stakeholder group views must be considered when assessing corporate reputation.

## Media impact

Organisations develop their reputation through the information that stakeholders gather via various media platforms (Kaul & Chaundhri, 2015). Consequently, news media can shape the public agenda by influencing public opinion, authorities and elites (Andrews & Caren, 2010).

The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and driving social discourse through various mechanisms such as agenda-setting, framing, and persuasive messaging. In addition, the media's influence is amplified in the digital age, posing both opportunities and challenges for informed public discourse (Gulzar, 2023). An example of this is found in a study by Ausat (2023), which suggests that social media has a significant role in shaping public opinion.

In this regard, Jones and Hadland (2024) argue that the South African government has had a turbulent relationship with the media, which increasingly attempts to hold it to account through its watchdog role for its actions since taking power in 1994. These authors (*ibid.*) further posit that this antagonism stems from a tension between the liberal normative understanding of journalism, the freedom of the press, its role in democratisation, as well as the African values of a development media with acquisitive

states. In this regard, Knudsen (2015) points out that political news increasingly focusses on negative evaluations. This negative media reporting on public sector activities adversely impacts the public's emotional attachment to their government.

## Emotional attachment

The emotional attachment that consumers develop toward some brands has attracted considerable research attention within marketing research (Vredevelde, 2018). Thompson, Bevan and Sparks (2012) write that the possibility that customers can develop emotional connections to brands is suggested and supported in marketing academic literature. Levy and Hino (2015) define emotional attachment as a construct that reflects a mental state or feeling connected or attached to a brand; namely, a holistic feeling toward a brand.

Marketing research has often viewed emotional attachment from the private sector point of view. Scholars such as Khan *et al.* (2016) point out that the private sector increasingly recognises emotional attachment as an essential aspect of marketing an organisation's offerings as there is a close relationship between emotional attachment and customer loyalty. Emotional attachment is an outcome of long-term relationships between service providers and customers, which occurs during the service experience (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and is a result of the company's holistic marketing efforts (Levy & Hino, 2015). A strong reputation signals trustworthiness to customers, which motivates them to attach themselves to the organisation (Engizek & Yasin, 2017). In similar vein, a study conducted by Levy and Hino (2015) indicates that one of the factors that motivate customers to choose and connect to a certain product or service is emotion. However, the emotional connection between a company and its customers is formed gradually.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm, which was deemed appropriate for conducting research that was exploratory in nature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tuli, 2010). A scientific investigation was conducted into the relatively under-researched topic of public sector reputation management, particularly that of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. The research design provided a blueprint for the collection and the analysis of the study's empirical data to answer the research question, including for the study's population and sampling approach.

### Population and sampling

A non-probability purposive sampling approach was considered as the most appropriate for this study, as it afforded the researcher the opportunity to identify cases on which the researcher had prior knowledge (Devers & Frankel, 2000). The researcher purposefully selected five organised structures that represented community members from diverse backgrounds. These structures included business, the media, youth, NGOs, and government officials from different geographical parts of the Eastern Cape province. Three participants from each structure were interviewed, providing a total of

15 participants. For participant observation, the researcher selected two community engagement sessions that the Office of the Premier had facilitated, which enabled the researcher to observe the interactions and views of the public towards the Eastern Cape Provincial Government.

## Data collection

The semi-structured in-depth interview was identified as a suitable technique to collect the data on the participants' perceptions of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation management (Bradford & Cullen, 2012; Evans, 2017). According to Moriarty (2011), in-depth interviews remain the most common data collection method in qualitative research as it is a familiar and flexible way of questioning participants about their opinions and experiences. A significant advantage of this data collection strategy was that a considerable quantity of data was generated from the interviews that lasted one hour each. In addition, the semi-structured interviews permitted adequate flexibility, which enabled the researcher to pose questions and the interviewees to respond freely to the topic being raised. Open-ended main questions and follow-up questions were asked only if a participant's response to the initial question did not cover certain topics of interest. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and the responses to each question were immediately transcribed verbatim.

Typically, themes from theory and literature are used to develop an interview schedule for semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule was divided into the following three domains of inquiry:

- ◆ Public views on the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's corporate reputation;
- ◆ Media impact on the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation; and
- ◆ Publics' emotional attachment to the Eastern Cape Provincial Government.

Data was also collected through participant observations. Kumar (2011) describes participant observations as a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place. The researcher observed two community engagement sessions that the Eastern Cape Office of the Premier (Provincial Government) facilitated. The researcher took field notes and noted each action that would enrich the data. Field notes and a recorder were used to capture the proceedings, which were transcribed verbatim after each participant observation. The transcribed notes from both the in-depth interviews and the participant observations formed part of the study's data analysis.

## Data analysis

### *Thematic analysis*

The first step in thematic analysis involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and the field notes (Evans, 2017). In this case, the researcher listened to the audiotapes and transcribed these verbatim.

The interviews and the observations were also transcribed in the same order as they were conducted as soon as the researcher returned from the field. This approach permitted the researcher to approach the data with specific questions in mind.

Step two entailed concepts and themes from the literature being used for the initial manual coding to determine whether what the researcher acquired from the interviews was the same as what was found in the literature review.

The third step of the data analysis involved a manual process of developing potential themes based on the literature and theory. Once the themes were manually developed, step four involved defining and naming the themes through the Leximancer software analysis. During this stage, the researcher reviewed, modified and developed the preliminary themes that were identified in step three. The researcher then further defined and refined the themes that were presented for analysis and analysed the data within these themes. Finally, once the researcher had gathered a relevant set of themes, a report based on the themes developed from the data was presented and highlighted on the concept map.

#### *Leximancer software analysis*

In view of the vast volume of data in this qualitative study, computer-assisted data analysis was used to assist with organising or categorising the data. The Leximancer software provided a text analytics tool that was used to analyse the content of the textual transcripts collected and to display the extracted information visually. The software is interactive and allowed the researcher to search, add, remove and merge terms directly, as well as the various data categorising functions automatically.

One of the fundamental conceptual qualities of the Leximancer software is its ability to perform both conceptual and relational content analysis. For the conceptual analysis, the transcripts were measured for the presence and frequency of concepts. Such concepts were words or phrases, or more complex definitions, such as collections of words representing each concept. Relational analysis measured how such identified concepts were related to each other within the transcripts. Leximancer measured the co-occurrence of concepts found within the text, automatically extracted this information, and represented the information visually for comparison. For each theme, the researcher conducted and wrote a detailed analysis as well as identified the narrative for each theme to determine how it fitted into the broader overall narrative in relation to the research questions and to ensure there was not too much overlap between themes.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth, informed insight into participant perceptions of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation. The research findings denoted that the reputation of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government was poorly managed, as all the participants interviewed in the study reported that they did not have a favourable perception of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. The

study's findings are discussed in the context of the conceptual framework as outlined in the Public Sector Reputation Management Framework.

## Public Sector Reputation Management Framework

The most significant original contribution of the study is the proposed conceptual framework, which outlines how the Eastern Cape Provincial Government can strategically manage its reputation; thus, consolidating the *social contract* and enhancing its *legitimacy*. It illustrates how the Eastern Cape Provincial Government as a public sector organisation could effectively bolster its reputation by zeroing in on positive public views, balanced media coverage, and positive public emotional attachment. Importantly, this conceptual framework can be empirically tested in future research. The original contribution of this study lies in the framework, as depicted in Figure 1 below. This framework provides the first step in enriching the academic scholarship on public sector reputation management. The extant literature has posited that public sector reputation has received scant academic attention in comparison to the private sector, and this study's conceptual framework sought to bridge this knowledge gap.

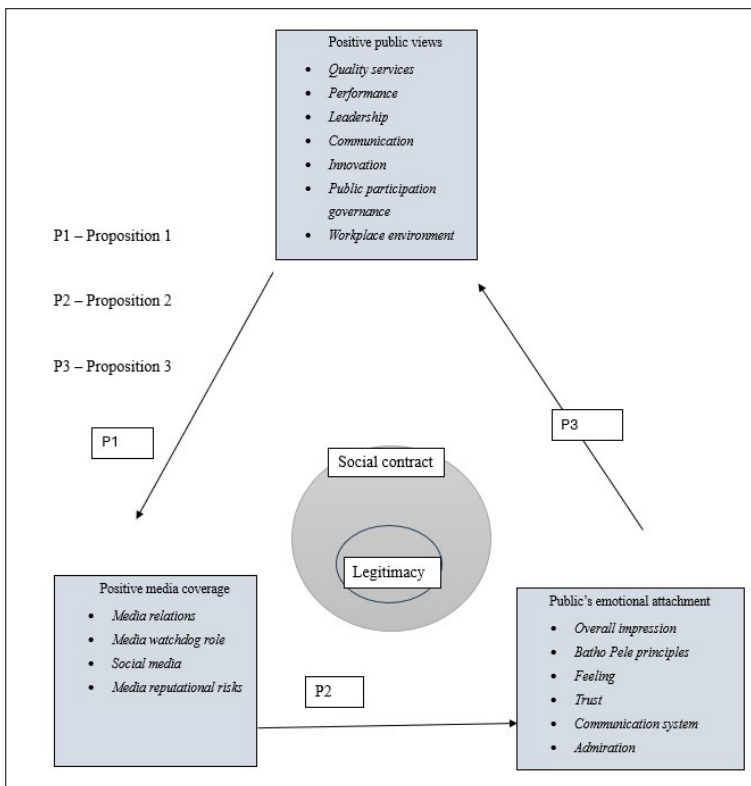


FIGURE 1: PUBLIC SECTOR REPUTATION MANAGEMENT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

(Source: Researcher's conceptualisation)

This conceptual framework can assist in reinforcing government efforts that seek to heighten the strategic management of reputation. Many public sector organisations are under pressure to deliver quality services to the communities they serve. Maleho, Conradie and Dondolo (2017) write that citizens often complain about problems associated with unemployment, crime and poverty. Consequentially, the local government and the provincial government sphere face high levels of protests related to service delivery issues, which signifies diminishing public trust and legitimacy. According to Van de Walle (2008), in the public sector, stakeholders' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with service delivery impacts on how they assess the reputation of this sector. As such, the Public Sector Reputation Management Framework provides the basic framework for government institutions to ameliorate their reputation management processes to gain acceptance and legitimacy.

Central to the proposed conceptual framework is the application of three constructs and attendant variables aimed at reinforcing reputation management of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. The Public Sector Reputation Management Framework provides a new strategic approach to how the management of reputations can improve the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's legitimacy and receive support in the implementation of its public policy framework. The goal of this conceptual framework is to empower the Eastern Cape Provincial Government with fundamental hegemonic acumen to build a *social contract* with the communities it serves.

To this end, the study's findings are discussed in line with three constructs as reflected in the conceptual framework. These constructs, which are further linked to variables from the empirical data and the related theoretical framework, including propositions that identify the interconnectedness between the three constructs, are illustrated in Figure 1 above.

## Construct 1: Positive public views

At the centre of the conceptual framework is *positive public views* that citizens hold about their government as it endeavours to fulfil its political mandate of providing quality services. Bèrdufi and Dushi (2015) argue that it is a democratic government's duty to act in accordance with society's will, and not against it. Managa (2012) states that when this duty is neglected, communities resort to protests.

This construct forms an important part of the conceptual framework as the positive views of the public inevitably engender the establishment of a *social contract* with the communities it serves and constantly fortify its *legitimacy*. The linked variables include:

- ◆ *Quality services, performance, customer service, leadership, communication, innovation, public participation, corporate governance, corruption and fraud, workplace environment*

The literature shows that good reputation results from all the perceptions and assessments that employees and the public form about an organisation regarding its performance, quality of services, innovation, public participation, good governance, workplace environment, leadership, governance and communication (Levy & Hino,

2015; Luomah-aho, 2015; Fombrun & Low, 2011). The study's findings indicate that, in general, people are of the view that the Eastern Cape Provincial Government has reneged on its electoral mandate of providing quality and sustainable services. In this regard, Maleho *et al.* (2017) postulate that services are fundamental components of corporate reputation, and a company's commitment to providing quality services should remain high, as this could enhance its relationship with its stakeholders.

Linked to the provision of services is the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's performance. For example, the empirical data showed that the delivery of quality services was adversely impacted by an embedded culture of poor performance. Poor performance reflected on reported poor customer service that was rendered to the people of the Eastern Cape. Public servants were reported to be lazy, inefficient, and lacking customer care, which was a manifestation of non-compliance with the principles of Batho Pele (People First). Various participants reported poor leadership within the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. Poor leadership was also associated with the lack of effective communication of government programmes, which created an information gap. The data indicated that the ineffective government communication within the Eastern Cape Government could further be attributed to the slow pace of innovation. For example, the Provincial Government had not meaningfully adopted technological innovations for the benefit of its citizenry. Furthermore, the Eastern Cape lacks basic infrastructure such as reliable electricity supply, roads and quality schools, which impede efforts to accelerate innovation.

The empirical data further showed that there were limited platforms for public participation in government programmes/planning processes. Public participation is a significant democratic platform that the government must provide through which citizens can participate in the decision-making processes to take ownership of and support government programmes. Most participants were of the view that the Eastern Cape Provincial Government lacked adequate platforms that potentially could enhance public participation. Generally, the participants did not feel part of the Provincial Government's decision-making processes. Managa (2012) opines that, as a result, citizens resort to protest action expressing their dissatisfaction and frustration because of their exclusion from decision-making processes, as well as the lack of accountability by government officials. In this regard, Graham (2020) argues that the opportunity for citizens to participate in the political process is key for a healthy democracy; therefore, it is important that appropriate procedures and mechanisms are in place to facilitate this participation.

Poor corporate governance was an important element that emerged from the empirical data, which manifested in the proliferation of malpractice cases and unethical conduct within government institutions. The data showed that the Eastern Cape Provincial Government lacked the necessary leadership skills, and leadership failure was ascribed to cadre deployment that encouraged unnecessary political interferences in administration processes. The data further showed that the Eastern Cape Government was experiencing a high employee turnover rate compared to other provinces, which was associated with an uncondusive *work environment*.

To build a strong reputation, the Eastern Cape Provincial Government could regularly assess the views of citizens and ensure that their basic needs are addressed. In addition to theoretical contributions, this study revealed that with the increasing demand for improved public services, the Eastern Cape Provincial Government should prioritise good performance and it must be responsive to the needs of the public. Based on this construct's findings, the following proposition is proposed in relation to other constructs as they reflect on the conceptual framework:

**Proposition 1 (P1)**

*If the public has positive views about the Eastern Cape Provincial Government, it is likely that the media will provide balanced coverage of government programmes (based on public views and media coverage constructs).*

## Construct 2: Positive media coverage

The second construct is media coverage, which is coordinated with the first construct. Regarding media coverage, the views of the public on how the government conducts itself will to a greater degree determine how the media reports on the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. In line with the agenda setting theory, the media plays a key role in determining what is at the centre of public discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

When citizens are not satisfied with government services; thus, they have negative views, this will be reflected in media coverage. In this regard, Einwiller, Craig and Carrol (2016) opine that stakeholders depend more on the news media to learn about reputation dimensions that are difficult to experience or observe directly and for which the news media are the main source of information. The linked variables include:

- ◆ *Media relations, watchdog role, social media, reputational risks*

The findings indicated that relations between the media and the Eastern Cape Provincial Government were generally poor, which was reflected in persistent negative media coverage of the Provincial Government. Poor communication was identified as one of the main contributors to the negative media coverage. According to the findings, poor communication from the Eastern Cape Government resulted in journalists investigating government-related issues; thus, fulfilling the media's watchdog role (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017). As such, the news media has become a strategic source of information for citizens and, as a result, has contributed to shaping the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation. This study highlighted that the effective management of media relations through consistent communication and transparency would potentially strengthen public sector reputation.

In the same vein, Agbo and Chukwuma (2017) posit that social media also plays an important role, allowing citizens to voice their opinions on government policies and programmes, as well as expose misconduct such as bribery and corruption. Social media is associated with reputational risk that government communicators must manage proactively. In view of this construct, the following proposition is highlighted:

**Proposition 2 (P2)**

*Positive media coverage of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government may result in an improved public emotional attachment to the Provincial Government (based on media coverage and emotional attachment constructs).*

### Construct 3: Public emotional attachment

Public emotional attachment is the third construct in the conceptual framework. It is a key construct that illustrates the bond that exists between customers and an organisation. The customer connection with an organisation generally provides happiness and security, which generates positive views. Emotional attachment can be a strong determinant of the long-term relationship between an organisation and its clients, which is characterised by the fulfilment of promises and expectations. This construct further highlights the fact that customers who are emotionally connected to an organisation will more likely have a positive attitude towards it. Furthermore, a strong emotional attachment will guarantee a *social contract* between an organisation and the community it serves. The social contract is an important basis for the creation of society, and it frames government *legitimacy*. As a consequence, a government will be legitimate only when it has been accepted by the people it governs, because it is the people who, through the *social contract*, grant legitimate power and authority to the government. The linked variables include:

- ◆ *Overall impression, Batho Pele, feeling, trust, communication system, admiration*

The empirical data revealed that there was poor public emotional attachment to the Eastern Cape Provincial Government. Due to poor performance and a lack of quality services, the participants generally held a negative view of the Eastern Cape Provincial Government, indicating that their trust in it had significantly diminished. Edwards (2015) corroborates these findings and argues that the available evidence points to a less than desirable proportion of the population expressing trust in governments. Correspondingly, the empirical data showed that the deterioration of trust could be attributed to poor customer service by public servants, who consistently failed to adhere to the Batho Pele principles. The data further showed that the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's communication system was not adequately coordinated to benefit the citizenry. In addition, the empirical data showed that the people of the Eastern Cape did not hold the provincial government in high esteem and would be less likely to recommend it to the next person. In relation to this construct, the following proposition is advanced:

**Proposition 3 (P3)**

*The public is likely to experience a strong emotional attachment to the Eastern Cape Provincial Government if they have positive views about how it conducts itself in fulfilling its mandate (based on emotional attachment and positive views constructs).*

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the contribution that the study makes to the body of knowledge, there are some limitations. This was a qualitative, interpretive study that relied on non-probability sampling, and, therefore, its findings cannot be generalised to the entire population. In addition, the study only focused on the Eastern Cape province; therefore, its geographical applicability is limited. Researcher biases might also have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the research data. However, to mitigate potential bias, the researcher adopted reflexivity to ensure that there was proactive circumspection of personal biases, subjectivities, choices and preconceived ideas that could adversely affect the collection and interpretation of the data. However, despite the limitations, the study still offers insights into how the Eastern Cape Provincial Government's reputation could be managed strategically.

Owing to the similarities among public sector organisations, the findings of this study could be applied to public sector organisations in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Future research in this area should focus on quantitative approaches to validate the findings of this study and to allow for the generalisation of the findings to other provinces in the rest of South Africa. To further offset the limitation of the qualitative data collection, future research could consider mixed-method approaches.

## CONCLUSION

This study introduced the Public Sector Reputation Management Conceptual Framework as an instrument to enhance public sector reputation management. The study extends reputation literature by demonstrating that public feelings and trust can enhance the emotional attachment to a government; thus, guaranteeing a positive public sector reputation. Importantly, this study has shown that, despite a dearth of literature and research on public sector reputation management, particularly within the South African context, literature on private sector reputation management could be used to develop an integrated framework applicable to both sectors. However, this approach should be considered with Agolla and Lill's (2013) caveat in mind that, because the two types of organisations differ in many ways, the transfer of concepts from one sector to another must be undertaken with caution. Despite these salient differences, this study contributed to public sector reputation management literature by demonstrating that some concepts and constructs from private sector reputation management could be applied to the public sector.

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