

THE STRATEGIC ROLES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS DURING COVID-19 CRISIS IN GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

In our current era of global interconnectivity, the significance of public relations (PR) in crisis management has become increasingly crucial. Government organization often face crises that demand prompt and strategic communication to minimize harm and uphold stakeholders trust. This study aims to examine the strategic roles of public relations in crisis scenarios by analyzing pertinent case studies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical data. The study utilized a systematic review methods, specifically examining publications both from quantitative and qualitative research published on Google Scholar from 2021 to 2024. The study focused on the following keywords: crisis management, public relations, communication strategy, and organizational reputation. Following the screening process, fourteen studies satisfied the criteria specified for this research. The results suggested that successful public relations strategies during times of crisis require prompt communication, openness, and proactive involvement with individuals or groups having a vested interest in the situation. This study enhanced comprehension of the crucial function of public relations in crisis management and provides practical insights for both public relations professionals and researchers. Subsequent investigations should delve into the changing dynamics of public relations in the era of digital technology and analyze its consequences for crisis management tactics.

Key Words: Crisis Management; Public Relations; Communication Strategy; Organizational Reputation

INTRODUCTION

Crisis management is essential to an government operations, encompassing the procedures and tactics employed to mitigate the consequences of unforeseen unfavorable events. Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication process that establishes mutually advantageous relationships between organizations and their audiences. It is crucial in crisis management (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). The connection between public relations (PR) and crisis management is based on the PR professionals' skill in creating and spreading messages that may effectively manage the story, uphold public confidence, and safeguard the organization's reputation in times of crisis (Ulmer et al., 2017).

Within crisis management, public relations serves as the primary line of defense, guaranteeing the dissemination of precise and prompt information to individuals with a vested interest in the situation. In the digital age, it is crucial to recognize the significance of news and information dissemination across many platforms at a quick pace (Austin & Jin, 2017). Efficient

public relations (PR) tactics can reduce the negative impact of crises, enabling organizations to bounce back faster and preserve their reputation among the public (Coombs, 2018).

Crisis management as a formal subject originated in the mid-20th century in response to the necessity of dealing with industrial catastrophes, natural disasters, and corporate scandals (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014). Throughout the years, numerous theories and models have been established to comprehend and direct the implementation of crisis management and public relations. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a fundamental theory that provides a framework for choosing suitable communication techniques depending on the nature of the crisis and the organization's previous reputation (Coombs, 2018).

The Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model is an essential framework combining risk and crisis communication to guide health-related events (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014). The ideas

mentioned above emphasize the significance of comprehending the crisis's essence, the impacted parties' requirements, and the most efficient methods of communication during stressful situations (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015).

Advancements in technology and changes in media consumption patterns have substantially impacted crisis management in recent years. Social media's emergence has revolutionized the dissemination and consumption of information, presenting PR professionals with opportunities and challenges (Austin & Jin, 2017). Social media platforms facilitate swift communication and interaction with stakeholders. However, they can contribute to quickly disseminating false or inaccurate information and worsening crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the pivotal significance of public relations (PR) in effectively handling health crises, wherein unambiguous and coherent communication played a vital role in ensuring public safety. Nevertheless, it also exposed deficiencies in readiness and the necessity for more resilient digital communication methods (Ulmer et al., 2017). The growing frequency of cyber threats and data breaches adds complexity to the field of crisis management, necessitating public relations practitioners to possess expertise in managing digital crises (Bowcut, 2022).

In the present age of digital technology, social media platforms have evolved into powerful instruments that empower content creators to interact with their audience and reveal facets of their lives. Influencers significantly impact their audiences, can significantly affect consumer behaviors, and shape trends due to their many followers. However, if influencers involve themselves in contentious issues, the consequences for associated brands could be substantial. The Blockout 24 campaign, which became widely known in Malaysia following a controversial video posted by TikTok user @Blockout2024, is a prominent illustration of this phenomenon.

After the MET Gala, TikToker @Blockout2024 posted a video on May 9th, encouraging users to block celebrities on social media using the #BlockOut2024 hashtag. This action aimed to impede these celebrities from earning revenue through advertising to protest their failure to address the Gaza crisis. The concept quickly spread to Malaysia, where social media users eagerly accepted it.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic review methodology, encompassing items potentially published between January 2021 and July 2024. According to Carrera-Rivera et al. (2022) systematic literature review is an approach that outlines a set of procedures for organising the review in a methodical manner. A comprehensive search was undertaken using multiple academic databases, such as Google Scholar, to discover research about crisis management and the involvement of public relations (PR). The research incorporated the following keywords: crisis management, public relations, communication strategy, and organizational reputation. These keywords were selected to accurately capture the main areas of interest and core aspects of the study.

Fourteen studies that met the research goals were selected after an initial screening process based on the title and abstract. Subsequently, a comprehensive assessment of the complete text articles was conducted. The study was guided by the critical research questions: "What are the most efficient public relations strategies in crisis management, as indicated by recent literature?"

The data extraction process involved gathering information from each article that was evaluated. This information included the publication date and year, authors, types of research, nation, methodologies utilized, and conclusions relating to the importance of public relations during crises. The study included articles that satisfied the specified criteria outlined in the systematic literature review table.

The final selection consisted of fourteen research: eight were empirical, utilizing surveys, content analysis, and case studies; four were qualitative, involving interviews and observations; two were theoretical frameworks; and one was a mixed-method study. From a geographical perspective, The research was conducted in multiple nations, encompassing the USA, South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, New Zealand, Portugal, Italy, and Indonesia. This varied assortment thoroughly examines public relations strategies in crisis management across many situations and regions.

This systematic research seeks to improve comprehension of effective public relations methods during crises, the influence of digital media on these practices, and the existing difficulties encountered by public relations practitioners. Further investigation is warranted to examine the changing dynamics of public relations in the digital era and its impact on crisis management tactics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the in-depth investigation of crisis communication and public relations methods in multiple research projects sheds light on an intricate terrain of possibilities and difficulties. The effectiveness of public relations is naturally influenced by the specific circumstances in which it is applied, demonstrating its immense value as a tool for handling emergencies and preserving the trust of those involved. Nevertheless, it has limits, such as the possibility of miscommunication and the difficulties in dealing with misinformation. In order to effectively navigate and utilise the influence of public relations in crisis management, research indicates the need for a comprehensive and diverse strategy.

Within the field of crisis communication education, the incorporation of practical simulations opens up a wide range of potential opportunities. Despite ongoing worries regarding the level of realism, these simulations can significantly improve learning possibilities, especially in intricate situations such as crisis management. The findings emphasise the significance of not solely depending on theoretical knowledge but also cultivating practical abilities. Combining practical simulations with known communication frameworks is emphasised to develop a well-rounded approach. The incorporation of simulations into the curriculum requires careful attention to pedagogical factors.

Moreover, the significant influence of crisis communication extends beyond the limits of organisations, giving rise to discussions concerning the changing character of public

relations and the function of institutions in society. The arguments revolve around the ability of traditional public relations strategies to adjust and develop in response to technological advancements. Organisations encounter crucial choices where incorporating digital communication tools and techniques will determine the future of crisis management. In order to maintain a leading position in successful communication, organisations and stakeholders must collaborate due to the unavoidable role of digital communication in public relations.

Research investigates the ethical ramifications and implementation of diverse public relations tactics in different settings, ranging from the United States to South Korea. The studies emphasise the significance of transparency and involving relevant parties, with generally positive views on proactive communication's function in crisis management. The research recognises the impact of different aspects on the efficacy of public relations, such as organisational culture, diversity among stakeholders, and communication mediums. Additional subjective research and comparison studies are required to address ethical concerns and improve responsible public relations techniques, increasing stakeholder trust.

Using digital tools in crisis communication highlights their capacity to enhance instantaneous communication, engage stakeholders, and control misinformation effectively. Nevertheless, these applications present difficulties, and research emphasises the need to handle ethical issues with caution while preserving a harmonious combination of technology and human connection.

FIGURES AND TABLES

Author, Date, and Country	Title	Method	Description
Olson, K. S. (2024), USA	Making it Real: Using a	Education al research,	According to Olson prospective PR professionals might enhance their ability to

	Collaborative Simulation to teach Crisis Communications	collaborative simulation	handle real crises effectively and confidently by engaging in practice within virtual scenarios.		Crisis Response		stakeholders, offering transparent and open information, and showcasing the organization's dedication to social responsibility" (Chang et al., 2023, p. 3762).
Hong, S., Kim, B., & Lee, S. Y. (2023). South Korea	A public health crisis in the university: Impact of crisis response strategies on universities' transparency and post-crisis relationships during COVID-19 pandemic	Mixed Method Research (Empirical study, surveys, and content analysis)	The primary objective of PR activities should be to effectively and promptly distribute precise information, actively involve stakeholders, and maintain a consistent message to establish confidence and credibility.	Abidin, M. Z. B. Z., & Ibrahim, M. S. (2023). Malaysia	Komunikasi Strategik dalam Pengurusan Krisis Kepimpinan Organisasi: Strategic Communication in Organizational Leadership Crisis Management	Case study and qualitative interviews	Strategic communication activities aim to effectively and promptly provide information, address issues, and demonstrate accountability to effectively handle and reduce the impact of leadership crises.
Liu, B. F., Jin, Y., & Austin, L. (2023). USA	Digital Crisis Communication Theory	Concept Paper	The authors emphasize the significance of prompt, open, and compassionate communication in handling public perception and upholding trust amid digital crises.	Lerouge, R., Lema, M. D., & Arnaboldi, M. (2023). Italy	The role played by government communication on the level of public fear in social media: An investigation into the Covid-19 crisis in Italy	Content Analysis	Implementing public relations methods that prioritize quick information, transparency, and active involvement with the public can effectively minimize panic and foster confidence. Public relations professionals should prioritize delivering unambiguous and coherent communications and effectively addressing public problems via various communication channels.
Zheng, Q. (2023). USA	Public relations in crisis: The role of public relations in addressing misinformation and maintaining trust	Empirical study, content analysis, and surveys	The results indicate that being proactive in communication, having a high media literacy level, and actively engaging with stakeholders is essential for preserving confidence and credibility.	Suder, M. (2023), USA	Impact of entrepreneurial orientation on performance and moderating role of crisis perception: Multi-method examination	Mixed Method Research (quantitative analysis and case studies)	Public relations techniques that prioritize transparent communication, active involvement of stakeholders, and proactive management of crises can assist organizations in effectively navigating crises and preserving their entrepreneurial orientation.
Morehouse, J., & Lemon, L. L. (2023). USA	Beyond reputational and financial damage: Examining emotional and religious harm in a post-crisis case study of Hillsong Church	Case study	Implementing successful public relations tactics requires sympathetic communication, recognition of shortcomings, and open and honest interaction with the impacted community (Morehouse & Lemon, 2023, p. 305).	Oon, J. X. (2023), Malaysia	The impact of sensational News on public perception of the Malaysian News Industry	Empirical study, surveys, and content analysis	The primary objective of PR strategies should be to establish trust with the public by engaging in transparent communication and proactive interaction. This approach will ultimately enhance the credibility of the news industry.
Chang, W., Weng, L., & Wu, S. (2023), Taiwan	CSR and Organizational Attractiveness: The Impacts of Crisis and	Mixed Method Research (Empirical study, surveys, and content analysis)	The authors highlight the significance of public relations, asserting that "Efficient PR strategies are essential for handling CSR-related crises." They contribute to the preservation of the organization's appeal by addressing the concerns of	Koswara, A., Nugraha,	Fostering strategic	Empirical studies, case	Public relations techniques that prioritize clear and open communication, active

A. R., & Damayanti, T. (2023), Indonesia	function of public relations - Corporate communication in corporate culture practices	studies, and qualitative interviews	involvement of stakeholders, and consistency with the principles of the organization aid in effectively managing crises and upholding a favorable company culture.
Park, S., & Choi, J. (2022). South Korea	Comparing public responses to apologies: Examining crisis communication strategies using network analysis and topic modeling	Empirical study, network analysis, and topic modeling	Through the examination of public feedback, public relations experts can customize their communications to specifically target issues, mitigate harm to reputation, and regain confidence. Efficient public relations (PR) procedures encompass comprehending public mood and employing data-driven methods to amplify communication endeavors in crisis.
Langaro, D., Loureiro, S., Schivinski, B., & Neves, H. (2022), Portugal	In the eye of the (fire)storm: better safe or sorry? Crisis communication strategies for managing the virality of online harmful brand-related content	Empirical study, content analysis, and case studies	Efficient public relations (PR) techniques encompass prompt and open communication, proactive involvement, and the utilization of digital platforms to address and resolve concerns promptly.
Lim, H. S., & Brown-Devlin, N. (2021), USA	The Value of Brand Fans during a Crisis: Exploring the Roles of Response Strategy, Source, and Brand Identification	Empirical study, surveys, and content analysis	The authors analyze the function of public relations (PR) in crisis management, emphasizing that PR practitioners have a vital role in mobilizing brand enthusiasts to act as advocates in times of crisis. Efficient public relations techniques entail actively involving devoted clients, harnessing their support to counteract unfavorable perceptions, and using their voices to bolster the organization's response's credibility. Establishing transparency and consistent communication are crucial factors in upholding the trust of brand enthusiasts and the wider public

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the comprehensive analysis of scholarly literature from 2021 to 2024 about the function of public relations (PR) in

crisis management uncovers valuable findings concerning successful PR tactics, the impact of digital media, and developing difficulties in the discipline. The examined research highlights the significance of prompt, open, and compassionate communication in handling emergencies and upholding public confidence.

During times of crisis, it is essential to connect with stakeholders proactively, clarify any misconceptions, and cultivate a resilient business culture. Research suggests that organizations that used transparent communication during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to reduce the adverse effects on their reputation and establish closer ties with their stakeholders. Incorporating digital communication tools, such as social media and instant messaging services, is vital for improving PR tactics by facilitating the quick spread of information and increasing stakeholder involvement.

Research indicates that public relations professionals play a crucial role in influencing public opinion during times of crisis, handling damage to reputation, and rebuilding trust. The function of public relations (PR) in crisis management has significantly transformed due to the growing utilization of artificial intelligence and data analytics. These technologies aid in forecasting impending crises and developing suitable strategies for reaction. The results suggest that government that implement complete public relations strategies incorporating simulations and data-driven methodologies are more proficient in efficiently managing crises. This technique aids in the immediate handling of crises and the subsequent recovery and establishment of a long-term reputation.

Government should prioritize actively engaging with stakeholders and ensuring transparency in their communication efforts during crises. This method encompasses not only information distribution but also stakeholders' active engagement in the communication process. Through proactive and frequent involvement of stakeholders, government can establish a reserve of positive sentiment that can be utilized in times of emergency. Effective and clear communication minimizes the adverse effects of false information and conjecture, which can worsen the crisis. During the

COVID-19 epidemic, government that offered regular and transparent communication regarding safety protocols, business continuity, and assistance for afflicted persons could sustain elevated levels of public confidence. Trust is essential because it reduces immediate harm to one's reputation and helps recover quicker after a catastrophe. Transparency encompasses the act of acknowledging errors when they happen and effectively conveying the measures being implemented to rectify them. This practice can significantly bolster credibility and inspire trust.

Utilizing digital communication tools is essential for promptly distributing information and engaging with stakeholders. In the current era of digital technology, channels such as social media, email newsletters, and company websites play a crucial role in crisis communication. Government should bolster their digital capabilities to handle communication amid crises proficiently. This entails maintaining a solid social media presence, ensuring the website is user-friendly and regularly updated, and providing real-time communication options like live chats or instant messaging services. Digital platforms enable government to promptly address rumors and misinformation, deliver precise updates, and interact with stakeholders individually. Social media platforms have been utilized during natural catastrophes to deliver immediate and up-to-date information, organize relief initiatives, and assist individuals impacted by the events. In addition, digital platforms provide bi-directional communication, enabling government to hear and respond feedback to stakeholders' feedback and concerns, preventing the crisis from escalating.

Public relations professionals should prioritize empathic communication by recognizing and addressing the concerns and feelings of impacted stakeholders. Empathetic communication entails comprehending and acknowledging the emotional and psychological effects of the situation on the individuals involved. This approach is especially crucial when the emergency directly affects individuals' livelihoods and welfare, such as natural calamities, medical crises, or government breakdowns that harm public. For instance, the Hillsong Church case study demonstrates how sympathetic communication can reduce emotional and psychological damage. Hillsong effectively managed its stakeholders during the crisis by empathetically addressing their concerns and emotions. Empathetic communication

facilitates the establishment of a rapport with stakeholders, ensuring that they feel acknowledged and appreciated, which is essential for preserving their confidence and assistance. It additionally entails demonstrating patience, engaging in active listening, and providing responses that respect their emotions and worries.

Integrating authentic crisis simulations into public relations training programs can effectively equip professionals to handle actual issues in the real world. Simulations aid in the cultivation of strategic communication abilities and bolster the capacity to handle real-life situations with assurance effectively. The training programs should be all-encompassing, addressing various crises, including natural catastrophes, cyber-attacks, and public scandals. By stimulating various scenarios, government can pinpoint potential vulnerabilities in their crisis management plans and enhance their overall preparedness. Simulations might expose deficiencies in communication routes, bottlenecks in information distribution, or a need for more cooperation across several departments. Government can improve and perfect their plans by addressing these difficulties in a controlled setting before facing a crisis. In addition, consistent training guarantees that every team member is well-acquainted with their respective duties and responsibilities in the event of a crisis, leading to a notable decrease in confusion and an enhancement in reaction efficiency. Government organizations regularly engaging in crisis simulations tend to be more prepared and resilient when confronted with disasters.

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