

Crisis Communication in the Digital Age: Analysis of Social Media Strategies for Reputation Recovery in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

A communication crisis and public trust that is not managed properly will become a serious threat to institutions because it affects the image and reputation of the organization, including becoming a serious threat to higher education institutions that can impact public trust and organizational sustainability. This study aims to analyze the implementation of effective communication strategies in the era of social media based on SWOT analysis in restoring the reputation of higher education institutions and identifying factors that determine the success of image restoration campaigns. The study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method at a state university in Kalimantan during the period of July-August 2025. Data was collected through crawling using the Brand24 media monitoring application with analysis of social media content, websites and online news portals (via Instagram and TikTok), monitoring of public sentiment using the Brand24 application, and analysis of engagement metrics. Data analysis used triangulation techniques to validate findings from various data sources. The implementation of measurable communication strategies through social media showed significant results with a 71% increase in positive public sentiment and a decrease in negative public sentiment to 4%. On the Instagram social media platform, it achieved an engagement rate of 140.1% with a total reach of 422,423 accounts, while TikTok achieved an engagement rate of 672.3% with 777 thousand views. Fact-based counter-issue strategies and promotion of the Tridharma program have proven effective in changing public perception and restoring public trust. Systematic and measurable social media management using a SWOT approach can be an effective tool in restoring the reputation of higher education institutions. The key to success lies in the consistent dissemination of fact-based content, active engagement with stakeholders, and regular sentiment monitoring.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The reputation of higher education institutions is an intangible asset that has strategic value in building legitimacy, public trust, and competitiveness in the higher education ecosystem (Larisu & Zulham, 2024). A positive reputation not only reflects academic quality and good governance, but also serves as social capital that strengthens the relationship between universities and their stakeholders. However, in the digital age characterized by information openness and rapid communication, institutional reputation has become increasingly vulnerable to the dynamics of public opinion in cyberspace (Asfia & Sari, 2024). Social media, with its interactive and highly viral characteristics, now plays a dual role: as a catalyst for the formation of a positive image and as a potential trigger or escalator of a reputation crisis (Erisher et al., 2014).

Communication and reputation crises in higher education institutions can arise suddenly and spread rapidly through social media, putting enormous pressure on credibility and public trust. In this context, the ability of institutions to respond quickly, measurably, and empathetically through digital platforms is a crucial factor in maintaining reputation sustainability (Sherrill, 2018). Inappropriate communication responses can worsen public perception, while careful crisis communication strategies can be effective recovery tools.

Empirical context The communication phenomenon behind this research is the reputation crisis experienced by a state university in Indonesia in 2025. The crisis was triggered by two events that occurred in close succession: an investigation into a number of professors and a fire in the rector's office building. Both issues quickly spread on social media, triggering a wave of negative sentiment and giving rise to various narratives that had the potential to erode the institution's credibility. This situation requires comprehensive issue mitigation, one of which is by implementing a comprehensive, coordinated digital communication strategy based on public sentiment analysis to restore public trust (Larisu & Zulham, 2024).

Studies on reputation management and crisis communication in higher education have been conducted extensively, but most focus on crisis prevention or reputation management under normal conditions (Hadijah, 2025). Research that specifically highlights post-crisis reputation recovery strategies through social media in the context of higher education in Indonesia is still very limited. The characteristics of digital communication, which are open, fast, and participatory, require a different approach from conventional crisis communication models.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What social media communication strategies did the higher education institution implement to restore reputation following a reputation crisis?; (2) How effective were these strategies in terms of engagement metrics and changes in public sentiment?; (3) What are the critical success factors that enabled the institution to recover public trust and restore institutional reputation in the digital space?

The findings of this study are expected to not only enrich the theoretical knowledge base on reputation management and crisis communication in the digital age, but also provide practical recommendations for policymakers and public relations practitioners in higher education to design communication strategies that are responsive, data-driven, and adaptive to the dynamics of the digital public sphere.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study method (Stake, 1995). Case studies were chosen because they allow for in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena in real contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and contexts are unclear (Woodside, 2010). The subject of the study is a state university in Kalimantan that implemented a post-crisis reputation recovery strategy. This university is characterized as a state higher education institution with more than 890,000 followers on Instagram and nearly 7,500 followers on TikTok during the study period. The objects of the study are social media communication strategies, content produced, and stakeholder responses on the Instagram and TikTok platforms during the period July-August 2025. Data collection techniques were

conducted through four methods: 1) Communication strategy documents, social media plans, and internal evaluation reports; 2) Social Media Content Analysis of content published on Instagram (42 feed posts, 315 stories) and TikTok (20 videos); 3) Social Media Analytics Metrics data from Instagram Insights and TikTok Analytics (followers, reach, impressions, engagement); 4) Sentiment Monitoring in the form of public sentiment data from the Brand24 application for the period July 27 - August 25, 2025. Data analysis used thematic analysis techniques and data triangulation was carried out by comparing findings from various sources (documents, social media content, analytics metrics, and sentiment monitoring) to increase the validity of the research (Pertti Alasuutari et al., 2008).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the institution successfully designed and implemented a structured crisis communication strategy in response to reputational challenges arising from two major issues, namely the investigation of a number of professors and the fire incident at the rectorate building. Baseline sentiment data measured on July 27, 2025, at the onset of the crisis revealed 62% negative public sentiment, 24% neutral sentiment, and only 14% positive sentiment, indicating a severely compromised institutional reputation requiring immediate strategic intervention. A SWOT-based situation analysis conducted during this critical period shows a strategic balance between internal strengths and external threats that influenced subsequent digital communication strategies (Stewart & Atilano, 2018). The institution's main strengths lie in its strong academic reputation, national and international achievements, internal community solidarity, and extensive social media infrastructure (88,079 followers on Instagram and 6,865 on TikTok). These baseline metrics served as crucial benchmarks for measuring the effectiveness of reputation recovery interventions. The study critically reveals that institutional strengths alone were insufficient to counteract the rapid spread of negative narratives in the digital sphere without coordinated, evidence-based strategic intervention. Details of the SWOT analysis and subsequent transformation outcomes are described as follows:

Table 1. SWOT Analysis of Digital Crisis Communication Strategies for Higher Education Institutions

Aspect	Description of Empirical Findings
Strengths	- Well-established academic reputation at the national and regional levels. - Solid and loyal internal community base (lecturers, students, alumni). - Ownership of official social media channels with wide reach (Instagram: 88,079 followers; TikTok: 6,865 followers). - The speed of the public relations team in identifying issues and building corrective narratives. - The credibility of university leaders recognized by the public.. - Limited human resources in the digital communications team, particularly in real-time content management.
Weaknesses	- Reliance on certain social media channels (mainly Instagram) limits message diversification. - Initial responses to crises are reactive and not fully coordinated. - Low level of integration between units in managing public messages..
Opportunities	- Academic events such as graduations and new student orientations as a means of reframing positive reputations. - Increased public trust in the transparency of information on digital platforms. - Active participation of students and alumni as co-creators of authentic content. - Social media algorithms that support the visibility of organic content with high engagement.
Threats	- The potential for derivative issues or negative framing from external parties. - Media trolling on Instagram and TikTok. - The spread of misinformation and hoaxes in digital public spaces that are difficult to control. - Intense media coverage that could prolong the effects of the crisis. - The risk of institutional overexposure, which could lead to skeptical perceptions.

Source: Data processed by researchers (2025)

On the other hand, the main weaknesses faced were the formation of negative sentiment in the digital public space and the limited capacity of the communications team to respond to a large-scale crisis. Strategic opportunities emerged through the momentum of graduation and new student orientation, which provided a positive context for reputation campaigns, particularly in increasing reach and engagement through twibbon content and the use of hashtags related to the organization's identity and tagline. Meanwhile, external threats included the potential for further issues, the spread of misinformation, and competing narratives with parties seeking to maintain negative framing.

Based on the analysis, the institution developed a communications strategy with three main pillars under the theme "Rise, Strong & Superior." The first pillar emphasized a fact-based counter-issue approach to reduce public misinformation. The second pillar focused on promoting the Tridharma achievements with broad impact to highlight the institution's positive values. The third pillar emphasized emotional engagement with audiences through inspirational content linked to key moments in academic life. This third content pillar was broken down into planned content angles, ensuring a focused and well-scheduled content.

This strategy is implemented through audience segmentation that utilizes a power-interest grid to group stakeholders based on their influence and interest in the institution. The government and regulatory bodies are categorized as keep satisfied, alumni and mass media as manage closely, students and parents as keep informed, and the general public as monitor. This segmentation allows for the tailoring of messages to the characteristics of the audience (Pedro et al., 2020; Strydom & Fourie, 2018).

In the implementation stage, the communication strategy was realized through digital content planning using a Google Calendar-based social media calendar to ensure consistency in publication. During the period of July–August 2025, 42 Instagram feed posts, 315 Instagram stories, and 20 TikTok videos were produced. The content types covered four main categories, namely informative (press releases, infographics, announcements), inspirational (testimonials and success stories), documentary (coverage of Tridharma activities), and interactive (polls and behind-the-scenes). Instagram was chosen as the main channel for narrative visual content, while TikTok was used to reach young audiences with dynamic and authentic short video formats..

Performance metrics show significant improvement across all quantitative indicators. On Instagram, total reach reached 422,423 accounts and total impressions reached 7,604,523, with an engagement rate by reach of 29.2%, well above the industry standard of 3–6%. The engagement rate by account reached 140.1%, indicating a high level of audience interaction with the uploaded content. On TikTok, performance was even more prominent with a total of 777,000 views, 46,145 total engagements, and an engagement rate by followers of 672.3%. A total of 74.3% of TikTok views came from the For You Page, indicating widespread organic distribution without the support of paid advertising.

Sentiment analysis using Brand24 from July 27 to August 25, 2025, indicated a significant shift in public perception. Positive sentiment dominated with 4,284 mentions (96%), while negative sentiment dropped sharply to 188 mentions (4%), a decrease of 171 mentions compared to the previous period. The peak increase in positive sentiment occurred during the graduation and new student orientation period..

High-performance content analysis shows that three posts stood out as catalysts for changing public perception. First, the "New Student Orientation – With Leaders" post on Instagram reached 143,646 accounts with 14,280 engagements and an 83% positive comment ratio. Second, the "Inclusive Education Program" post on Instagram reached 57,400 accounts with 5,475 engagements and a predominance of positive comments. Third, the "New Student Orientation – Student Perspective" content on TikTok recorded 21,000 likes, 2,590 shares, and 221 comments, demonstrating high viral potential. In general, the quantitative and qualitative results show that a well-planned digital communication strategy successfully reduced negative sentiment and significantly increased brand engagement in the digital public sphere.

The findings of this study demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT) in designing social media-based crisis communication strategies for the context of higher education in Indonesia. The fact-based counter-issue approach plays a central role in reversing the previously negative public narrative. The drastic decline in negative sentiment reinforces the proposition that speed, consistency, and transparency of information are the main determinants of successful crisis communication in the digital age (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020; Koparak & Yüncü, 2019). In this context, the publication of press releases related to the fire and the investigation of the professor demonstrates a balance between information disclosure and institutional narrative control, in line with the principle of openness in crisis communication theory (Seeger, 2006).

The success of Tridharma's promotional strategy also indicates that the cognitive and affective dimensions of reputation work synergistically. Inspirational content showcasing the achievements of the academic community, community service activities, and inclusive programs successfully built emotional resonance with both internal and external audiences. These results support the view that reputation is not only determined by rational perceptions of organizational performance, but also by emotional connections built through shared narratives and experiences. The high engagement rates on Instagram (140.1%) and TikTok (672.3%) indicate that the audience's affective participation is a strong indicator of sustainable reputation recovery (Asiedu et al., 2022; Suchman, 1995).

In addition to the content of the message, the success of this strategy was also influenced by the utilization of strategic momentum. The timing of the campaign, which coincided with graduation and new student orientation periods, served as an accelerator in strengthening positive exposure. These results reinforce the relevance of agenda-setting theory, which explains how organizations can shape public attention through timely communication (Dominic et al., 2023; Hadijah, 2025). The celebratory momentum served as a social context that amplified the acceptance of positive messages while reducing resistance to corrective narratives.

Interestingly, high metrics were achieved without paid promotion support. The fact that 74.3% of TikTok content distribution comes from the For You Page shows the success of platform algorithm optimization through content quality, publication timing, and the use of relevant hashtags. This phenomenon is consistent with findings regarding the relationship between early engagement and increased organic reach (Kuswati et al., 2025). Thus, the effectiveness of digital communication does not solely depend on financial investment, but also on the strategic ability to read the algorithmic logic of social media.

Another dimension that helps explain the success of reputation recovery is the transformation of internal stakeholders into brand ambassadors. Content featuring students and lecturers as authentic narrators has a higher response rate than institutional content. This can be explained through the concept of source credibility, where messages conveyed by sources that are considered credible and relatable are more persuasive in shaping public attitudes (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2020; Koparak & Yüncü, 2019). In this context, students and lecturers act as insider storytellers who are able to represent institutional values more naturally and credibly.

The implementation of a layered evaluation system—incidental, short-term, and periodic—demonstrates the organization's level of adaptability to the dynamics of public opinion. This approach is consistent with the principle of continuous improvement in crisis management, where every piece of public feedback becomes the basis for the next strategic adjustment. This mechanism allows organizations not only to react to crises, but also to learn from them to strengthen their communication capacity in the future (Brüggemann & D'amato, 2012).

Although quantitative achievements show impressive results—positive sentiment increased by 71% and negative sentiment decreased by 4%—reputation recovery cannot yet be considered complete. The ongoing investigation of the professor confirms that reputation is a dynamic social construct that is constantly being negotiated (Zavattaro et al., 2015). In the long term, the sustainability of an

institution's reputation depends on consistent communication practices that are transparent, credible, and adaptable to changes in the social context.

Conceptually, this study enriches the literature on reputation management in the higher education sector by demonstrating the relevance of combining corrective and image-enhancing approaches in the Indonesian digital context (Asfia & Sari, 2024; Erisher et al., 2014). These findings also underscore the importance of viewing social media not merely as a one-way communication channel, but as an interactive ecosystem where stakeholder participation is central to the formation of legitimacy and public trust. Thus, this study provides an empirical basis for a more participatory and socially engaged crisis communication model in an increasingly open and dynamic digital era (Fumasoli et al., 2020; Neves & de Oliveira Barbosa, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that SWOT analysis plays an important role as a conceptual instrument in designing adaptive, measurable, and evidence-based crisis communication strategies for higher education institutions. The main strengths of the institution lie in its established academic reputation, solid internal community, and social media infrastructure with wide reach. These factors become symbolic and operational capital in rebuilding public trust after a reputation crisis. Conversely, the prominent weaknesses in the form of limited communication team capacity and cross-unit coordination indicate the need to reformulate a more integrated and collaborative communication governance mechanism across actors.

Strategic opportunities arising from academic momentum and active participation of the academic community show that an engagement-based communication approach is more effective than conventional top-down strategies. Creative use of digital platforms enables institutions to transform routine moments such as graduations and student orientations into strategic events that reinforce a positive image. However, external threats in the form of misinformation and narrative competition in the digital space underscore the importance of speed, consistency, and transparency in every stage of crisis communication.

Theoretically, these findings confirm the relevance of integrating Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1997) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) in the context of Indonesian higher education. Corrective action strategies through the dissemination of fact-based information and bolstering strategies through the promotion of tridharma achievements have proven to work synergistically in changing public perception. In practical terms, these results indicate that the success of reputation restoration is not only determined by how quickly an organization responds to a crisis, but also by how deeply the organization involves its internal community as authentic brand ambassadors.

Thus, SWOT analysis does not merely function as a situational diagnostic tool, but as a reflective framework for directing resilient and sustainable communication design. Institutions that are able to strategically navigate the dynamics between strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats will have an advantage in building positive narratives, strengthening social legitimacy, and maintaining reputation sustainability in an increasingly competitive digital ecosystem.

This study has several important limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the temporal scope is limited to a two-month period (July-August 2025), which may not capture the long-term sustainability of reputation recovery outcomes and potential recurrence of negative sentiment during subsequent crisis events. Second, the study focuses on a single case institution, limiting the generalizability of findings across different types of higher education institutions with varying organizational structures, geographic contexts, and stakeholder compositions. Third, the sentiment analysis relied on a single monitoring application (Brand24), which may not capture all digital discourse occurring in local community forums, institutional alum groups, or alternative social media platforms prevalent in specific regions. Finally, the study did not account for external macro-level

factors such as media coverage in traditional news outlets or government policy announcements that may have independently influenced public perception during the study period.

Future research should consider the following directions: (1) Longitudinal studies spanning 12-24 months to assess whether reputation recovery achieved through social media strategies proves durable or whether institutions experience sentiment backlash during subsequent operational challenges. (2) Multi-case comparative analysis involving 3-5 universities with different organizational capacities and communication infrastructures to identify contextual variables that moderate communication strategy effectiveness. (3) Mixed-methods approaches integrating quantitative social media analytics with qualitative interviews of key stakeholders (senior management, communication professionals, student representatives, faculty) to understand implementation barriers and enablers not visible through digital metrics alone. (4) Examination of the role of traditional media gatekeeping versus social media influencer advocacy in amplifying or constraining institutional crisis narratives in the Indonesian higher education ecosystem. (5) Exploration of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics applications for early detection of emerging reputational threats in university-related discourse, enabling proactive rather than reactive crisis communication strategies. These research directions will advance both theoretical understanding and practical capability for managing institutional reputation in the rapidly evolving digital public sphere.

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