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**A Systematic Scoping Review of Crisis Communication Strategies among
Higher Education Institutions**

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Abstract

In times of crisis, effective communication is crucial for establishing credibility and providing assurance, which also applies to higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, this study aims to identify the types of messages commonly disseminated by HEIs during crises, determine the communication mediums used to reach stakeholders, and analyse the remedial strategies implemented to maintain stakeholder trust and reputation. This scoping review examined 29 articles extracted from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar databases, which were published between 2010 and 2024, focusing on crisis communication practices and strategies among HEIs worldwide. These insights offer valuable guidance for HEIs to enhance their crisis communication frameworks, ensuring they are better prepared to navigate future challenges and maintain stakeholder trust.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Governance, Higher Education Institution, Crisis Management

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1.0 Background

Crises continue to affect higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide, demonstrating how essential clear, timely, and consistent communication is for sustaining trust. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many HEIs suspended physical operations, affecting numerous higher education students globally. In Malaysia, approximately 1.285 million tertiary students were impacted by the abrupt shift to remote learning during the Movement Control Order (MCO). These disruptions revealed how uneven communication, unclear institutional updates, and inconsistent messaging can heighten anxiety among students, lecturers, and parents, particularly when information is scattered across different platforms.

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Crisis communication in HEIs is often discussed across three phases: pre-crisis, where institutions prepare communication protocols and designate channels; during-crisis, where timely and empathetic messaging becomes crucial; and post-crisis, where institutions work to restore confidence, address lingering concerns, and rebuild their reputation (O'Shea et al., 2022). The pre-crisis phase emphasises proactive planning and preparation as a foundation for effective crisis communication. The during-crisis phase is arguably the most scrutinised in the literature, with an overwhelming consensus on the importance of immediate and empathetic communication (Hocke-Mirzashvili et al., 2015; Kuzmina & Popova, 2024; Schwarz et al., 2024). At this stage, transparency and accountability are often emphasised, with regular updates seen as critical to maintaining trust (Liu et al., 2022; Ozanne et al., 2020). The post-crisis phase focuses on recovery and reflection. Moerschell and Novak (2019) noted that post-crisis communication should shift towards addressing residual concerns, repairing relationships, and managing the institution's reputation. These considerations point to the need for a crisis communication strategy among HEIs to manage crises, as it involves numerous stakeholders.

Unlike risk management and scenario planning strategies that are commonly practiced within the industry, HEIs often find themselves unprepared to face crises (Liu et al., 2022). This warrants an exploration of crisis communication strategies, which this scoping review addresses. Specifically, the study aims to identify the types of messages commonly disseminated by HEIs during crises, determine the communication mediums used to reach stakeholders, and analyse the remedial strategies implemented to preserve trust and protect institutional reputation. This synthesis provides a clearer understanding of how HEIs navigate communication challenges during crises and offers insights that may strengthen future crisis preparedness.

2.0 Literature Review

Crisis communication is essential in shaping how HEIs respond to uncertainty. Universities manage multiple groups of stakeholders who require accurate and timely information to make decisions and feel assured that the institution is in control (Moerschell & Novak, 2019). Past studies have highlighted that during crises, communication breakdowns can influence stakeholder anxiety, learning continuity, institutional reputation, and overall trust (Fortunato, 2021). This is especially true in contexts where information changes rapidly or where stakeholders depend heavily on digital communication.

Scholars such as Ozanne et al. (2020) and Moon et al. (2024) have examined how universities communicate during health emergencies, campus safety incidents, natural disasters, and reputational crises. These studies commonly emphasise clarity, empathy, transparency, and stakeholder-centred messaging. They showed that frequent updates, simplified information, and supportive tones help reduce confusion among students and staff. At the same time, inconsistent communication can create misinformation and distrust.

Several theoretical perspectives help explain how crisis communication functions. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory explains how message strategies are selected based on the organisation's level of responsibility and the type of crisis. This theory highlights the importance of adjusting messages to protect institutional credibility while maintaining openness with stakeholders (Liu et al., 2022). The Image Repair Theory and apologia approach also inform communication choices because institutions often need to explain, justify, or clarify decisions during and after crises (Martin & Van Stee, 2019). These strategies guide how messages can rebuild trust, mitigate reputational harm, and demonstrate accountability.

Across the literature, several message types have been identified in the context of HEIs. These include safety messages, warning messages, expressive and sympathetic messages, and spiritual messages. Each message type serves a different purpose and influences how stakeholders interpret institutional intent and preparedness. Tone, clarity, and emotional resonance are consistently highlighted as important elements of message construction. Studies such as Schwarz et al. (2024) and Mackert et al. (2020) also show that well-planned messages help stakeholders feel informed and supported even when the crisis is prolonged or unpredictable.

Although these studies provide useful insights, current research remains scattered. Many studies focus only on COVID-19 or single institutional events. Fewer studies offer a consolidated understanding of crisis communication across different crisis types, communication channels, and remedial strategies. This creates a gap in understanding how universities prepare for and respond to crises through a more integrated communication approach. Therefore, a scoping review is necessary to synthesise the patterns, strategies, and lessons reported in previous research.

3.0 Methodology

This study conducted a scoping review to map existing research on crisis communication practices in HEIs. This approach is appropriate for the present study because crisis communication in higher education is an emerging area with diverse methods, crisis types, and communication strategies. The scoping review framework also allowed the researchers to examine patterns across multiple contexts and provide an overview of how institutions communicate with stakeholders during times of crisis (Fig. 1).

The first stage involved formulating the research questions that guided the review. These questions focused on identifying message types, communication platforms and remedial strategies used by HEIs.

The second stage involved identifying the relevant keywords. The keywords were developed based on preliminary reading and consisted of three main terms which were "crisis", "communication" and "university" or "education".

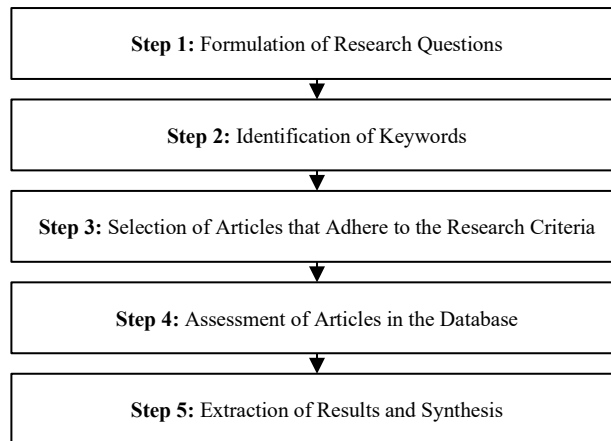


Fig. 1. Steps for Selection of Articles

First Keyword	Second Keyword	Third Keyword
'crisis' AND	'communication' AND	'universit*' AND/OR 'education'

Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases were used to identify articles published from 2010 to 2024, covering a period of 15 years. The initial search resulted in 68 articles. The titles and abstracts were reviewed to ensure relevance to the research questions. After removing duplicates and studies that did not meet the criteria, 29 articles remained for full-text review. The full screening process is depicted in Fig. 2 below.

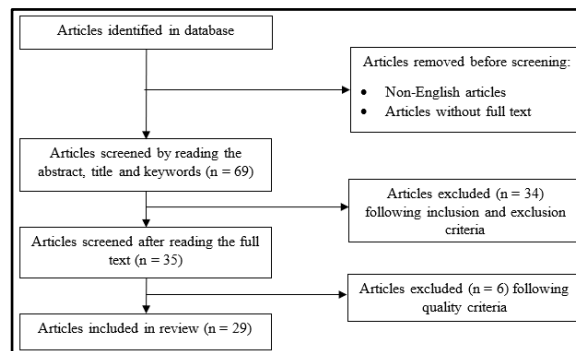


Fig. 2. Screening Process

The final stage involved extracting and synthesising findings based on recurring patterns across the reviewed studies. The articles were coded based on message types, communication mediums and remedial strategies. These categories were then grouped to reveal overarching themes that described how HEIs communicate with stakeholders.

4.0 Results and Discussion

This scoping review synthesised findings from 29 articles published between 2010 and 2024. The results are reported according to the three research objectives: (i) types of messages communicated during crises, (ii) communication mediums used by HEIs, and (iii) remedial strategies to maintain stakeholder trust and institutional reputation.

4.1 Research Objective 1: Types of Messages Communicated During Crises

Six types of crisis communication messages were commonly used by HEIs: spiritual, safety, warning, expressive, sympathetic, and "business as usual" messages. These message categories reflect the varied functions of institutional communication and the diverse needs of stakeholders during crises.

Spiritual messages are frequently used by religiously affiliated institutions, as noted by Omilion-Hodges and McClain (2016) and Fortunato (2021). These messages often invoked faith or prayer, with leaders expressing sentiments such as, "With God's help, we will get through this," or extending prayers to victims' families. However, while these messages could provide comfort and reassurance to some, they might not resonate with all stakeholders.

Safety messages were especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Biddix et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022; Mackert et al., 2020; Omilion-Hodges & McClain, 2016; O'Shea et al., 2022; Ozanne et al., 2020; Thelen & Robinson, 2019). These messages aimed

to protect stakeholders both physically and psychologically by advising adherence to health guidelines and encouraging students to stay off-campus. Live updates and real-time instructions on where and how to seek help were also common (Schwarz et al., 2024; Michelow et al., 2023). Safety messages risk becoming repetitive and may be perceived as performative if not followed by visible, concrete actions (Mackert et al., 2020).

Warning messages were used to alert stakeholders to immediate dangers in response to threats like campus shootings (Fortunato, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Omilion-Hodges & McClain, 2016; Ozanne et al., 2020). These messages urged stakeholders to take necessary precautions during high-risk moments, underlining the need for swift, clear, and decisive communication. As time progressed, warning messages shifted to combat misinformation with clear explanations and warnings against unverified information predominantly shared on social media (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

Expressive messages allowed institutions to express solidarity and compassion, fostering a connection with stakeholders (Schiffecker & McNaughtan, 2022; Schwarz et al., 2024). Expressive messages acknowledged the challenges faced by stakeholders (Slage et al., 2021) and demonstrated the institution's commitment to equity and well-being. Mackert et al. (2020) found that empathy-based messages successfully framed institutions as a source of support and safety, promoting collective responsibility. However, these messages risk being viewed as performative if not backed by concrete actions addressing systemic issues (Fortunato, 2021).

Sympathetic messages conveyed empathy and care. Leaders often acknowledged the difficulties stakeholders were experiencing. For instance, during university shooting incidents, top management would express their condolences to victims' families (Omilion-Hodges & McClain, 2016). During COVID-19, university leaders also reassured students and staff and expressed relief that stakeholders were safe (O'Shea et al., 2022). These messages played a crucial role in maintaining morale and trust.

"Business as usual" messages were frequently used by HEIs during prolonged crises like the pandemic (Biddix et al., 2023). These messages emphasised continuity in academic and administrative operations, seeking to reassure stakeholders that institutional functions would persist (Martínez-Cardama & Pacios, 2020). However, the insistence on normalcy, while comforting to some, might ignore the personal challenges faced by stakeholders and can also be perceived as unrealistic or "overpromising" (Mackert et al., 2020).

Hong and Kim (2018) revealed that narrative messages elicited greater attitudinal changes among stakeholders toward a university. This is particularly impactful when paired with an effective social media platform, as it helps enhance a university's public image, fostering trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control through a perceived conversational human voice. Thelen and Robinson (2019) similarly reported that audience engagement with social media posts was higher and more favourable when messages were constructed with a mix of rational and emotional appeals, as opposed to being solely rational or solely emotional to foster two-way communication (Schwarz et al., 2024).

4.2 Research Objective 2: Communication Mediums Used by HEIs

HEIs frequently employed a variety of communication mediums and platforms to increase engagement and distribution of information, ease accessibility, and improve connectivity to others to create a sense of community information (Hocke-Mirzashvili et al., 2015). This highlights the importance of adjusting communication strategies to reach stakeholders through multiple platforms (Moon et al., 2024; Ozanne et al., 2020). Table 4 depicts the common mediums used by HEIs to communicate with their stakeholders.

Table 4. Medium used to communicate with stakeholders

Medium Used	Count
Hashtags	2
Poster / Infographics	3
Pre-recorded Videos	6
Live Broadcasts	5
Social Media Posts	15
Emails	8
Instant Messaging	4
Radio	2
University Website	6

Social media emerged as the most used medium for disseminating messages (Schwarz et al., 2024). Hong and Kim (2018) and Hocke-Mirzashvili et al. (2015) suggest that when universities maintain active social media pages that provide official statements and updates, stakeholders develop more favourable attitudes towards the institution. The appeal of social media stems from the control it offers HEIs, allowing direct interaction with the public and the rapid delivery of crucial information.

During crises, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are often used to share official statements and press releases, either through a university's main page or via a dedicated crisis-specific page (Mani et al., 2023; Ozanne et al., 2020). Social media's ability to facilitate two-way dialogue with stakeholders makes it a preferred channel, as it helps dispel misinformation quickly (Mani et al., 2023). This can also be achieved through collaboration or by verifying information shared by official bodies, such as the Ministry of Health, through infographics, pictures, and re-shared press releases that add to the credibility of the university (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Furthermore, having university leaders present on social media during a crisis can provide comfort to stakeholders, reinforcing the sense that the issue is being taken seriously (Snoeijs et al., 2014).

However, social media enables the public to contribute through comments and tags, which means inaccurate information may spread. This underlines the need for constant monitoring to ensure that only verified and truthful information is shared (Ozanne et al., 2020). Despite this, Facebook has been identified as the preferred platform for obtaining real-time information, surpassing other methods such as email due to its timeliness (Ozanne et al., 2020).

Email remains an effective medium for delivering detailed information about a crisis, alongside official websites (Schwarz et al., 2024). These official sources are valuable in maintaining credibility, as stakeholders regard information from institutional channels as verified and trustworthy (Hocke-Mirzashvili et al., 2015; Ozanne et al., 2020).

Another medium that has seen growing popularity is instant messaging through services like WhatsApp. These platforms enable HEIs to deliver consistent messages to a wide audience, helping to reduce misinformation. Instant messaging is also considered more reliable than phone calls or email due to its accessibility and rapid transmission of information (Ozanne et al., 2020).

Lastly, several studies have shown that HEIs actively involve stakeholders through mechanisms like town hall meetings, surveys, and social media monitoring (Islam et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). These forums enable feedback and ensure that crisis responses remain relevant and adaptable. This is often practiced during the maintenance phase of a crisis, allowing stakeholders to ask direct questions that can increase the credibility of the institution (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022). By leveraging a range of communication tools, including social media, email, instant messaging, and stakeholder engagement, HEIs can remain responsive and maintain credibility during times of crisis.

4.3 Research Objective 3: Remedial Strategies to Maintain Stakeholder Trust and Institutional Reputation

Remedial strategies are a final component of crisis communication, which include stakeholder engagement, collaboration, and ensuring inclusivity. Collaboration with external agencies is a critical component of effective crisis management. Many HEIs align their communication with public health organisations and national health agencies to ensure that their messaging is both accurate and credible. In parallel, combating misinformation is a priority for HEIs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires HEIs to reshare accurate content from credible sources and use infographics to simplify complex messages and refute circulating rumours (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Live broadcasting and Q&A sessions, where healthcare experts engage directly with the public, address their concerns, and offer credible, factual information is a proactive approach that maintains the integrity of an institution (Moerschell & Novak, 2019; Schwarz et al., 2024).

Ingratiation, which involves using praise or appeals to shared values to gain favour, is a common strategy for fostering solidarity and loyalty during crises. For instance, universities have praised stakeholders or used emotionally resonant messaging to promote a sense of unity (Formentin et al., 2017; Mackert et al., 2020). However, the most effective approach combines apologies with concrete corrective actions, demonstrating a sincere effort to address underlying issues and rebuild trust (Martin & Van Stee, 2019).

Victimage is another strategy that can be employed post-crisis, where HEIs remind their stakeholders that the institution is also a victim of the crisis (Ozanne et al., 2020; Slage et al., 2021). In this strategy, the institution is placed in the inner circle of the stakeholders, where the crisis is viewed as being outside of the institution who is subject to outside societal pressures (Slage et al., 2021). Personal pronouns such as “we” or “us” are used to suggest that the institution is part of the public audience (Thelen & Robinson, 2019). This framing method can also be accompanied by formal apologies for not providing consistent information or by stating measures that are taken to improve the communication in future crises.

The adaptability of these strategies is demonstrated by institutions in using multichannel communication and personalised messaging. This ensures that stakeholders remain informed and engaged throughout the crisis, fostering a sense of trust. However, the reliance on digital platforms exposed significant challenges related to inclusivity, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who struggled with accessing the necessary technology for remote learning.

5.0 Conclusion

This scoping review synthesised the types of messages, communication mediums, and remedial strategies adopted by HEIs during crises. The overall findings indicate that HEIs rely heavily on safety, expressive, and sympathetic messages to reassure and support stakeholders, especially in the early stages of a crisis. These message types were consistently used to reduce uncertainty, encourage compliance with safety measures, and maintain a sense of psychological connection. The emphasis on empathy and sincerity reflects the broader expectation that universities not only share information but also acknowledge the emotional realities experienced by students and staff.

The findings also show that the choice of communication medium shapes how messages are interpreted. Social media, email, and official university websites remain central in crisis communication, largely because of their accessibility and immediacy. However, reliance on digital platforms highlights the need for HEIs to ensure that their communication strategies do not widen existing inequalities, particularly for stakeholders with limited technological access. The review also suggests that a combination of narrative content and rational information helps strengthen message effectiveness, which aligns with earlier research on the value of humanised communication during crises.

In terms of remedial strategies, the review highlights that collaboration with health agencies, transparent updates, and opportunities for two-way communication contribute significantly to sustaining trust. Strategies such as apology, corrective action, and timely clarification of misinformation help mitigate reputational harm. However, strategies like ingratiation and victimage should be applied carefully to avoid perceptions of insensitivity or deflecting responsibility. Overall, the most effective remedial strategies appear to be those that are transparent, inclusive, and supported with concrete institutional action.

This review also notes important gaps in the current body of research. The majority of studies focused on COVID-19, which limits understanding of crisis communication in other types of crises such as campus violence, natural disasters, policy failures, and reputational scandals. Most studies were also situated in the United States, leaving cultural and regional differences underexplored. In

addition, the heavy reliance on content analysis shows that there is a lack of empirical studies that examine how stakeholders actually respond to different message types or platforms.

Based on these observations, future research should explore crisis communication beyond pandemic contexts, including localised incidents that impact specific groups within HEIs. Comparative studies across countries or cultural settings would also offer deeper insights into how different audiences interpret crisis messages. Finally, more applied research that develops, validates, and tests communication tools or message frameworks could support HEIs in preparing clearer and more consistent crisis responses.

In conclusion, the findings from this scoping review reinforce that crisis communication in higher education is most effective when it is transparent, empathetic, inclusive, and supported by institutional action. HEIs should adopt long-term communication plans that emphasise readiness, continuous stakeholder engagement, and sustained reflection after each crisis. Strengthening these aspects would enable HEIs to not only respond more effectively in the moment but also build institutional resilience and trust over time.

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