

CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND RISK PERCEPTION: REPUTATION RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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Abstract

The phenomenon of crisis communication in the social media era demands fundamental changes in organizational reputation management strategies. This study aims to construct a new conceptual model that explains the relationship between crisis communication, public risk perception, and digital ethics-based reputation management. Using a qualitative approach based on a systematic literature review, this study examines more than 60 Scopus and SAGE-indexed scientific publications (2015–2024) to identify conceptual patterns and research gaps. The analysis shows that traditional crisis communication models oriented towards message control are no longer effective in dealing with the two-way communication structure of social media. Public risk perception is now mediated by the dynamics of collective emotions and engagement algorithms, which demand an empathy- and data-driven communication approach. This study proposes an Ethical Data-Driven Reputation Management (EDDRM) model that integrates three main dimensions: data analytics, public communication ethics, and social empathy. This model has implications for strengthening organizational social legitimacy through transparency, adaptive speed, and moral integrity. The study's main contribution lies in updating the crisis communication paradigm oriented towards public trust and balancing strategic effectiveness with ethical responsibility in the contemporary digital ecosystem.

Keywords : crisis communication, risk perception, digital reputation management, communication ethics, social media

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1. Introduction

The changing global communications landscape brought about by digitalization has fundamentally shifted the paradigm of crisis management. The rapid flow of information on social media means that the process of shaping public opinion is no longer mediated by press agencies or formal communications authorities, but rather by networks of users interacting with each other and simultaneously producing narratives. This phenomenon creates new vulnerabilities for organizations, where reputations can collapse within hours due to the digital amplification of minor issues that go viral. This information instability demonstrates that the concept of "message control" relied upon in classical crisis communications theory has lost its relevance (Akhyar & Pratiwi, 2019; Kim & Liu, 2022). This new reality demands that organizations understand crises not simply as events to be contained, but as dynamic processes that require adaptive and multidisciplinary responses. The linear communication model that positions organizations as the sole sender of messages is now being replaced by an interactive model based on complex social networks. Consequently, crisis communications strategies require a deeper understanding of digital social structures and the ever-changing dynamics of public perception. This transformation underscores the need for a conceptual redefinition of the relationship between crisis communications, risk perception, and reputation management in the digital realm.



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Public risk perceptions regarding an issue cannot be understood solely through an objective approach relying solely on empirical data, as psychological and social factors significantly influence how individuals interpret risk. The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) theory explains that risk messages circulating in the public sphere are amplified through social, emotional, and symbolic mechanisms. Social media amplifies this process by providing a space for collective emotional expression, accelerating the spread of panic, and creating biased perceptions of threats (Zhang, 2023). Digital interaction patterns create echo chambers that reinforce confirmation of dominant views and diminish the public's capacity to rationally evaluate risks (Cangara & Sultan, 2025). As a result, public perceptions of an organization's credibility are often determined more by emotional sentiment than by factual evidence. This phenomenon poses an epistemological challenge for organizations seeking to maintain their reputations through the dissemination of objective data, as factual truths do not always align with digitally constructed social truths. This gap highlights the need for an interdisciplinary approach combining social psychology, communication science, and network analysis to understand the formation of risk perceptions in the digital age.

An organization's reputation no longer rests on a static symbolic foundation, but rather on a dynamic and easily distorted network of public perceptions. Reputation is a social construct built from the accumulation of public experiences and expectations of an organization. In the era of social media, this accumulation occurs on a large scale and at high speed, making every digital interaction a potential reputation crisis point (Kahardja, 2022). The weakness of the organization's vertically oriented communication structure makes it difficult to adapt to the horizontal nature of social media, which demands a quick, open, and empathetic response (Sari & Chandra, 2025; Amrozi et al., 2024). A strategic framework capable of integrating digital sentiment analysis with ethical principles of public communication in a sustainable manner is lacking. When organizations fail to understand the emotional dynamics of the public, crisis communication strategies tend to be reactive and defensive, which actually worsens public perception. This is where the need for a predictive, data-driven reputation management model that prioritizes long-term stakeholder relationships becomes apparent.

This complexity is further exacerbated by the rise of misinformation and disinformation, which exacerbates reputational crises. False information systematically spread through bots, anonymous accounts, or coordinated campaigns can shape public perceptions of organizations. The effect is not only to undermine public trust but also to shift society's interpretive framework regarding the reality of the crisis. When the public trusts emotional narratives more than official clarifications, institutional credibility is eroded. This phenomenon highlights a research gap regarding the effectiveness of factual clarification-based communication strategies amidst social media algorithms that prioritize emotional engagement. Most previous research has focused on damage control and has not integrated algorithmic aspects into crisis communication design. Therefore, there is an academic urgency to develop new approaches that assess not only communication content but also the architecture of its information distribution.

In addition to cognitive and emotional challenges, there are also structural dimensions that complicate reputational risk management. The structure of social media networks displays non-linear interaction patterns where issues can jump across communities through unpredictable bridging nodes (Adi & Arijanti, 2025; Jin et al., 2014). This pattern explains why small issues can escalate into major crises through dense and uncontrolled social connectivity. The use of big data analytics and social network analysis is relevant for understanding these spread patterns and identifying strategic nodes of influence for communication interventions. Unfortunately, most organizations have not yet systematically optimized the potential of these analytics. A research gap emerges here: there is still limited empirical research on the effectiveness of integrating social network analytics and trust-



based crisis message design. The convergence of data science, communication theory, and social behavior studies presents a highly promising research area to address this challenge.

Meanwhile, traditional crisis communication approaches tend to assume public rationality and the stability of information systems, yet social media creates highly volatile communication conditions. The assumption that messages can be controlled through planned delivery strategies proves inadequate when faced with the viral and spontaneous nature of social media. Therefore, organizations need adaptive models that allow communication responses to be adjusted in real time based on changing public perceptions. Such models require the integration of real-time monitoring systems with decision support frameworks based on online behavioral data. Recent research indicates that organizations that implement adaptive systems are better able to restore public trust post-crisis (Zheng et al., 2018; Clemons et al., 2025). However, the academic literature still shows a conceptual gap regarding how such systems can be designed ethically without violating digital privacy. This gap highlights the importance of scientific exploration of the balance between response efficiency and communication integrity.

Reputational crises in the social media era also present complex moral and normative dimensions. As the public demands transparency, speed, and empathy, organizations often face a dilemma between information disclosure and protecting institutional interests. Crisis communications that are insensitive to the dynamics of public ethics can backfire in the form of moral rejection. Therefore, the ethical dimension must be positioned not as an add-on, but as a strategic foundation in any crisis response. Unfortunately, most empirical research still positions communication ethics as a secondary variable, rather than a determinant of successful reputational risk management. This gap highlights the need for a new paradigm that views reputation not merely as a symbolic asset, but as a moral reflection of an organization's relationship with its publics. Integrating ethics into crisis communication design is a crucial step toward sustainable social legitimacy.

These dynamics demonstrate that reputation risk management in the social media era requires a holistic approach that simultaneously combines psychological, social, technological, and ethical dimensions. A crisis is no longer simply an external threat, but rather a systemic phenomenon reflecting the complex relationships between organizations, the public, and digital infrastructure. Previous research has been fragmented, focusing on either communication or technology aspects separately, thus failing to produce an integrative model capable of fully explaining the relationship between crisis communication, risk perception, and reputation recovery. Potential research novelty lies in the development of a data-driven conceptual framework that considers the algorithmic dynamics of social media and the public's psychological biases in reputation formation. Therefore, this research is expected to not only bridge the theoretical gap but also provide practical contributions to the design of responsive, ethical, and sustainable crisis communication strategies in the digital era.

2. Method

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach based on a literature review, which aims to explore, identify, and critically analyze various theories, concepts, and relevant empirical findings regarding crisis communication, risk perception, and reputation management in the social media era. This approach was chosen because the problem being studied is conceptual and multidimensional, thus requiring in-depth exploration of existing theoretical frameworks to identify research gaps and formulate a new, more integrative conceptual model. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is oriented towards understanding the meaning and complexity of social phenomena, rather than statistical generalizations. Therefore, the literature review allows researchers to contextualize the relationship between crisis communication and risk perception within the dynamics of the



digital ecosystem by considering the intertwined psychological, social, and technological dimensions.

The research process began with the collection of primary and secondary academic literature from internationally indexed journals such as *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Risk Research*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, and various proceedings and reports from digital communication research institutions. Literature selection criteria included thematic relevance to the research topic, recency (at least within the last five years, 2019–2024), and theoretical significance to the issues of crisis communication and reputation management. This approach aligns with Snyder's (2019) view that a systematic literature review serves not only to map existing research findings but also to identify patterns, contradictions, and areas underexplored by previous studies. Therefore, this method is not passively descriptive, but rather analytical and interpretive, where each piece of literature is critically examined to identify potential new theoretical syntheses.

The analysis phase was conducted through thematic coding and conceptual categorization, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021) in their Thematic Analysis Framework. Each literature source was analyzed to identify key themes such as "digital crisis communication," "public risk perception," "algorithmic amplification," "digital communication ethics," and "data-driven reputation strategies." These themes were then compared across studies to identify patterns of conceptual convergence and divergence. This analysis was conducted using an interpretive approach, examining the meaning behind theoretical constructs and previous research findings to understand the logical relationships between conceptual variables. This approach strengthens the theoretical validity of the study because it not only relies on a summary of the literature but also assesses the underlying assumptions of each theory used by previous researchers.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, this study adopted the principle of source triangulation as proposed by Denzin (2012), namely by comparing findings from various interrelated disciplines, including communication, social psychology, risk management, and data science. This interdisciplinary approach is important because digital reputation issues are complex and cannot be adequately explained by a single perspective. Triangulation allows for strengthened interpretations through cross-confirmation between different theories and empirical findings. For example, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) can be juxtaposed with Social Amplification of Risk theory (Kasperson et al., 1988) to understand how crisis narratives are formed and amplified in the digital space. By combining these two frameworks, this study seeks to develop a new conceptual model for how organizations can simultaneously manage risk perceptions and reputation in the social media era.

The following table presents a summary of the methodological framework that systematically describes the stages of this literature research.

Research Stages	Activity Description	Academic Goals	Main Output
Literature Identification	Browsing journals, books, and research reports related to crisis communication, risk perception, and digital reputation (2019–2024)	Ensuring the relevance and currency of sources	Selected bibliography and literature database
Critical Evaluation	Assess the methodological validity and	Avoiding confirmation bias and strengthening	Evaluative notes and conceptual synthesis



	theoretical contribution of each study.	analytical rigor	
Coding and Categorization	Grouping literature based on main themes and variables	Building a thematic structure for in-depth analysis	Conceptual thematic scheme
Synthetic Analysis	Linking cross-disciplinary theories to form an integrative conceptual model	Finding novelty and research gaps	A conceptual model of crisis communication based on digital risk perception
Interpretative Validation	Triangulation of results with theory and empirical findings across fields	Ensuring the reliability and logical consistency of synthesis results	Theoretical contributions and recommendations for further research

All these stages result in a theoretical synthesis process that aims not only to repeat what is already known but also to challenge old assumptions and uncover new dimensions of the crisis communication phenomenon in the social media era. This literature review approach differs from conventional literature reviews because it contains evaluative and constructive elements, where each source is assessed not only for its content but also for its epistemological contribution to the development of crisis communication science. As stated by Torraco (2016), an integrative literature review serves as a foundation for the formation of new theory by combining conceptual elements scattered across various previous studies into a more coherent framework.

The methodological implication of this research design is the strengthening of conceptual dimensions that can guide further empirical research. By identifying existing research gaps such as the limitations of conventional crisis communication models in addressing the dynamics of digital risk perception this research contributes to the development of a new paradigm that combines data-driven communication strategies with public ethical sensitivity. Through a systematic and critical literature approach, this research not only enriches the scientific discourse on crisis and reputation but also provides conceptual direction for the development of adaptive communication strategies that can be operationalized in modern crisis management practices.

3. Results and Discussion

Revision of the Crisis Communication Paradigm in the Digital Era: From Message Control to Adaptive Public Dialogue

The development of social media has changed the basic assumptions of modern crisis communication theory. In the pre-digital era, dominant approaches such as the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs (2007) assumed an asymmetry between the sender (organization) and the recipient (the public). However, digitalization has eliminated this hierarchy and created a decentralized, two-way communication system, where the public becomes not only a consumer of information but also a producer of meaning. Research by Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar (2018) shows that 68% of multinational organizations failed to control the crisis narrative in the first 24 hours due to responses still based on the classical linear model. This data demonstrates the failure of the old paradigm that prioritized message control over adapting to the fluid and unpredictable dynamics of the digital public.

This change requires organizations to adopt the dialogic communication model proposed by Kent & Taylor (2002), which positions crisis communication as a collaborative



process between the organization and the public. This model assumes that public trust is built through openness, speed, and honesty in communication, rather than mere defensive clarification. In an empirical study by Liu et al. (2020) of 200 digital crisis cases in East Asia, they found that companies that implemented dialogic communication had a 37% higher reputation recovery rate compared to organizations that used the conventional message control model. This confirms that the success of modern crisis communication is no longer measured by an organization's ability to control the narrative, but by its capacity to adaptively manage public trust and perception.

Furthermore, the algorithmic dynamics of social media complicate the relationship between organizations and the public because algorithms tend to amplify content that evokes emotional engagement. As a result, rational organizational messages are often drowned out by more sensational content. In the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023), 62% of global respondents stated they trusted the narratives of ordinary users on social media more than official company statements. This epistemic imbalance requires organizations to understand that crisis communication now relies on the ability to build emotional resonance without losing factual integrity. The Adaptive Crisis Communication Model (Uysal, 2018) offers a new framework by combining real-time sentiment monitoring and empathy-based responses as a strategy to bridge this gap.

This paradigm shift also poses new ethical and epistemological challenges. As organizations attempt to adapt their messaging to digital dynamics, there is a risk of emotional manipulation that can blur the line between ethical persuasion and digital propaganda. Research by Aïmeur et al. (2023) highlights that 41% of organizations in digital crises use emotional reframing techniques that intentionally lower perceptions of moral responsibility. While this practice is effective in the short term, it actually undermines long-term trust because the public perceives insincerity. Therefore, the new paradigm proposed in this study emphasizes transparency-centered adaptability, namely the ability to adapt communication strategies responsively without losing normative integrity.

As a synthesis, the revised crisis communication paradigm in the digital age points to a model that combines adaptive speed, social sensitivity, and moral integrity. This new model views crises not simply as reputational threats but as opportunities to strengthen trust with the public through dialogic participation. The following table compares the characteristics of the conventional crisis communication paradigm and the adaptive digital paradigm.

Analysis Aspects	Conventional Paradigm	Adaptive Digital Paradigm
Communication Structure	Hierarchical, top-down	Open, participatory network
Strategic Focus	Message control	Co-construction of meaning
Time Orientation	Reactive	Predictive and responsive
Trust Base	Institutional authority	Transparency and empathy
Success	Message consistency	Speed, honesty and adaptation

Risk Perception and Public Emotional Dynamics: Psychological Foundations of Reputation Management in the Digital Space

Public risk perception is a psychological component that determines the direction of public opinion during a crisis. According to Slovic (1987), humans tend to assess risk not based on objective probability, but rather on fear, control, and familiarity with the threat. On social media, these factors are amplified by engagement algorithms that prioritize intense emotions. A study by Melki et al. (2021) confirms that social amplification of risk mechanisms



in digital spaces magnify the reputational impact of even minor incidents because emotional interactions between users serve as a catalyst for amplification. When an issue triggers collective outrage, it spreads exponentially without the need for strong empirical evidence.

This dynamic creates a paradox in crisis communication: the more organizations attempt to explain with data, the greater the risk that their messages will be ignored because the public is trapped by affective bias. Research by Pennycook & Rand (2021) shows that factual clarification without emotional acknowledgment actually increases perceptions of public cynicism by 28%. Conversely, crisis communication that includes emotional acknowledgment of the public impact, for example by demonstrating empathy for victims or a willingness to change, significantly reduces the intensity of negative reactions. Thus, an empathy-based approach is not simply an ethical choice, but an effective psychological strategy in moderating public risk perceptions.

Furthermore, the echo chamber and confirmation bias phenomena reinforce selective risk perceptions. According to Pennycook & Rand (2021), 57% of social media users only consume information from sources that reinforce their initial beliefs. This creates epistemic challenges for organizations, as clarifying messages fail to penetrate audiences already forming negative opinions. A psychographic segmentation-based communication approach, utilizing sentiment mapping and behavioral clustering, offers an alternative way to understand the heterogeneity of public perception. This strategy enables organizations to design contextualized messages tailored to audience values and affect.

However, psychological interventions in crisis communication present ethical challenges. Attempts to manage public emotions through targeted message design can risk being interpreted as manipulation. A 2023 report by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) emphasized that the line between persuasion and emotional exploitation is increasingly blurred in the digital space. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of ethical emotional framing, namely the use of empathy as a basis for authenticity, not as a manipulative instrument. This ethical model seeks to balance psychological effectiveness and communication integrity.

From the overall discussion, it can be concluded that public risk perception is the intersection of the psychological, social, and moral dimensions of crisis communication. Organizations that are able to manage perceptions by understanding the dynamics of public emotions have a greater chance of maintaining their long-term reputation. Therefore, effective crisis communication in the social media era requires not only information mastery but also in-depth emotional and psychological literacy of the public.

Integrative Model of Data-Based Reputational Risk Management and Public Communication Ethics

Modern reputation management demands the integration of analytical technology and ethical communication principles. A data-driven approach offers the advantage of identifying the dynamics of public perception in real time. According to Kim & Liu (2022), the use of social listening tools allows early detection of reputational issues up to 48 hours faster than manual methods. However, the effectiveness of this technology depends on an organization's ability to interpret data not merely as quantitative indicators, but as social representations of public perceptions and values (Veil et al., 2018). A data-driven approach without understanding the social context risks narrow and reactive interpretations.

The integration of data with communication ethics is a major challenge that has not been widely explored theoretically. Most crisis analytics models focus on technical efficiency, while neglecting moral aspects such as digital privacy, information fairness, and algorithmic transparency. Eriksson's (2018) study found that 43% of organizations using social media analytics lack an explicit ethics policy regarding the use of public data. This creates an ethical dilemma when collected data is used to manipulate risk perceptions or avoid accountability. Therefore, this study proposes an Ethical Data-Driven Reputation



Management (EDDRM) model, which emphasizes the integration of data analytics, public trust governance, and moral accountability.

Empirical evidence suggests that a crisis communication strategy that combines data analysis and public ethics leads to greater trust. A study by Lachlan et al. (2016) on global organizations found that implementing ethical transparency policies in digital reporting increased public trust by 34%. This means that ethics is not simply a moral norm, but a strategic component of reputational effectiveness. This integration creates a crisis communication model that is not only fast and efficient but also sustainable in maintaining social legitimacy.

From a conceptual perspective, this integrative model positions reputation as the result of a three-dimensional interaction: public perception (psychological), organizational communication (strategic), and algorithmic architecture (technological). This multidimensional approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how reputation is formed, eroded, and restored (Bukhar et al., 2021). Thus, this research contributes to the development of crisis communication theory by adding a new interpretive layer: that reputation is not solely managed through messages, but through an interacting ecology of data and digital morality.

In closing, this discussion proposes a conceptual model that combines data-driven insight, ethical governance, and public empathy as the three main pillars of reputation risk management in the social media era. This model emphasizes that successful crisis communication cannot be achieved solely through technological sophistication or speed of response, but rather through moral integrity that enables organizations to maintain long-term public trust.

Model Dimensions	Key Components	Success Indicators	Academic Contribution
Data Analytics	<i>Social listening, sentiment analysis</i>	Issue detection speed	Risk management efficiency
Communication Ethics	<i>Transparency, fairness, accountability</i>	Increased public trust	Social legitimacy of the organization
Public Empathy	<i>Emotional framing, authenticity</i>	Reducing negative perceptions	Emotional connectivity and long-term trust

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Crisis communication in the social media era marks a fundamental shift from a message-control paradigm to an adaptive and participatory dialogic model. Organizational reputation is now shaped not only by message content but also through continuous social interactions in the non-linear digital space. This transformation requires organizations to combine responsiveness with honesty and public empathy as the basis for social legitimacy. Literature analysis shows that conventional crisis communication models fail to anticipate algorithmic dynamics that amplify public emotions. Public risk perception has been shown to be more influenced by affective resonance than objective facts, making empathy-based strategies an effective psychological tool. However, excessive emotional exploitation has the potential to undermine an organization's long-term credibility. Therefore, the integration of data-driven analytical approaches and ethical communication principles has become a new epistemic need in digital reputation management. The proposed Ethical Data-Driven Reputation Management (EDDRM) model emphasizes the importance of synergizing public behavior analysis, empathy, and moral transparency. This approach not only minimizes



reputational risk but also builds sustainable trust. This research strengthens the argument that digital reputation is a simultaneous product of perception, algorithms, and organizational morality. Thus, effective crisis communication in the digital age must be rooted in ethical, empathetic, and data-driven adaptive responses. This paradigm paves the way for the development of.

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