

The Transformation of Public Relations Roles in Crisis Communication in the Social Media Era

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Abstract:

The transformation of the public relations (PR) role in crisis communication has become a strategic issue in managing educational institutions in the era of social media. Advances in communication technology present new challenges, where the flow of information moves rapidly, openly, and beyond the full control of institutions. This study aims to analyze how PR adapts in managing public communication and reputation crises through the use of social media as the main platform. The method used is library research by reviewing literature related to educational public relations, social media, crisis communication, and the dynamics of digital transformation. The findings show that PR no longer functions merely as an information disseminator, but rather as an active, responsive, and data-driven public relations manager. PR professionals must possess digital competencies such as creative content production, audience analysis, and real-time issue and crisis mitigation. Social media offers great opportunities for institutional branding, but also presents risks of negative issues and hoaxes that may harm institutional reputation. The implication of this study underscores the necessity for educational institutions to strengthen PR capacity through digital literacy training, develop proactive crisis communication frameworks, and integrate ethical communication principles to sustain public trust and institutional credibility. This study emphasizes that the transformation of the PR role is a key determinant in sustaining the reputation of educational institutions amid increasing competition and the complex dynamics of digital communication.

Kata Kunci: *educational public relations, crisis communication, social media, digital transformation*

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has significantly transformed the patterns of interaction between organizations and the public (Liu & Yuan, 2015; Mahmood, Weerakkody, & Chen, 2020; Soean, Nur, & Wekke, 2022). Social media has become the primary space for society to access information and express opinions quickly and massively (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Yunas, 2024). In this era, the role of Public Relations (PR) is no longer limited to one-way communication through traditional media, but also demands skills in managing interactive two-way communication. The digital transformation of public communication presents great opportunities for organizations to build a positive image and closeness with the public (Reinikainen & Valentini, 2023; Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2023). However, the speed of information flow also brings serious challenges, especially when a crisis occurs that can damage an organization's reputation within seconds. Therefore, PR professionals are required to adapt to the dynamics of social media to maintain institutional image stability.

Social media causes public issues and problems to escalate rapidly and uncontrollably (Abbas, Wang, Su, & Ziapour, 2021; Chen, Chen, & Xia, 2022; Gui, Kou, Pine, & Chen, 2017). Crises that once required time to spread can now go viral within minutes and trigger public panic (Fletcher & Aunger, 2024; Naeem & Ozuem, 2022; Richards, Briggs, & Axe, 2020). In such situations, PR holds a strategic role as an information controller and mediator between the organization and its audience. Transparency, speed, and accuracy of communication become key elements in managing crises in the digital public sphere. Failure to provide an effective response may worsen the situation and create distrust toward the institution. Thus, transforming the role of PR in crisis communication has become an urgent necessity in facing the challenges of the digital era.

On the other hand, the use of social media in crisis communication also provides opportunities for PR to demonstrate openness, accountability, and responsive public service. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok can serve as channels for delivering clarifications or public advisories quickly and to a wide audience. With the right communication strategies, PR can reduce conflict escalation and restore public trust effectively. The digital era offers organizations the space to showcase professional and transparent crisis management. Therefore, digital literacy and creativity have become essential competencies for modern PR practitioners in carrying out their functions.

The problem that arises today is that not all organizations are optimally prepared to transform in handling crises on social media. Delayed responses, lack of digital content monitoring, and limited human resource competencies in managing public issues often lead to failures in crisis communication. Moreover, many institutions still rely on conventional communication strategies that are less relevant to the characteristics of digital media. These issues create obstacles in maintaining credibility and consistency of the information received by the public. If left unaddressed, an organization's reputation may suffer long-term damage. Therefore, examining the transformation of PR roles in crisis communication through social media is crucial.

Previous studies have extensively discussed the effectiveness of social media as a public communication tool between organizations and society. Several studies have shown that social media can increase public participation and speed up the dissemination of information during crises. Other studies also explain that public trust can increase when organizations conduct transparent and consistent communication in digital spaces. In the context of crisis management, the role of PR significantly determines an organization's success in controlling situations and minimizing reputational damage. These research findings illustrate that social media is a key instrument in the era of modern communication.

However, most previous studies have focused on the use of social media as an information delivery tool and have not deeply explored the evolving roles and competencies required of PR in navigating the dynamics of digital crisis communication. Additionally, studies on responsive communication strategies that align with the characteristics of critical and reactive social media audiences remain limited. With the shift in the landscape of public communication, there is a need to analyze how PR transforms from merely a message disseminator into a reputation manager and facilitator of real-time public dialogue. Therefore, a more comprehensive study is needed to strengthen crisis management theory and practice in the digital age.

Based on these conditions, an important research gap emerges—namely, the need to understand the transformation of PR roles in managing increasingly complex crisis communication through social media. Studies on the adaptive capabilities of PR in responding to viral issues, managing public sentiment, and designing reputation recovery strategies still require further exploration. This study offers a new perspective on how modern PR not only focuses on

information dissemination but also employs strategic, digital-based planning to anticipate and mitigate crises early. This becomes the novelty that contributes scientifically to the development of communication and public relations studies.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the transformation of PR roles in addressing crisis communication in the era of social media and to identify effective strategies that organizations can adopt to maintain their image and public trust. This research aims to provide an understanding of the dynamics of digital public communication, the challenges faced by PR, and the professional competencies needed in modern crisis management. Additionally, this study is expected to serve as a reference for practitioners and academics in developing adaptive and responsive public relations approaches that align with technological advancements. Thus, this research contributes to improving the quality of organizational communication in facing future reputational challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a library research approach, which is conducted by collecting various relevant scientific sources for in-depth analysis (Muhammad Mustofa, 2023). This approach was chosen because the focus of the research lies in the conceptual analysis of the transformation of Public Relations (PR) roles in crisis communication in the era of social media. Research data were obtained from literature such as books, national and international scientific journals, research reports, academic articles, and digital documents related to PR, crisis communication, and social media. In addition, primary sources such as public relations regulations and official organizational documents were also used to enrich the information. This library study enables the researcher to conduct a comprehensive theoretical examination, resulting in a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The research procedure was carried out through several systematic stages, including problem identification, reference searching, literature selection based on relevance and credibility, data organization, as well as content analysis and interpretation (Majid, 2017). The search for sources was conducted using digital databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, ResearchGate, and university journal portals. During the selection stage, literature that aligned with the focus of the study was filtered using criteria such as topic relevance, recent publication year, and methodological compatibility. Afterward, the collected data were analyzed

descriptively and analytically to identify patterns, conceptual relationships, and theoretical developments related to the role of PR in crisis communication within digital spaces. This approach allows the researcher to present a comprehensive overview of the existing body of knowledge.

The data analysis technique used in this study is content analysis, which involves classifying information based on the main themes that emerge from the literature. Content analysis helps the researcher identify changes in the functions, roles, and strategies of PR in managing crisis communication on social media. Source triangulation was also applied to ensure data validity by comparing various literature with differing perspectives. To maintain objectivity, the researcher applied critical principles in evaluating data and interpreting findings logically. Thus, the results of this study not only summarize theoretical findings but also offer new insights that strengthen modern public relations practices in crisis management. Through this structured library research approach, the study is expected to provide both academic and practical contributions to the development of crisis communication strategies in the era of social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

A. The Concept of Public Relations in Education

Public relations (PR) in education is a managerial function that serves to bridge communication between educational institutions and the community as the primary public (Afandi, Muadin, & Ridani, 2025). PR acts as an intermediary to ensure that messages, information, and institutional policies are clearly and accurately conveyed to the external public. At the same time, PR must also be able to absorb aspirations, opinions, and feedback from the community as input for improving the quality of educational services. In this perspective, PR is not only a communication tool but also part of the institution's development strategy. The success of PR can be seen in the increased level of public trust and participation in educational institutions. Therefore, PR holds a strategic position that influences the success of educational missions. This function positions PR as a key actor in creating harmonious relationships between schools or campuses and the community.

In the context of educational management, PR carries out two-way communication roles. This communication process includes conveying information related to institutional programs, student or university

achievements, new policies, and academic development agendas(Mohzana, 2024). Communication can be carried out through various media, such as circular letters, social media, official websites, and stakeholder meetings. In addition to external communication, PR must also pay attention to internal communication with educators, administrative staff, and students to create harmonious coordination. Such internal harmony contributes to the institution's overall positive image. With strong communication management skills, PR helps create a conducive and collaborative educational environment. This makes PR an essential pillar in maintaining information stability and organizational harmony within educational institutions.

Furthermore, PR in education is involved in conflict management and building productive relationships with the public. Conflicts in educational institutions may arise from misinformation, communication errors, or differences in interests between the institution and the community. In such situations, PR must act as a mediator who can objectively explain the situation to ease tensions. PR's ability to manage issues and problems becomes crucial in preventing reputation crises in educational institutions. PR also initiates strategic collaborations with the government, businesses, and community organizations to broaden public support. This collaborative role helps educational institutions achieve their long-term goals. Thus, PR plays an essential role in maintaining public relations stability through solution-oriented and professional communication approaches.

The development of information technology brings both challenges and great opportunities for PR in education(Ozgen & Saydam, 2022). PR must possess high digital literacy to manage information and publish content across various digital platforms. Additionally, PR professionals need to understand the characteristics of digital audiences, content strategies, and public engagement techniques to increase community involvement. Information transparency on the internet has made the public increasingly critical of educational institutions; therefore, PR must be able to manage reputation with rapid and accurate responses. If negative information spreads uncontrollably, an institution's image can be severely damaged. Thus, PR must be proactive in monitoring public opinion and crafting persuasive and informative communication. Adaptation to the digital era has become a key factor for PR success today.

As a strategic profession, PR in education must possess professional competencies such as public speaking skills, the ability to write information effectively, an understanding of community psychology, and negotiation skills. In addition to technical competencies, PR must also have strong character traits such as honesty, integrity, and empathy in building relationships with the public. The reputation of an educational institution is largely influenced by the quality of communication established by PR, making professionalism an essential aspect. Amid increasing competition between educational institutions, PR serves as the frontline in showcasing institutional excellence and assuring the public of its quality. Therefore, PR is not merely an organizational complement but an integral component supporting the sustainability of educational institutions. PR helps institutions remain relevant, trusted, and competitive amid continuously evolving social dynamics.

B. Social Media as a Platform for Public Communication

Social media has become a dominant public communication platform in modern life due to its ability to facilitate rapid information exchange without geographical limitations (Lovari & Valentini, 2020). The continuously growing number of social media users has turned these platforms into a new public sphere that shapes public opinion and behavior. In the field of education, social media strengthens institutional visibility and enables direct interaction with primary publics such as students, parents, alumni, and the wider community. Social media also allows public relations (PR) practitioners to disseminate official institutional information within seconds, enabling the public to receive updates in real time. Public engagement through comments, messages, and content sharing provides opportunities for institutions to enhance interaction and participation. Moreover, social media helps PR monitor emerging trends and issues within society. Therefore, social media has become an essential element in PR communication strategies.

In addition to serving as an information dissemination tool, social media also functions as a branding instrument for educational institutions. These platforms make it easier for PR to showcase professionalism, institutional achievements, academic activities, and distinctive institutional characteristics that need to be highlighted to the public. The use of visuals such as photos, videos, infographics, and creative content adds value in attracting audience attention. With the right content strategy, social media can

enhance the institution's reputation and attractiveness in the eyes of prospective students and the community. However, branding strategies must not be executed haphazardly; they should be based on audience research and institutional identity. When implemented consistently, social media can strengthen public trust and improve an institution's competitiveness amid global competition. Therefore, social media management must be a top priority in modern educational PR functions.

Despite its many benefits, social media also presents significant risks for educational institutions. Negative information, hoaxes, or sensitive issues can quickly spread and affect an institution's reputation in a very short time. Even minor communication errors may trigger crises that result in substantial damage to institutional credibility. This demands that PR professionals be capable of responding quickly, accurately, and proportionately to the dynamics of digital information. Monitoring public opinion becomes an essential step to detect potential problems early, enabling appropriate mitigation measures. Data security and ethical use of social media must also be considered, as the openness of platforms may affect the privacy of students and school members. Thus, the use of social media must be carried out professionally and guided by clear communication policies.

To maximize the benefits of social media, PR practitioners need strong digital competencies, including understanding algorithms, analyzing metrics, and managing public interactions (Ewing, Kim, Kinsky, Moore, & Freberg, 2018). PR must be able to design engagement strategies oriented toward dialogue and public service, instead of merely disseminating one-way messages. Besides technical skills, creativity in content creation is also key to ensuring that institutional messages are well-received by diverse audiences. Media literacy is equally important so that PR can filter information suitable for publication while avoiding provocative or misleading content. Continuous training and capacity-building for PR personnel are necessary to remain adaptive to the advancement of communication technologies. Consequently, social media becomes not just a communication tool but an integral part of institutional reputation management. When managed professionally, social media can strengthen an institution's position and enhance harmonious relationships with the community.

C. Crisis Communication in the Context of Education

Crisis communication in educational institutions is a structured process designed to handle emergency situations that have the potential to damage the institution's image and public trust. In the field of education, reputation is a highly valuable asset because it is closely tied to credibility and public acceptance. Therefore, any emerging crisis must be handled quickly, transparently, and systematically to minimize its impact. Crises in educational institutions vary widely, ranging from student violence, teacher misconduct, cases of harassment, to hoax issues circulating on social media. Each crisis situation requires an appropriate response to prevent further public unrest. Public relations (PR) serves as the frontline in maintaining information stability so that the public continues to receive valid and reliable information. With proper crisis communication, the institution can maintain its reputation even when facing significant pressure.

When dealing with a crisis, the first step is to identify the root cause objectively. PR must collaborate with leadership and relevant parties to conduct a rapid analysis of the developing issue. Afterward, formulating key messages becomes essential to ensure that the information delivered is consistent and does not lead to multiple interpretations. The speed of response also plays a major role, as delays may result in widespread speculation. Additionally, appointing an official spokesperson is a strategic step to ensure that only one recognized source conveys information to the public. This helps prevent uncontrolled statements from internal institution members. With proper communication management, the risk of misinformation can be effectively reduced.

Crises in educational institutions do not only involve negative publicity but also concern the psychological well-being of students (Capone, Caso, Donizzetti, & Procentese, 2020). PR must ensure that information dissemination does not violate privacy or the rights of children, who are protected by law. Therefore, crisis communication in education must observe publication ethics and uphold moral values. PR must also adopt an empathetic approach when delivering information, especially in cases involving victims or vulnerable individuals. The tone and language used must calm the public rather than ignite new conflicts. The emotional and physical safety of students must always be the top priority in every communication action. By considering these humanitarian aspects,

institutions can preserve the noble values that underpin their educational mission.

In the era of social media, crisis communication becomes even more complex due to the rapid and often uncontrollable flow of information. Minor issues can quickly escalate into major crises if they go viral and gain widespread public attention. Therefore, PR must conduct regular digital monitoring to detect issues that may develop into serious problems. Information mitigation strategies should be prepared in advance through clear and well-trained crisis management protocols. In addition, PR should utilize various digital communication channels to quickly provide official clarifications. Open interaction with the public on social media can help reduce the spread of misinformation. Thus, mastery of communication technology has become an essential competency for modern PR professionals.

Crises in educational institutions should not only be viewed as threats but also as opportunities for organizational learning. After a crisis is resolved, a thorough evaluation is needed to identify mistakes and improve educational service systems. Image recovery can be achieved by enhancing transparency, maintaining active communication, and reaffirming the institution's commitment to preventing similar crises in the future. PR can also carry out reputation recovery campaigns through positive content and collaboration with media and stakeholders. Experience in handling crises strengthens the organization's capacity to become more resilient in facing future challenges. Therefore, the success of crisis communication is measured not only by how quickly the problem is resolved but also by the institution's ability to regain public trust. With professional communication strategies, institutions can emerge stronger and more trusted by the community.

D. The Transformation of the Public Relations Role in the Social Media Era

The digital era has brought significant changes to how public relations (PR) professionals carry out their duties and functions in educational institutions. PR is no longer merely a conveyor of formal information but has become a manager of interactive communication across various digital platforms. With the presence of social media, the public can directly provide feedback, criticism, or appreciation for the information delivered by the institution. This makes two-way communication the primary system that must be managed professionally. PR in the era of social media must be able to build dynamic, responsive, and service-oriented public relations. The

increasingly critical and expressive behavior of the digital public poses new challenges for PR. Therefore, the transformation of PR roles requires enhanced competencies and adaptation to the development of communication technology.

In the digital communication space, PR is required not only to master communication skills but also to create creative content. PR practitioners need to become content creators who can package educational messages and institutional information into attractive visual formats such as videos, infographics, or digital campaigns. Storytelling becomes an essential technique because content with narrative elements more easily captures public attention and emotions. In addition, PR must also learn copywriting and digital marketing techniques to ensure that messages reach a wider audience. Creative and informative content increases engagement, enabling the institution's image to remain stable and grow positively. Thus, creativity has become a crucial element of the modern PR role.

Digital transformation also requires PR practitioners to possess data analysis skills as part of effective communication strategy planning. Social media provides various analytical features that allow PR to understand audience characteristics, conversation trends, and the quality of public interaction. These data can be used to evaluate content effectiveness and determine the best time and platform for publication. With proper data management, PR can make evidence-based communication decisions. The ability to interpret digital data makes communication strategies not only intuitive but also measurable. This enhances the accuracy of messages delivered to the public. Therefore, digital literacy and data analysis are essential competencies for today's PR professionals.

The development of social media also affects the structure and work patterns of PR, which have become increasingly collaborative. To address the complexities of digital communication, PR must coordinate with various departments such as information technology, marketing, and institutional management. This cross-disciplinary integration makes the PR role more strategic in shaping communication direction and public policy. Moreover, PR must also build networks with mass media, online communities, influencers, and other stakeholders to expand institutional information outreach. Such collaboration ensures that organizational communication remains consistent, effective, and well-structured. With a more open work

structure, PR takes on a central role in representing the institution's voice in the public sphere.

The rapid changes of the digital era require PR professionals to be adaptive and innovative in fulfilling their responsibilities. Quick responses to issues, the ability to manage digital crises, and strong understanding of online communication ethics are key requirements for modern PR success. PR must also be proactive in designing long-term strategies that support the sustainability of the institution's reputation amid global competition. Additionally, professional competencies must be continuously updated through training and the adoption of emerging technologies so PR remains relevant in an evolving landscape. The ability to maintain institutional credibility on social media is now a primary indicator of PR success. With the right transformation, PR can become a powerful force in safeguarding the existence and public trust of educational institutions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that public relations (PR) in education has a primary function as a bridge between the institution and the community, making its role inseparable from the institution's managerial strategy. The increasingly complex transformation of PR roles demands professional and well-planned communication governance. This is due to the fact that the reputation of an educational institution highly depends on the extent to which PR can build a positive image through two-way communication. In the digital era, the public has become more critical and responsive to circulating information, requiring PR to be more transparent in performing its duties. Public communication is no longer merely about delivering information, but about shaping perceptions and maintaining public trust continuously. Thus, PR professionalism reflects the quality of educational services. PR performance becomes a crucial factor in creating a harmonious and competitive educational ecosystem. Therefore, the role of PR is no longer complementary but a strategic pillar for institutional success.

Analysis of the use of social media in educational PR practices shows a significant increase in the effectiveness of public communication. Social media enables direct interaction that strengthens the connection between institutions and the community without spatial or temporal limits. Its real-time and viral characteristics present great opportunities for quickly disseminating programs

and achievements. However, the dynamics of social media can also pose challenges when sensitive issues spread uncontrollably. Therefore, PR must understand strategies for content management and public engagement accurately. Failure to control public discourse can trigger a reputational crisis within minutes. With a strong digital strategy, social media can serve as a powerful tool for branding and public diplomacy in educational institutions. The success of digital-era PR greatly depends on how effectively it manages these platforms in a professional and service-oriented manner.

The study also reinforces that crisis communication is an aspect requiring serious attention in educational PR management. Institutional crises can arise at any time and are often related to social, moral, or behavioral issues involving the school community. In such situations, PR plays a role in reducing public uncertainty through fast, accurate, and ethical delivery of information. If an institution responds late or uncoordinatedly, the crisis can escalate into a long-term reputational disaster. PR must be prepared with structured crisis-handling protocols, including the appointment of spokespersons and the determination of consistent key messages. Moreover, protecting students' privacy must be a top priority in every communication decision. Humanistic crisis communication not only saves the institution's reputation but also upholds essential educational values. With proper management, crises can become opportunities for organizational learning and strengthening.

Further analysis reveals that the transformation of PR roles in the social media era requires new competencies based on technology and creativity. PR professionals can no longer rely solely on conventional communication skills; they must master digital content, data analysis, and platform algorithm literacy. This is crucial for ensuring that communication strategies align with audience behavior and needs. In addition, storytelling has become an increasingly important technique for building emotional engagement with the public. With strong and authentic narratives, educational institutions can more easily gain sympathy, support, and public loyalty. This transformation also shifts PR's work patterns toward greater collaboration with other units such as IT, marketing, and crisis management. Slow adaptation may cause institutions to fall behind and lose public trust.

The study also reveals that the success of PR in managing digital communication is strongly influenced by integrity and professional ethics. When dealing with diverse audiences, PR must uphold transparency, honesty, and

empathy in every information publication. Misuse of information or narrative manipulation will only damage the institution's image in the long run. Proper information transparency strengthens institutional accountability in the eyes of the public. Additionally, PR must understand boundaries regarding privacy and students' rights to avoid legal or ethical violations. Strong communication ethics enable PR to build trust, which forms the foundation of institutional reputation. Such ethics become essential social capital for maintaining a positive image in an era of information openness.

The discussion shows that PR roles in educational institutions have undergone major evolution in response to technological and social changes. PR has now become a reputation controller that significantly determines institutional sustainability amid global competition. Effective communication strategies must integrate public relations management, digital communication, and crisis preparedness into a single, well-planned system. The readiness of PR to face the challenges of the social media era is an indicator of the institution's ability to adapt to changing times. With proper transformation, PR can strengthen the identity, credibility, and competitiveness of educational institutions at both national and international levels. Therefore, enhancing PR human resource capacity must be a top priority in modern educational management. The role of PR will become increasingly strategic as a guardian of institutional image and public relations stability amid the evolving dynamics of digital communication.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the public relations (PR) role in crisis communication in the era of social media has become an urgent necessity for educational institutions in maintaining public image and trust. Social media has shifted communication patterns from one-way dissemination to interactive, real-time engagement, requiring PR professionals to possess more advanced digital competencies. In the educational context, PR is responsible not only for sharing information but also for managing issues, preventing crises, and fostering constructive relationships with stakeholders. Crisis communication becomes a crucial element in safeguarding institutional reputation when facing situations that threaten public trust. Therefore, PR professionalism in addressing issues transparently, promptly, and empathetically is essential. Data-based strategies, creative content, and strong digital literacy form the foundation for effective modern PR practices. The main contribution of this study lies in offering a

conceptual framework that highlights how PR transformation—through digital adaptation, ethical communication, and proactive crisis management—can significantly enhance institutional resilience and long-term reputation. With this adaptive and responsive shift, PR can strengthen institutional competitiveness and support the sustainability of educational institutions amid the ongoing evolution of communication technologies.

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