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Reputational Crisis Communication in Indonesia's Digital PublicSphere of Public Emotion, Perceived Injustice, and Trust, 2024–2026

Erman Anom

erman.anom@esaunggul.ac.id

Universitas Esa Unggul

Faridah Ibrahim

Kuala Lumpur University of Science & Technology

H Humaizi

Universitas Sumatera Utara

Syamsul Asmedi

Universitas Pamulang

Research Article

Keywords: crisis communication, institutional reputation, public trust, social media, moral outrage, procedural–emotional misalignment, Indonesia

Posted Date: October 26th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11423542/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This study examines how institutional communication shapes the trajectory of reputational crisis amid changing public emotions and perceptions of injustice in Indonesia's digital public sphere between 2024 and 2026. Using a qualitative longitudinal case-study design, the study analyzes documented digital discourse, institutional communication materials, crisis-related documentation, and public-trust indicators. The analysis identifies four interconnected patterns: the transformation of economic grievances into questions of fairness and institutional legitimacy; a shift in public emotional orientation from anger to humiliation and grief and then to fatigue and demands for evidence; recurring institutional communication reflexes that may intensify rather than contain crisis; and increasing protest-related digital conversation alongside a weakened trust environment. The study proposes the concept of procedural–emotional misalignment to explain situations in which institutionally defensible procedural responses become insufficient because they do not address the emotional, moral, and evidentiary expectations of publics. The findings further identify speed, empathy, and evidence as complementary communication requirements across different stages of a prolonged crisis.

1. Introduction

The expansion of digital media has fundamentally transformed the environment in which institutional reputation and public trust are constructed, contested, and maintained. In contemporary crisis communication, organizations and public institutions no longer exercise exclusive control over the production and circulation of crisis narratives. Social media enables citizens to respond to institutional actions in real time, share interpretations across networked communities, and collectively evaluate whether institutional responses are credible, appropriate, and accountable (Jin et al., 2022; Al-Omoush et al., 2023). Consequently, reputational crises in the digital era should not be understood solely as organizational communication problems but as dynamic processes in which institutional responses interact continuously with public interpretation, emotion, and collective judgment.

This transformation creates a particular challenge for institutions because the meaning of a crisis is not determined exclusively by the event itself. Publics evaluate not only what happened but also how institutions respond, what they acknowledge, what they explain, and whether their actions correspond with public expectations of fairness and accountability. Crisis communication research has demonstrated that organizational responses can influence public sentiment and subsequent behavioral reactions, while transparency and accountability are important for maintaining or restoring public trust (Zheng, 2023; Liu et al., 2024). In digitally mediated environments, therefore, the effectiveness of institutional communication depends not only on the accuracy of information but also on the perceived appropriateness, responsiveness, and emotional resonance of the response.

Public emotion is particularly consequential in this process. Anger, grief, frustration, disappointment, and perceptions of injustice can influence how citizens interpret institutional messages and whether they continue, amplify, or transform crisis-related conversations. Research on crisis communication has

shown that emotional responses are closely connected with online engagement and public reactions, while institutional transparency and responsiveness may influence the development of trust (Zheng, 2023; Liu et al., 2024). Crisis communication consequently involves more than the transmission of factual information; it also involves an ongoing process of negotiating meaning between institutions and publics whose emotional expectations may change as a crisis develops. (Coombs & Tachkova, 2023, 2024)

The empirical material analyzed in this study documents a substantial transformation in public discourse between 2024 and 2026. Rather than remaining limited to individual policy complaints, public conversations increasingly moved toward questions of fairness, accountability, governance, and institutional legitimacy. The material identifies four broad stages in this development: initial complaints during 2022–2023, expansion toward purchasing power and employment security in 2024, acceleration toward governance-related concerns in 2025, and broader structural anxiety in 2026. Most importantly, the discourse is described as moving from asking why something is “expensive” toward asking why the burden is perceived as unfairly distributed.

The scale and trajectory of digital conversation further demonstrate that these developments cannot simply be dismissed as temporary social-media noise. According to the CARMA International digital-monitoring data presented in the source material, conversations related to protest increased by 271% from the 2025 baseline, with the increase strengthening before demonstrations occurred. The material therefore suggests a progression from structural economic pressure toward public frustration, perceived injustice, distrust, digital mobilization, and potentially collective action. Importantly, communication is positioned as an intervention point within this trajectory: while structural economic pressure is largely beyond the control of communication practitioners, institutional responses may influence subsequent transitions from frustration to perceived injustice, distrust, and mobilization. (CARMA International, n.d.)

The empirical material identifies three distinct emotional configurations: anger in 2024, humiliation and grief in 2025, and fatigue accompanied by demands for evidence in 2026. These emotional shifts are significant because they suggest that a standardized crisis-response strategy may become increasingly ineffective when public expectations change over time. In 2024, publics were described as demanding certainty and adherence to rules; in 2025, the emphasis shifted toward justice, accountability, and evidence of legal processes; while in 2026, publics increasingly demanded demonstrable progress rather than additional statements or promises. The broader trust environment reinforces the significance of this development.

The material documents a decline in reported public trust in the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR), from 64.0% in January 2025 to 47.0% in October 2025, representing a 17-percentage-point decline over the period shown. It also cautions against interpreting any single public-opinion indicator as a complete representation of institutional reputation, distinguishing among positive sentiment, satisfaction, and trust. This distinction is theoretically important because reputational crisis may not be

adequately captured by sentiment alone. An institution may still generate positive national or emotional identification while simultaneously experiencing declining confidence in its institutional performance.

These patterns suggest that a response may be procedurally defensible from the institutional perspective while nevertheless being interpreted by publics as defensive, insensitive, evasive, or insufficient. This tension can be conceptualized as procedural–emotional misalignment: a condition in which institutional communication is structured primarily around administrative, legal, or procedural reasoning while publics interpret the crisis through emotional, moral, and legitimacy-based frames. The concept does not imply that procedures are inherently inappropriate. Rather, it highlights the possibility that procedural correctness alone may be insufficient to restore trust when the central public question has shifted from “What is the procedure?” to “Is this fair, who is accountable, and what evidence demonstrates that something is being done?” Existing crisis communication scholarship provides important explanations of crisis response strategies, responsibility attribution, transparency, and stakeholder reactions (Coombs, 2007, 2022; Coombs & Tachkova, 2023; Zheng, 2023).

However, less attention has been given to how the emotional interpretation of a crisis changes longitudinally and how institutional responses interact with those changing interpretations. The Indonesian case presented here allows this trajectory to be examined across successive periods of anger, grief, and fatigue. Accordingly, this study examines institutional communication and reputational crisis as a dynamic relationship between institutional response, public emotion, perceived injustice, and trust. Drawing on the 2024–2026 Indonesian empirical material, the study investigates how public discourse changes over time and how institutional communication may either contain or intensify crisis trajectories.

Particular attention is given to the relationship between three communication qualities identified in the empirical material—speed, empathy, and evidence—and the broader process through which public frustration may develop into distrust and digital mobilization. The study contributes to crisis communication scholarship by shifting analytical attention from communication as the delivery of institutional messages toward communication as a process of interpretive alignment between institutions and digitally networked publics. It proposes that reputational crisis escalation is not determined solely by the presence or absence of institutional communication, but also by whether institutional responses correspond with the emotional, moral, and evidentiary expectations through which publics interpret the crisis.

Research Question

RQ: How does institutional communication shape the trajectory of reputational crisis amid changing public emotions and perceptions of injustice in Indonesia’s digital public sphere between 2024 and 2026?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative longitudinal case study design to examine the development of institutional reputational crises and their communication dynamics in Indonesia between 2024 and 2026. A longitudinal approach was selected because the study focuses not on a single crisis episode but on changes in public discourse, emotional orientations, perceptions of injustice, institutional responses, and trust across successive periods. The approach enables the analysis to consider reputational crisis as a process that develops over time rather than as an isolated communication event. The study further employed digital discourse analysis to examine how public concerns and emotional interpretations were represented within the documented digital conversation, complemented by thematic analysis of institutional communication responses. (Treanor et al., 2021)

The analytical focus was therefore placed on the relationship between three elements: (1) the changing character of public discourse, (2) institutional responses to crisis, and (3) the apparent movement of the crisis trajectory from frustration toward perceptions of injustice, distrust, and digital mobilization. (Treanor et al., 2021).

2.2 Data Sources and Scope

The empirical material covered the period 2024–2026 and was derived from the materials documented in the study source, including digital conversation data, crisis-related documentation, institutional communication examples, and public trust indicators. The source material incorporates data attributed to CARMA's Indonesia's Digital Pulse (2024–2026) as well as reported public-trust measurements and documentation of selected institutional crisis episodes. The analysis focused on crisis episodes and communication patterns that were explicitly documented in the empirical material. These included the 2024 controversy surrounding the revision of the Regional Election Law and the emergence of the “Garuda Biru” symbol; the 2025 period involving economic pressure, the death of Affan Kurniawan, and the emergence of the 17 + 8 People's Demands; and the 2026 period characterized by continuing public demands, the approaching anniversary of Affan Kurniawan's death, and renewed concerns regarding institutional responses. The study does not treat all digital conversations in Indonesia as its unit of analysis. (CARMA International, n.d.)

Rather, the unit of analysis consists of documented crisis-related discourse and institutional communication patterns associated with the selected 2024–2026 episodes.

2.3 Analytical Dimensions

The data were organized into five principal analytical dimensions derived from the empirical material: crisis context, public discourse, public emotion, institutional response, and crisis trajectory. These dimensions were used to examine how public concerns and emotional interpretations changed over time and how institutional responses interacted with the evolving crisis trajectory.

2.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the 2024–2026 material. The coding process was organized around the relationship between what the public demanded, how the institution responded, and how the response was subsequently interpreted within the crisis discourse. The first stage involved identifying the dominant public concern in each period. The material indicates a movement from economic grievances toward broader concerns regarding fairness, governance, accountability, and institutional legitimacy. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

The second stage identified the dominant emotional orientation associated with each period. The analysis retained the three-period categorization documented in the source: anger in 2024, humiliation and grief in 2025, and fatigue and demands for evidence in 2026. The third stage examined institutional communication responses. Six recurring patterns were coded: early denial, responding to emotion through procedure, legalistic language in situations of grief, the “rogue actor” explanation, communication securitization, and delayed clarification. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

The final stage examined how these patterns related to the broader crisis trajectory. Particular attention was given to whether institutional communication appeared to contain the issue, sustain public frustration, or contribute to the movement toward distrust and mobilization. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

2.5 Longitudinal Comparison

To identify changes across time, the material was compared across the three principal periods: 2024, 2025, and 2026. The comparison considered changes in public emotion, dominant public demands, digital artifacts, and the communication response considered appropriate within each period. The source characterizes the three periods respectively as “angry,” “humiliated and grieving,” and “tired and demanding.” It further associates each emotional configuration with different public expectations: certainty and adherence to rules in 2024, justice and accountability in 2025, and demonstrable evidence of progress in 2026. This longitudinal comparison allows the study to examine whether institutional communication strategies remain appropriate when the emotional and interpretive conditions of the public change. (Treanor et al., 2021)

2.6 Use of Quantitative Indicators

Although the study is qualitative in design, quantitative indicators documented in the empirical material were used as contextual and corroborative evidence, rather than as the basis for statistical inference. These indicators include the reported 271% increase in protest-related conversation from the 2025 baseline, which is used to illustrate the increasing intensity of digital protest discourse. The study also considers the reported decline in public trust in the Indonesian House of Representatives from 64.0% in January 2025 to 47.0% in October 2025 as contextual evidence of a changing institutional trust environment. Accordingly, these figures are presented visually in the findings section to support interpretation of the qualitative patterns rather than to establish causal relationships (Indikator Politik Indonesia, 2025a, 2025b).

2.7 Analytical Framework

The analysis resulted in a conceptual trajectory connecting structural conditions, public interpretation, institutional communication, and crisis escalation: Structural Pressure → Public Frustration → Perceived Injustice → Distrust → Digital Mobilization → Collective Action Institutional communication was treated as an intervening element within this trajectory because the empirical material identifies several points at which institutional responses may influence whether frustration is contained or develops into broader distrust and mobilization. The analysis also identified three communication qualities—speed, empathy, and evidence—as recurring conditions associated with effective crisis response in the source material. These dimensions were subsequently used to interpret the relationship between institutional responses and changing public expectations.

2.8 Research Integrity and Analytical Boundaries

The study distinguishes between empirical evidence documented in the source material and analytical interpretation developed by the researchers. Quantitative figures are therefore not used to imply causal relationships that cannot be established from the available material. Similarly, the study does not claim that institutional communication alone causes public distrust or mobilization. Instead, it examines how communication responses interact with changing public emotions, perceptions of injustice, and broader structural pressures.

This approach is intended to preserve analytical consistency between the available evidence and the study's research question while allowing the study to develop a theoretically informed explanation of reputational crisis dynamics in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

3. Findings

The analysis identified four interconnected patterns in the development of reputational crisis discourse in Indonesia between 2024 and 2026. First, public discourse evolved from concerns about economic burden toward broader perceptions of injustice and institutional legitimacy. Second, the emotional orientation of the digital public changed across the three-year period, moving from anger to humiliation and grief and subsequently to fatigue and demands for evidence. Third, several recurring institutional communication responses appeared to intensify rather than contain the crisis.

Finally, the increasing volume and diffusion of protest-related discourse indicated a movement from public frustration toward broader distrust and digital mobilization. Together, these findings demonstrate that reputational crisis developed not simply through the occurrence of controversial events, but through the interaction between institutional responses and changing public interpretations.

3.1 From Economic Grievance to Perceived Injustice

The first finding concerns a significant transformation in the object of public grievance. The documented discourse indicates a movement from relatively concrete concerns about economic conditions toward broader questions concerning fairness, accountability, governance, and institutional legitimacy. The

source identifies four phases: initial complaints during 2022–2023, expansion toward purchasing power and employment security in 2024, acceleration toward governance-related concerns in 2025, and structural anxiety in 2026. This transformation is analytically important because the meaning of the grievance changes as the discourse develops.

A complaint framed as “expensive” primarily concerns the condition itself, whereas the question of why a particular group is required to bear the burden introduces a moral dimension. The issue consequently moves from a policy or economic problem toward a question of distributive fairness and institutional responsibility. The finding suggests that the escalation of reputational risk occurs when an initially sectoral or policy-specific concern becomes interpreted as evidence of a broader institutional problem. In this stage, communication is no longer concerned only with explaining a policy.

It becomes concerned with explaining why the consequences of that policy are considered fair, who is accountable, and whether institutional behavior is consistent with public expectations of legitimacy. The significance of this shift lies in the widening interpretive frame of the crisis. As public discourse moves toward questions of justice and legitimacy, procedural explanations alone become less likely to address the underlying concern. The empirical material therefore indicates that the escalation of reputational crisis is associated with a shift in the question being asked by the public—from “What is happening?” toward “Why is this happening to us, who is responsible, and is this fair?”

3.2 The Emotional Transformation of the Digital Public

The second finding concerns the changing emotional character of public discourse across the three-year period. The material identifies three distinct emotional configurations: anger in 2024, humiliation and grief in 2025, and fatigue accompanied by demands for evidence in 2026. In 2024, public anger was primarily associated with the perception that rules and institutional commitments were being altered or disregarded. The “Garuda Biru” or “Peringatan Darurat” symbol became an important digital artifact through which this sentiment was collectively expressed.

The dominant public demand during this period was certainty and adherence to rules. In 2025, the emotional configuration changed. The material characterizes the public mood as humiliation and grief, particularly in the context of economic pressure, perceptions of privilege, and the death of Affan Kurniawan. Digital artifacts such as “Brave Pink,” “Hero Green,” the 17 + 8 document, and motorcycle-driver processions became associated with demands for justice, accountability, and evidence of legal processes.

By 2026, the dominant orientation had shifted toward fatigue and demands for evidence. According to the documented analysis, publics increasingly compared previous promises with demonstrable institutional progress. Archived videos, previous statements, countdowns to deadlines, and comparisons between earlier commitments and subsequent developments became important elements of the digital discourse. The public demand consequently shifted from another explanation or promise toward

evidence of what had actually been accomplished. is important because it demonstrates that public expectations do not remain static throughout a prolonged crisis.

A communication strategy that may be relevant during an initial dispute can become insufficient when the public moves from anger to grief and subsequently to fatigue. The crisis therefore develops not only through changes in institutional behavior but also through changes in the emotional and interpretive state of the public.

3.3 Institutional Communication Reflexes and Crisis Escalation

The third finding concerns recurring institutional communication patterns that may contribute to crisis escalation. Six communication “reflexes” were identified in the empirical material: early denial; responding to emotion through procedure; using legalistic language in situations of grief; the “rogue actor” explanation; communication securitization; and delayed clarification. The first pattern, early denial, occurs when institutions reject or minimize information before sufficient evidence has been examined. When subsequent evidence becomes publicly available, the institution is then required to revise its initial position.

The source associates this pattern with the 2025 response concerning the death of Affan Kurniawan, where initial information emerged while the public already possessed visual evidence. The second pattern is responding to emotion through procedure. In this configuration, publics demand moral recognition or justice while institutions respond by describing administrative mechanisms. The documented example concerns the response to the 17 + 8 People's Demands, in which administrative steps were presented in response to demands that were interpreted by the public as fundamentally moral and political.

The third pattern is legalistic communication in situations of grief. Statements emphasizing that actions are “in accordance with applicable regulations” may be institutionally defensible but can be interpreted differently when the public is experiencing loss or demanding recognition of suffering. The source identifies the continued use of formulations such as “still under investigation” as an example of a communication gap between procedural language and public emotional expectations. The fourth pattern is the “rogue actor” or “individual misconduct” explanation, through which institutional responsibility is separated from the behavior of individual members.

The documented concern is that such framing can be interpreted as institutional avoidance of responsibility, particularly when questions concerning command responsibility or organizational accountability remain unresolved. The fifth pattern is communication securitization, in which physical barriers, restrictions, and other visible security measures become communicative symbols. In such circumstances, the physical response itself becomes part of the message received by the public. The source identifies the circulation of images of high barriers around a Jakarta shopping center in 2026 as an example of how visual security measures can precede explanatory communication.

The sixth pattern is delayed clarification. Communication that arrives only after a public narrative has become established may correct factual claims but may no longer be sufficient to restore trust. The documented 2024 example concerning the revision of the Regional Election Law illustrates how delayed explanation followed the spread of the “Garuda Biru” narrative and the escalation of public pressure. these six patterns indicate a recurring discrepancy between institutional logic and public interpretive logic. Institutions may prioritize procedural accuracy, legal protection, administrative accountability, or organizational control.

Publics, however, may simultaneously evaluate whether the response demonstrates empathy, acknowledges harm, identifies responsibility, and provides credible evidence of action. The problem therefore does not necessarily arise because an institution has no response; rather, it may arise because the response does not address the question that the public believes is most important.

3.4 From Digital Frustration to Mobilization

The fourth finding concerns the relationship between the intensity of digital discourse and the development of broader mobilization. The empirical material reports that protest-related conversations increased by 271% from the 2025 baseline and that this increase strengthened before demonstrations occurred. In the source material, digital volume is interpreted not merely as an indicator of online popularity but as part of a broader process of mobilization. The documented framework distinguishes among volume and speed of conversation, network expansion, and adoption of shared symbols. Volume and speed indicate that an issue is growing; wider networks indicate that the issue is crossing social groups; and symbolic adoption indicates that the issue is beginning to form a shared identity (CARMA International, n.d.).

The analysis therefore identifies a possible progression: Structural Pressure → Public Frustration → Perceived Injustice → Distrust → Digital Mobilization → Collective Action. The empirical material emphasizes that this sequence is not deterministic. Instead, institutional communication represents a potential intervention point at several stages. Structural economic pressure may not be directly controllable through communication, but the transition from frustration to perceived injustice, from perceived injustice to distrust, and from distrust to digital mobilization may be influenced by institutional responses.

3.5 Trust Decline as an Indicator of Reputational Vulnerability

The relationship between crisis communication and institutional reputation is further illustrated by the documented change in public trust toward the Indonesian House of Representatives. The reported trust level declined from 64.0% in January 2025 to 47.0% in October 2025, representing a 17-percentage-point decline during the period presented in the source. This finding is relevant because a reputational crisis may generate consequences beyond immediate public sentiment. Once institutional trust declines, future institutional communication may become less persuasive because the institution begins

subsequent crises with reduced credibility. The source consequently characterizes trust as a form of institutional capital that can be lost more rapidly than it can be restored.

At the same time, the empirical material cautions against equating sentiment, satisfaction, and trust. Different indicators may produce substantially different assessments of institutional standing, and a single positive or negative measure should therefore not be treated as a complete representation of reputation. This finding reinforces the importance of examining reputational crisis through multiple dimensions rather than relying exclusively on social-media sentiment or public-opinion scores.

3.6 Synthesis of Findings

Across the four principal findings, a consistent pattern emerges. A reputational crisis develops through an interaction between changing public interpretation and institutional response. The initial concern may begin as an economic or policy grievance, but it can develop into a question of fairness and legitimacy. As the emotional condition of the public changes, expectations toward institutional communication also change.

Meanwhile, institutional responses that emphasize denial, procedure, legalism, organizational separation, security, or delayed clarification may fail to address the underlying public concern. The longitudinal evidence indicates three successive shifts: economic grievance → perceived injustice anger/grief → fatigue and demand for evidence digital conversation → distrust and potential mobilization These shifts suggest that institutional communication cannot be evaluated solely according to whether a statement is factually correct or procedurally compliant. Its effectiveness must also be assessed according to whether it responds to the emotional and interpretive conditions of the public at a particular stage of the crisis. The final pattern identified in the analysis is consequently the importance of speed, empathy, and evidence.

The empirical material frames these three qualities as mutually reinforcing elements of crisis response: rapid recognition of visible reality, empathetic communication, demonstrable action, and continuing evidence of progress. This finding provides the basis for the subsequent discussion of procedural–emotional misalignment and its implications for crisis communication and institutional trust.

Ethical Considerations

All interview participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Sensitive data were anonymized during transcription and analysis to protect participant identities, consistent with Indonesia’s Law No. 27/2022 on Personal Data Protection. The study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Esa Unggul, conducted in accordance with Peraturan Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional (BRIN) Nomor 22 Tahun 2022 tentang Klirens Etik Riset (Regulation of the National Research and Innovation Agency Number 22 of 2022 concerning Research Ethics Clearance), Indonesia’s national standard governing the ethical clearance of research involving human participants

4. Discussion

4.1 From Crisis Response to Interpretive Alignment

The first important implication of the findings concerns the conventional understanding of crisis response. Crisis communication theories have traditionally emphasized the importance of selecting appropriate response strategies according to crisis type, perceived responsibility, and reputational threat (Coombs, 2007, 2022). Such approaches remain important because institutions must provide accurate information, acknowledge responsibility where appropriate, and protect organizational legitimacy. However, the present findings suggest that strategic appropriateness is not sufficient if institutional communication is interpreted differently by the public. (Coombs, 2022; Coombs & Tachkova, 2023)

The movement from economic grievance toward perceived injustice illustrates this problem. An issue that initially concerns prices, purchasing power, or employment may acquire a substantially different meaning when citizens begin to interpret the consequences as unfairly distributed. At this stage, a response that merely explains policy procedures may fail to address the actual question being asked by the public. The communication problem therefore shifts from information provision to interpretive alignment. (Coombs, 2022; Coombs & Tachkova, 2023)

This finding extends crisis communication scholarship by suggesting that institutional response should be evaluated at two levels. The first is procedural adequacy: whether the institution has followed legal, administrative, and organizational requirements. The second is interpretive adequacy: whether the response addresses the meaning that publics attach to the crisis. A response may satisfy the first while failing the second. (Coombs, 2022; Coombs & Tachkova, 2023)

The concept of procedural–emotional misalignment developed in this study captures this tension. It refers not to the absence of institutional communication but to a discrepancy between the logic through which institutions communicate and the emotional and moral logic through which publics interpret the crisis. (Coombs, 2022; Coombs & Tachkova, 2023)

4.2 Changing Public Emotion Requires Changing Communication

The second implication concerns the temporal nature of public emotion. The findings identify a progression from anger in 2024, to humiliation and grief in 2025, and subsequently to fatigue and demands for evidence in 2026. This progression is important because it demonstrates that publics do not remain emotionally static throughout prolonged institutional crises. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the role of emotion in shaping digital engagement and reactions to crisis communication (Coombs & Tachkova, 2024; Liu et al., 2024)

However, the present study adds a temporal dimension: different emotional states generate different communication expectations. When publics are angry, they may primarily demand recognition and

certainty. When grief and humiliation become dominant, the demand may shift toward justice, accountability, and acknowledgement of harm. When fatigue emerges, repeated statements may lose persuasive power, and publics may instead demand evidence of implementation and measurable progress. (Coombs & Tachkova, 2024; Liu et al., 2024)

This means that crisis communication cannot rely on a fixed message strategy throughout a prolonged crisis. The communication response must evolve as the emotional condition of the public evolves. This is an important extension of crisis communication approaches that tend to classify crises according to the event and organizational responsibility but may pay less attention to how stakeholder expectations themselves change over time. (Coombs & Tachkova, 2024; Liu et al., 2024)

4.3 Why Procedural Communication Can Intensify Rather Than Resolve Crisis

The third implication is particularly important for public-sector communication. The findings identify six recurring institutional communication patterns: early denial, responding to emotion through administrative procedures, legalistic language in situations of grief, the “rogue actor” explanation, securitization, and delayed clarification. These responses are not necessarily irrational from an institutional perspective. Denial may be intended to prevent misinformation; procedural language may protect institutional legitimacy; legalistic statements may reflect legal constraints; attribution to individual misconduct may distinguish organizational responsibility from individual behavior; and security measures may be intended to prevent disruption.

The problem arises when institutional rationality is not equivalent to public legitimacy. For example, stating that a case remains “under investigation” may be procedurally accurate. However, when the public is grieving and demanding recognition of harm, the statement may be interpreted as an avoidance of moral responsibility. Similarly, explaining administrative mechanisms in response to demands for justice may provide information without addressing the emotional meaning of the grievance.

The findings therefore suggest that institutional communication should not be assessed exclusively according to whether a message is factually correct or legally defensible. It must also be evaluated according to whether it recognizes the public's underlying concern. This finding is particularly relevant to government communication because public institutions possess formal authority but remain dependent on perceived legitimacy and trust. Research on Indonesian government communication similarly emphasizes the importance of trust, credibility, social capital, and communication approaches that move beyond predominantly top-down patterns (Wahidah, 2022; Al-Omoush et al., 2023).

4.4 From Negative Sentiment to Institutional Distrust

Another important finding concerns the relationship between digital discourse and institutional trust. The documented 271% increase in protest-related conversation indicates that digital discussion can develop beyond isolated expressions of dissatisfaction toward broader forms of mobilization. However, the findings also caution against equating increased negative discourse with declining institutional

reputation automatically. The source distinguishes between sentiment, satisfaction, and trust, noting that these indicators may produce different evaluations of institutional standing. (Zheng, 2023; Al-Omoush et al., 2023)

This distinction is theoretically significant. Social-media negativity may represent immediate emotional reaction, whereas institutional distrust represents a deeper judgment concerning whether an institution is credible and capable of acting in the public interest. The reported decline in public trust in the DPR—from 64% in January 2025 to 47% in October 2025—illustrates why this distinction matters. The finding should not be interpreted as evidence that communication alone caused the decline. (Zheng, 2023; Al-Omoush et al., 2023)

Rather, it indicates the broader reputational environment within which institutional communication operates. Once trust has declined, institutional communication faces a more difficult environment because subsequent messages are interpreted through an already weakened credibility structure. In other words, communication does not begin from a neutral position during an extended crisis. (Zheng, 2023; Al-Omoush et al., 2023)

4.5 Speed, Empathy, and Evidence as Conditions of Effective Crisis Communication

The findings further identify three communication qualities—speed, empathy, and evidence—as particularly important for crisis response. These three dimensions can be interpreted as addressing different problems in the crisis trajectory. Speed addresses the problem of narrative formation. When institutions respond slowly, publics and other actors may establish the dominant interpretation before the institution enters the conversation.

Empathy addresses the problem of emotional legitimacy. It enables institutions to acknowledge the human meaning of an event rather than responding exclusively through administrative language. Evidence addresses the problem of declining credibility. Once publics have become skeptical, statements and promises may no longer be sufficient.

Demonstrable action becomes necessary to rebuild confidence. The three elements therefore operate sequentially but also reinforce one another: Speed establishes presence; empathy establishes recognition; evidence establishes credibility. This interpretation extends the conventional focus on crisis response strategy by suggesting that what matters is not simply what institutions say, but whether the communication meets the dominant public expectation at a particular stage of the crisis.

4.6 Theoretical Contribution: Procedural–Emotional Misalignment

The central theoretical contribution of this study is the proposition that reputational crisis escalation may occur through procedural–emotional misalignment. The concept is derived from the recurring pattern observed across the 2024–2026 material. Institutions frequently respond through procedures,

regulations, investigation processes, administrative explanations, or organizational distinctions, while publics increasingly frame the crisis through justice, grief, fairness, accountability, and evidence. The contribution is therefore not to argue that procedural communication is ineffective in itself.

Rather, it suggests that procedural communication becomes insufficient when the public's interpretive frame has moved beyond procedure. This produces a potentially reinforcing cycle: Procedural Response → Emotional/Interpretive Misalignment → Perceived Insensitivity or Avoidance → Distrust → Increased Digital Mobilization The cycle helps explain why additional institutional statements may sometimes fail to reduce a crisis. More communication does not necessarily produce greater trust when the communication repeatedly addresses a different question from the one the public believes needs to be answered.

4.7 Implications for Government and Institutional Communication

The findings have practical implications for public institutions. First, crisis communication should incorporate emotional diagnosis alongside conventional issue monitoring. Monitoring should identify not only what people are saying but also what emotional and moral concerns dominate the discourse. Second, institutions should distinguish between procedural response and relational response.

A procedural explanation may be necessary, but it should be accompanied by acknowledgement of harm, recognition of public concerns, and clear identification of what action is being taken. Third, institutions should recognize that communication requirements change throughout a prolonged crisis. The demands documented in this study moved from certainty to justice and accountability and eventually toward evidence of progress. A single communication strategy is therefore unlikely to remain equally effective across all stages.

Finally, institutional communication should be evaluated according to whether it contributes to restoring credibility and trust, rather than simply reducing negative conversation temporarily. This distinction is important because reputational recovery involves more than sentiment management; it requires evidence that institutional behavior is consistent with the expectations communicated to the public.

4.8 Overall Interpretation

Taken together, the findings suggest that reputational crisis in the digital public sphere is best understood as a dynamic process of institutional–public interpretation. The crisis begins with an event or structural pressure but develops according to how publics interpret institutional responses. The Indonesian 2024–2026 trajectory demonstrates this process clearly: economic and policy grievances increasingly became interpreted as questions of fairness and institutional legitimacy; public emotion moved from anger toward grief and fatigue; institutional responses frequently remained procedural; and digital discourse increasingly developed toward distrust and mobilization. The central implication is therefore that effective crisis communication requires alignment between institutional action, public emotion, and credible evidence.

Speed without empathy may appear dismissive; empathy without evidence may be perceived as symbolic; and evidence without timely communication may arrive after the dominant narrative has already been established. The combination of the three provides a more comprehensive basis for understanding how institutions may contain reputational crisis and rebuild public trust. This interpretation provides the basis for the study's central proposition: reputational crisis escalates when institutional communication remains procedurally appropriate but becomes emotionally and interpretively misaligned with the evolving expectations of the public.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how institutional communication shapes the trajectory of reputational crisis amid changing public emotions and perceptions of injustice in Indonesia’s digital public sphere between 2024 and 2026. The findings demonstrate that reputational crisis is not a static condition produced by a single controversial event. Rather, it develops through an evolving interaction between public interpretation, emotional responses, institutional communication, and trust. The study identifies a longitudinal shift in public discourse from economic and policy-related grievances toward broader perceptions of injustice, accountability, and institutional legitimacy.

At the same time, the emotional orientation of the public changed from anger in 2024, to humiliation and grief in 2025, and subsequently to fatigue and demands for demonstrable evidence in 2026. These changes indicate that public expectations of institutional communication are not constant throughout a prolonged crisis. The study further finds that several recurring institutional communication patterns—including early denial, procedural responses to emotional grievances, legalistic communication, attribution of responsibility to individual actors, securitization, and delayed clarification—may contribute to the persistence or escalation of reputational crisis when they fail to address the underlying emotional and moral concerns of publics. The reported increase in protest-related digital conversation and the decline in public trust documented in the empirical material further illustrate the broader reputational environment within which institutional communication operates.

In answering the research question, this study argues that institutional communication shapes crisis trajectories not simply through the presence or absence of communication, but through the degree of alignment between institutional responses and the changing emotional, moral, and evidentiary expectations of publics. The concept of procedural–emotional misalignment is proposed to explain situations in which institutional responses may be procedurally appropriate but are interpreted by publics as insufficient, insensitive, or evasive because they address administrative requirements rather than the underlying concerns of justice, recognition, accountability, and trust. The study therefore contributes to crisis communication scholarship by bringing together three dimensions that are often examined separately: institutional response, public emotion, and reputational trust. It further emphasizes the importance of a longitudinal perspective because the communication requirements of a crisis may change as public emotion develops.

The findings suggest that speed, empathy, and evidence represent three complementary communication requirements: speed enables institutions to enter the emerging narrative before interpretations become entrenched; empathy acknowledges the emotional and human dimensions of the crisis; and evidence provides the basis for rebuilding credibility when public trust has weakened. Practically, the findings suggest that public institutions should move beyond communication strategies focused primarily on procedural clarification. Crisis monitoring should assess not only the volume and direction of public conversation but also the emotional and moral meanings emerging within that conversation. Institutional responses should consequently evolve with the crisis rather than rely on a single communication strategy throughout its trajectory.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis relies on documented digital discourse, institutional communication materials, and secondary indicators available in the study material rather than primary interviews with affected publics or institutional communicators. Second, the available quantitative indicators are used as contextual evidence and do not permit causal conclusions concerning the effects of institutional communication on trust or mobilization. Third, the longitudinal analysis covers the specific Indonesian cases documented for 2024–2026 and therefore should not be generalized to all institutional crises without further comparative research.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing institutional crisis communication across different Indonesian institutions or countries and by combining digital discourse analysis with interviews, survey data, or longitudinal social-media datasets. Such research would allow the proposed concept of procedural–emotional misalignment to be examined across different institutional and cultural contexts. Ultimately, the study suggests that restoring trust in a digital crisis requires more than communicating what institutions have done; it requires demonstrating that institutions understand what publics are experiencing, why they perceive the situation as unjust, and what credible evidence can demonstrate meaningful institutional response. In this sense, effective crisis communication is not merely a matter of managing information but of rebuilding the relationship between institutional action, public meaning, and trust.

Declarations

Ethical Considerations

All interview participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Sensitive data were anonymized during transcription and analysis to protect participant identities, consistent with Indonesia’s Law No. 27/2022 on Personal Data Protection. The study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Esa Unggul, conducted in accordance with Peraturan Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional (BRIN) Nomor 22 Tahun 2022 tentang Klirens Etik Riset (Regulation of the National Research and Innovation Agency Number 22 of 2022 concerning Research Ethics Clearance), Indonesia’s national standard governing the ethical clearance of research involving

human participants (Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, 2022). Interviews took place between January and May 2016, and all quotations are reported under the anonymized identifiers in Table.

Author Contributions (CRediT Taxonomy)

Conceptualisation: Erman Anom, Faridah Ibrahim Methodology: Erman Anom, Investigation: Erman Anom. Data curation: Hummaizi, Syamsul Asmedi.Formal analysis: Erman Anom. Validation: Humaizi, Faridah Ibrahim, Resources: Erman Anom, Faridah Ibrahim. Writing – original draft: Erman Anom. Writing – review and editing: Erman Anom, Humaizi. Project administration: Erman Anom. Supervision: Erman Anom, Humaizi,Syamsul Asmedi.

Acknowledgments

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the journalists, academics, and policy analysts who generously shared their insights during interviews and contributed valuable perspectives to this study. Special thanks are also due to the Faculty of Communication Studies, Universitas Esa Unggul, for providing institutional support and facilitating ethical clearance. The authors further acknowledge the assistance of colleagues and research assistants who contributed to transcription, coding, and data organization, thereby ensuring the rigor and consistency of the qualitative analysis.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available owing to confidentiality commitments made to interview participants, but they are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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