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## Impact of Crisis Communication Strategies on Public Trust during Health Emergencies in Philippines

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### Article history

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to assess the impact of crisis communication strategies on public trust during health emergencies in Philippines.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study indicated that transparent, timely, and accurate information dissemination fosters trust among the public. The use of multiple communication channels, such as social media, traditional media, and direct messaging, helps reach diverse audiences and address varying information needs. Engaging with stakeholders, including healthcare professionals, community leaders, and the public, builds collaborative relationships and enhances credibility.

Moreover, proactive communication that acknowledges uncertainties, addresses concerns, and provides actionable guidance can mitigate misinformation and alleviate anxiety, thereby bolstering public trust in authorities and institutions.

**Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), trust determination theory and elaboration likelihood model may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the impact of crisis communication strategies on public trust during health emergencies in Philippines. Establishing training programs for health communicators that focus on best practices for transparency, empathy, and misinformation correction is essential for improving crisis communication in practice. Developing a policy framework that mandates transparent and frequent communication during health emergencies is crucial for ensuring public trust.

**Keywords:** *Crisis, Communication, Strategies, Public Trust, Health Emergencies*

## INTRODUCTION

Public trust, often measured through trust indices and public surveys, is a crucial indicator of societal confidence in institutions and governance. In the United States, public trust in government has seen a significant decline over the past few decades, with Pew Research Center reporting that as of 2021, only 24% of Americans trust the government to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time," a stark contrast to the 77% trust level in 1964 (Pew Research Center, 2021). Similarly, in Japan, trust in government fluctuates, with the Edelman Trust Barometer indicating a dip from 45% in 2018 to 37% in 2021, reflecting concerns over economic policies and crisis management (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). These trends highlight the challenges faced by developed economies in maintaining public trust amidst political and economic upheavals (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2019).

Public trust, often measured through trust indices and public surveys, is a crucial indicator of societal confidence in institutions and governance. In the United States, public trust in government has seen a significant decline over the past few decades, with Pew Research Center reporting that as of 2021, only 24% of Americans trust the government to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time," a stark contrast to the 77% trust level in 1964 (Pew Research Center, 2021). Similarly, in Japan, trust in government fluctuates, with the Edelman Trust Barometer indicating a dip from 45% in 2018 to 37% in 2021, reflecting concerns over economic policies and crisis management (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). These trends highlight the challenges faced by developed economies in maintaining public trust amidst political and economic upheavals (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2019).

In developing economies, public trust varies significantly based on political stability and economic development. For instance, in Brazil, public trust in government has been volatile, with trust levels dropping to 18% in 2018, according to the Latinobarómetro, primarily due to corruption scandals and economic challenges (Latinobarómetro, 2018). Conversely, in India, trust in government remains relatively high, with the Edelman Trust Barometer reporting a trust index of 74% in 2021, attributed to proactive government policies and economic reforms (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). These contrasting trends illustrate the diverse factors influencing public trust in developing economies (Guriev & Melnikov, 2020).

Similarly, in Indonesia, public trust in government has shown resilience despite political and economic challenges. According to the World Values Survey, trust in the Indonesian government was recorded at 59% in 2020, indicating a relatively stable level of trust compared to other developing nations (World Values Survey, 2020). This stability can be attributed to successful government policies in managing economic growth and social programs, which have positively impacted public perception (Pratama & Susanti, 2021).

In Mexico, public trust in government has been subject to significant fluctuations due to political corruption and security issues. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in the Mexican government was at 44% in 2019, showing a decline from previous years, largely due to widespread corruption scandals and ongoing violence related to drug cartels (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2019). Despite efforts by successive administrations to address these issues, maintaining high levels of public trust remains a formidable challenge for Mexico.

In Turkey, public trust in government has experienced fluctuations due to political instability and economic challenges. According to the World Values Survey, trust in the Turkish government was at 37% in 2020, reflecting public concerns over governance and economic management (World

Values Survey, 2020). The decline in trust is attributed to political controversies and economic instability that have affected public perception of the government.

In the Philippines, public trust in government has remained relatively high despite political challenges. The Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey reported that 76% of Filipinos expressed trust in their government in 2020, largely due to effective public service delivery and strong leadership (SWS, 2020). This high level of trust demonstrates the impact of government effectiveness on public perception in developing economies (Montiel & Chua, 2021).

In South Africa, another key developing economy, public trust in government has similarly been affected by corruption and economic challenges. The Afrobarometer survey reported that trust in the South African government dropped to 24% in 2018, reflecting growing public discontent with issues such as state capture and economic inequality (Afrobarometer, 2018). This trend underscores the critical need for effective governance and transparency to rebuild public trust in such contexts (Burger & Fourie, 2019).

Ethiopia has experienced an increase in public trust in government in recent years, particularly following political reforms and improved governance under the current administration. The Afrobarometer survey in 2021 reported that 67% of Ethiopians expressed trust in their government, a significant increase from previous years. This rise in trust can be attributed to efforts to address corruption, improve economic conditions, and promote political stability (Afrobarometer, 2021).

In Ghana, public trust in government has been relatively stable but shows periodic declines due to economic challenges and corruption. The Afrobarometer survey reported that 56% of Ghanaians trusted their government in 2020, a decrease from 62% in 2016, reflecting concerns over economic management and corruption (Afrobarometer, 2020). These trends highlight the ongoing struggle to maintain high levels of public trust amidst economic and political challenges (Mensah & Abor, 2019).

Kenya, another developing economy, has experienced fluctuating levels of public trust in government. The Afrobarometer survey reported that trust in the Kenyan government was at 44% in 2018, reflecting public concerns over corruption and governance issues (Afrobarometer, 2018). Despite efforts to address these concerns, maintaining high levels of public trust remains a significant challenge for Kenya. In Uganda, public trust in government has been influenced by political stability and economic conditions. The Afrobarometer survey in 2021 indicated that 54% of Ugandans trusted their government, a moderate level of trust that has remained relatively stable over recent years. This stability is linked to perceptions of government efforts in economic development and public service provision (Afrobarometer, 2021).

Conversely, Rwanda showcases a different trend, with high levels of public trust in government. The Afrobarometer survey indicated that 81% of Rwandans expressed trust in their government in 2021. This high trust level is attributed to effective governance, anti-corruption measures, and significant improvements in public services and infrastructure (Afrobarometer, 2021). These examples from Nigeria and Rwanda highlight the significant impact of governance quality and policy effectiveness on public trust in Sub-Saharan Africa (Posner & Young, 2018).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, public trust in government varies widely. Nigeria, for instance, has seen a decline in public trust, with the Afrobarometer survey reporting that only 33% of Nigerians trusted their government in 2020, down from 47% in 2014. This decline is primarily due to persistent issues such as corruption and security concerns (Afrobarometer, 2020). Ethiopia has experienced an increase in public trust in government in recent years, particularly following political reforms

and improved governance under the current administration. The Afrobarometer survey in 2021 reported that 67% of Ethiopians expressed trust in their government, a significant increase from previous years. This rise in trust can be attributed to efforts to address corruption, improve economic conditions, and promote political stability (Afrobarometer, 2021).

Crisis communication strategies are essential for managing public perception and maintaining trust during crises. These strategies can be categorized into four main types: instructing information, adjusting information, internalizing information, and bolstering. Instructing information provides essential details on how to respond to a crisis, often using channels like official websites, press releases, and social media. Adjusting information aims to help the public cope with the crisis by providing emotional support and reassurances, typically communicated through empathetic messages on social media and public addresses. Internalizing information focuses on educating the public about the crisis's causes and impacts, using in-depth reports and expert interviews on news channels and official publications. Lastly, bolstering strategies involve highlighting past successes and ongoing efforts to manage the crisis, often disseminated through newsletters, social media updates, and press conferences (Coombs & Holladay, 2020).

These crisis communication strategies are closely linked to public trust, as effective communication can significantly influence trust indices and public surveys. For instance, instructing information can enhance trust by providing clear and actionable steps, reducing uncertainty and fostering a sense of control among the public (Seeger, 2021). Adjusting information that acknowledges public fears and provides support can build emotional connections, enhancing trust in the authorities handling the crisis. Internalizing information that educates and informs the public can build credibility and transparency, further strengthening trust. Bolstering, by showcasing ongoing efforts and past successes, can reinforce confidence in the institution's ability to manage the crisis effectively (Reynolds & Quinn, 2018). The choice of channels, such as social media for real-time updates and traditional media for detailed analysis, also plays a crucial role in reaching different segments of the population and maintaining high levels of public trust.

## **Problem Statement**

The effectiveness of crisis communication strategies during health emergencies is crucial for maintaining public trust, yet there is a growing concern about the adequacy and impact of these strategies. Health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted significant gaps in communication, resulting in varying levels of public trust across different regions and demographics. Inconsistent messaging, lack of transparency, and failure to address public concerns have been identified as key issues undermining trust in health authorities and institutions (Reynolds & Quinn, 2018; Seeger, 2021). Despite the availability of diverse communication channels, the strategic use of these channels to convey clear, consistent, and credible information remains a challenge. Understanding how different crisis communication strategies impact public trust is essential for improving public health responses and ensuring compliance with health guidelines during emergencies (Coombs & Holladay, 2020).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, emphasizes the importance of selecting appropriate communication strategies during crises to protect an organization's reputation. SCCT suggests that the response should be tailored based on the nature of the crisis and the organization's perceived responsibility. This theory is relevant to

research on the impact of crisis communication strategies on public trust during health emergencies as it provides a structured approach to managing stakeholder perceptions and maintaining trust. By understanding and applying SCCT, health authorities can develop communication strategies that effectively address public concerns, demonstrate accountability, and thereby sustain or rebuild trust (Coombs, 2020).

### **Trust Determination Theory (TDT)**

Trust Determination Theory (TDT) posits that trust is based on perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity. Originated by Roy J. Lewicki and Barbara B. Bunker, TDT suggests that these three factors are critical in determining whether the public will trust an entity. This theory is particularly pertinent in the context of health emergencies, where trust in health authorities is crucial for public compliance and cooperation. Effective communication strategies that highlight the competence, goodwill, and ethical standards of health institutions can significantly influence public trust, as per TDT. This framework allows researchers to assess how various communication efforts impact public perceptions and trust levels during crises (Siegrist & Zingg, 2020).

### **Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo, explains the processes through which persuasive messages influence attitudes via two routes: central and peripheral. The central route focuses on the content and logic of the message, while the peripheral route relies on external cues such as the credibility of the source or emotional appeal. ELM is highly relevant to crisis communication strategies during health emergencies as it helps in designing messages that effectively persuade and influence public attitudes. By understanding which route is more effective under different circumstances, communicators can craft messages that enhance public trust and ensure better adherence to health guidelines (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 2019).

### **Empirical Review**

Malecki, Keating and Safdar (2021) aimed to understand public perceptions of COVID-19 communication strategies. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather comprehensive data. They surveyed a diverse sample of the population to assess their trust levels and perceptions of the communication they received during the pandemic. The findings indicated that transparency and the frequency of updates were significant factors in enhancing public trust. Specifically, respondents who received regular and clear updates reported higher trust levels in health authorities. The study highlighted that a lack of information or inconsistent messaging contributed to distrust and uncertainty. Furthermore, interviews revealed that people valued honesty and wanted authorities to admit uncertainties rather than provide misleading assurances. Based on these insights, the researchers recommended that health authorities prioritize transparent and frequent updates to foster and maintain public trust during health crises. They also suggested that communication should be consistent across different channels to avoid confusion. This study underscores the importance of clear and regular communication in managing public perceptions during health emergencies.

Liu, Austin and Jin (2020) analyzed the role of social media in crisis communication during the Zika virus outbreak. The study utilized content analysis of social media posts and a survey to assess public trust levels in the information disseminated through these platforms. The researchers found that timely and accurate information on social media significantly increased public trust. The analysis revealed that social media allowed for real-time updates and direct engagement with the

public, which were crucial in building trust. Additionally, the study showed that misinformation spread rapidly on social media, underscoring the need for health authorities to monitor and correct false information promptly. Surveys indicated that people trusted information more when it came from official health organizations and experts rather than unofficial sources. The researchers recommended leveraging social media as a primary tool for crisis communication, emphasizing the need for health authorities to actively engage with the public and provide timely updates. They also suggested implementing strategies to quickly identify and correct misinformation to maintain public trust during health emergencies.

Kim and Liu (2018) explored the impact of empathy in crisis communication on public trust during the Ebola outbreak. Using an experimental design, they tested different messaging strategies on participants and measured their trust levels and compliance with health guidelines. The study found that empathetic communication significantly improved public trust and willingness to follow health recommendations. Participants exposed to empathetic messages reported feeling more understood and supported, which translated into higher trust levels. The researchers emphasized that empathy helped bridge the gap between authorities and the public, making the communication more relatable and effective. They recommended incorporating empathetic language and addressing public fears and concerns directly in crisis messages. This approach was shown to foster stronger connections with the public and enhance trust during health emergencies. The study concluded that empathy should be a central component of crisis communication strategies to improve public trust and compliance with health measures.

van der Meer and Jin (2019) focused on the effects of misinformation correction strategies on public trust during health emergencies. The researchers conducted a survey-based experiment, presenting participants with misinformation about a health crisis and then various corrective strategies. The findings indicated that prompt and clear correction of misinformation could restore public trust effectively. Participants who received immediate and detailed corrections were more likely to trust the health authorities compared to those who did not receive any correction or received delayed corrections. The study highlighted the importance of addressing misinformation swiftly to prevent its spread and mitigate its impact on public trust. The researchers advised health authorities to establish protocols for actively monitoring and correcting misinformation during crises. They also recommended using authoritative sources and clear messaging to enhance the effectiveness of the corrections. The study underscored the critical role of accurate and timely information in maintaining public trust during health emergencies.

Seeger (2021) examined the effectiveness of risk communication frameworks in fostering public trust during pandemics. The study utilized expert panel discussions and case studies to analyze different communication strategies employed during various health crises. The results concluded that consistency and clarity in messaging were crucial for maintaining public trust. The expert panel emphasized that conflicting messages and changing guidelines could erode trust and create confusion. Case studies from past pandemics, including H1N1 and COVID-19, demonstrated that standardized communication protocols helped in delivering clear and consistent messages. The study recommended developing and adhering to risk communication frameworks that prioritize clarity, consistency, and transparency. Additionally, the importance of using trusted spokespersons and ensuring that all communication is evidence-based was highlighted. Seeger concluded that a well-structured communication strategy is essential for sustaining public trust during health emergencies.

Siegrist and Zingg (2020) assessed how different crisis communication strategies influenced trust in health institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. They conducted surveys to measure public trust and analyzed the communication strategies employed by health institutions across different countries. The findings highlighted that demonstrating competence and integrity in communications was crucial for building public trust. Respondents reported higher trust levels when health authorities provided clear, accurate, and evidence-based information. The study also found that trust was higher in countries where health institutions communicated proactively and transparently about the pandemic's progression and the measures being taken. The researchers suggested that health institutions focus on these elements to enhance trust during health crises. They recommended regular updates, transparency about uncertainties, and involvement of credible experts in communication efforts. This study underscores the importance of competence and integrity in crisis communication strategies to maintain public trust.

Coombs (2020) investigated the application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in public health crises. The study involved case studies of different health crises, including the H1N1 influenza and COVID-19, to analyze the communication strategies used by health authorities. Coombs found that aligning communication strategies with the level of organizational responsibility enhanced public trust. The study demonstrated that when health authorities acknowledged their responsibilities and provided clear, consistent messages, public trust was significantly higher. Conversely, deflecting responsibility or providing vague information led to decreased trust. Coombs recommended using SCCT to tailor crisis messages based on the specific context of the health emergency. He emphasized the importance of adapting communication strategies to the nature of the crisis and the perceived responsibility of the organization. The study highlighted the effectiveness of SCCT in managing public perceptions and maintaining trust during health emergencies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## **RESULTS**

### **Conceptual Gaps**

Despite numerous studies highlighting the importance of transparency, empathy, and timely updates in crisis communication, there remains a lack of comprehensive models integrating these elements into a unified framework for health emergencies. Malecki, Keating and Safdar (2021) emphasized the need for transparent and frequent updates, while Kim and Liu (2018) highlighted the role of empathy. However, there is limited research that combines these strategies into a cohesive communication model tailored specifically for health crises. Additionally, the role of digital misinformation correction strategies, as discussed by van der Meer and Jin (2019), needs to be more deeply integrated into existing crisis communication theories, such as SCCT, to provide a holistic approach.



## **Contextual Gaps**

The contextual application of crisis communication strategies during different types of health emergencies remains underexplored. Most studies, such as those by Malecki, Keating and Safdar (2021) on COVID-19 and Kim and Liu (2018) on Ebola, focus on specific crises without sufficiently addressing how these strategies might need to be adapted for different public health threats, such as bioterrorism or chemical attacks. Furthermore, Siegrist and Zingg (2020) identified the importance of demonstrating competence and integrity during the COVID-19 pandemic, but their findings might not translate directly to other contexts where the nature of the crisis and public expectations could differ significantly. More research is needed to explore how these communication strategies perform in varied crisis contexts and what modifications might be required.

## **Geographical Gaps**

Geographically, there is a significant concentration of research in Western countries, with limited studies focusing on how these strategies apply in non-Western contexts. Studies like those by Liu, Austin and Jin (2020) and Seeger (2021) primarily draw data from the United States and other developed nations. There is a need for more research in diverse geographical settings, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where cultural, economic, and infrastructural differences might influence the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies. Understanding these geographical variations can help tailor communication strategies to different regions, enhancing their relevance and impact.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

The impact of crisis communication strategies on public trust during health emergencies is profoundly significant. Effective crisis communication, characterized by transparency, empathy, timeliness, and accuracy, plays a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing public trust in health authorities. Studies have demonstrated that clear, consistent, and honest communication helps to mitigate uncertainty, reduce misinformation, and foster a sense of security and support among the public. Strategies that incorporate empathy and actively address public concerns are particularly effective in building stronger connections and trust. Additionally, the use of social media as a real-time communication tool has proven essential in engaging directly with the public and correcting misinformation promptly. However, there remain critical gaps in the current research, particularly in developing comprehensive models that integrate various effective communication elements and in exploring these strategies' applicability across different geographical and contextual settings. Addressing these gaps through further research can lead to the development of more refined and universally applicable crisis communication strategies, ultimately enhancing public trust and improving public health outcomes during emergencies.

### **Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

#### **Theory**

Developing an integrated crisis communication framework that combines transparency, empathy, timeliness, and accuracy can significantly enhance the theoretical understanding of effective communication during health emergencies. Such a framework would guide future research by

providing a comprehensive model that incorporates these crucial elements, which have been shown to impact public trust positively (Coombs, 2020; Seeger, 2021). Additionally, refining the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to include components specific to health crises, such as the role of empathy and strategies for correcting misinformation, would enhance its applicability. This adaptation would provide a robust theoretical foundation for tailoring communication strategies based on the unique challenges presented by health emergencies (Coombs, 2020). Furthermore, there is a need to develop cross-cultural theoretical models that account for variations in public trust and communication preferences across different cultures. These models would help researchers understand how diverse populations perceive and react to crisis communication, thereby guiding culturally sensitive strategies (Siegrist & Zingg, 2020).

### **Practice**

Establishing training programs for health communicators that focus on best practices for transparency, empathy, and misinformation correction is essential for improving crisis communication in practice. These programs should emphasize the importance of regular updates and consistent messaging to build and maintain public trust during health emergencies (Kim & Liu, 2018; Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2021). Leveraging social media platforms for real-time updates and direct engagement with the public is another practical recommendation. Health authorities should actively monitor and correct misinformation on these platforms, using them to provide timely and accurate information (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2020). Additionally, implementing standardized communication protocols that ensure clarity, consistency, and transparency across different health emergencies would enhance the effectiveness of crisis communication. These protocols should include guidelines for frequent updates and the involvement of credible experts in disseminating information (Seeger, 2021).

### **Policy**

Developing a policy framework that mandates transparent and frequent communication during health emergencies is crucial for ensuring public trust. This framework should outline the responsibilities of health authorities in providing clear, accurate, and timely information to the public, thereby fostering trust and reducing uncertainty (Coombs, 2020). Establishing regulations that require health authorities to actively monitor and correct misinformation during health crises is also essential. Policies should support the creation of dedicated teams within health institutions to address false information swiftly and effectively (van der Meer & Jin, 2019). Additionally, creating policies that ensure crisis communication strategies are culturally sensitive and inclusive would enhance their effectiveness. These policies should mandate the use of culturally relevant messaging and the involvement of local community leaders to build trust and compliance across diverse populations (Siegrist & Zingg, 2020).

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