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Crisis Communication and Consumer Trust in Higher Education: A Case Study of Administrative Response to a Student Conflict

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of Crisis Communication in determining Student Trust within the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) following an internal conflict. Focusing on the case of a student conflict at Sulaimani Polytechnic University in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, the research addresses a significant gap by examining the generalizability of crisis communication theories in a non-Western setting characterized by distinct power dynamics and cultural expectations. Utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey methodology, data were collected from 131 students via proportional quota sampling to assess their perceptions of the university's communication response and their subsequent level of trust. Simple linear regression analysis revealed a statistically robust and highly significant positive relationship between Crisis Communication and Student Trust ($\beta = 0.778, p < 0.001$). The model explained 60.5% of the variance in student trust ($R^2 = 0.605$), demonstrating that the quality of the administrative communication response was the most powerful predictor of student confidence following the crisis. The findings confirm that timely, transparent, and accommodative communication strategies are instrumental in trust repair across diverse institutional and cultural settings. The study concludes by providing practical recommendations for HEI administrators to prioritize proactive and responsible communication to preserve institutional trust and maintain a resilient educational environment.

Keywords: Consumer Trust, Crisis. Communication, Student Conflict, Trust Repair, Crisis Response.

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AI usage declaration

The authors declares that the content of this work was not generated using AI.

Author contribution

The authors have contributed solely to all aspects of this research work.

Ethics information

Ethics approval was not required for this research.

Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Original article?

The researcher's work focused on Crisis Communication and Consumer Trust in Higher Education: A Case Study of Administrative Response to a Student Conflict.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Organizational credibility depends fundamentally on effective crisis management and transparent communication (Ahmad, 2012). Identifying crisis types is crucial, as different crises require different strategies (Coombs, 1999). Lerbinger (1997) categorizes crises into eight types, including confrontation crises, which specifically involve disputes between groups. The incident involving student conflict at Sulaimani Polytechnic University, where some students engaged in physical assault against others, clearly falls within this category, posing significant challenges for the university administration in maintaining internal trust and stability. Studying such incidents offers important understandings into crisis management effectiveness, particularly within the higher education sector. Crucially, the body of literature on HEI crisis management remains heavily focused on Western, individualistic societies.

This study addresses a critical gap by examining a conflict in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where distinct cultural factors such as collectivism, specific institutional power dynamics, and local rule of law significantly shape both administrative communication strategies and student expectations of trust and accountability. Effective crisis communication is essential, as it can prevent negative public reactions (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Conversely, ineffective communication with the impacted public serves as a poor example of crisis management (Petrovici, 2014). The rapid evolution of social media further compels organizations to adopt faster and more responsive communication strategies, as effective crisis communication through these channels is crucial in shaping public perception and trust (Civelek et al., 2016).

1.2. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

The management of crises in higher education institutions has become increasingly critical due to the complex and volatile environment in which these institutions operate (Utomo et al., 2024). Crisis management refers to the processes and strategies institutions use to mitigate, respond to, and recover from crises, which can include student conflicts, natural disasters, or health emergencies (Hutchins & Wang, 2008; Coombs & Laufer, 2018; Savelides et al., 2015). Effective crisis management involves not only the implementation of a comprehensive plan but also fostering a culture of resilience and open communication (Youngblood, 2010).

While higher education institutions frequently face crises, there is limited empirical evidence on how their communication during such events influences students' trust. In particular, universities in non-Western contexts remain underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in sustaining institutional credibility. This lack of clarity poses a challenge for university leaders seeking to maintain student confidence during crises. Student trust, however, is crucial for maintaining student satisfaction and loyalty. It is influenced by how institutions handle crises, as transparent and responsive management can enhance trust, while mishandling can erode it (Coombs, 2007).

Given these circumstances, this study aims to explore how effective crisis management impacts consumer trust within a higher education setting, focusing on the case of the student conflict at Sulaimani Polytechnic University. The objectives of this study are to examine the relationship between crisis communication and students' trust in higher education institutions, assess the extent to which crisis

communication predicts variations in student trust, and provide practical recommendations for improving institutional communication practices to strengthen trust during periods of crisis.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Similar to other higher education institutions, Sulaimani Polytechnic University operates within a complex environment where crises can disrupt not only academic activities but also relationships with diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, and external partners. Recent global events—most notably the COVID-19 pandemic—have underscored the critical importance of robust crisis preparedness and effective communication strategies in this sector (Benner, Grant, & O’Kane, 2022). By examining how administrative responses to the specific student conflicts at Sulaimani Polytechnic University affect student trust, this study contributes to a critical understanding of how HEIs can improve their crisis management practices to foster a more resilient and trustworthy educational environment. The research’s primary significance lies in its focus on the Kurdistan region, which serves as a unique non-Western context for testing the generalizability of crisis communication theories. This addresses a significant geographic and cultural gap in the literature, particularly concerning how institutional trust is mediated by communication in societies characterized by different power dynamics and collective social structures. This research is important because it addresses a gap in understanding how crisis management, specifically crisis communication, impacts student trust, a factor which Locke and Sullivan (2014) confirm is essential for the long-term success and reputation of higher education institutions. This study's structure follows this progression: Section 2 critically reviews the literature and establishes the theoretical framework (SCCT), culminating in the development of the core research hypothesis (H_1). Section 3 outlines the quantitative methodology, data collection, and measurement instruments. Section 4 presents the descriptive and inferential statistical results, including reliability, correlation, and regression analysis. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications of the finding, proposes practical recommendations, and identifies limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Developmen

2.1. Crisis Communication in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Crisis communication forms an essential component of crisis management, facilitating the critical flow of information necessary for effective decision-making and stakeholder engagement during uncertain and urgent situations. Crisis communication can be categorized into two primary types: crisis knowledge management and stakeholder reaction management (Coombs, 2009). Crisis knowledge management encompasses the internal efforts of crisis teams to gather, analyze, and interpret information to make informed decisions. This process involves systematic information collection and knowledge creation to develop effective public responses during crises, ensuring that decision-making is founded on reliable knowledge. In contrast, stakeholder reaction management focuses on communicative strategies designed to shape stakeholder perceptions of both the crisis and the

organization's response, thereby mitigating negative reactions and maintaining trust during instable times, which is an essential aspect of preserving organizational reputation during difficulty. Crisis management advances across three distinct phases that are pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Each presenting unique communication challenges and strategies. The pre-crisis phase emphasizes risk identification and reduction through proactive measures, as highlighted in the anticipatory model of crisis management (Olaniran & Williams, 2008). This phase prioritizes prevention by anticipating potential crises and developing risk mitigation strategies. Wan and Pfau (2004) suggest that pre-crisis messages can function as a form of inoculation for stakeholders, providing information that builds resilience against negative reactions and media portrayals. This approach aligns with research indicating that establishing a strong reputation before a crisis benefits organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2006; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). González-Herrero and Pratt (1996) further elaborated on this concept by proposing a proactive symmetrical crisis management process comprising four key steps: issues management through environmental scanning to identify potential crises early; planning prevention by creating strategies to prevent known issues from escalating; crisis response, which involves activating crisis plans, assembling teams, and appointing spokespersons; and post-crisis evaluation, involving ongoing communication with stakeholders and assessment of crisis management effectiveness.

During the crisis phase, organizations must execute their crisis communication plans, respond effectively to media inquiries, and engage with stakeholders through transparent, timely, and consistent communication to foster trust and credibility. Practitioners must ensure spokespersons are well-trained in effective message delivery and avoid phrases like "no comment," which can imply guilt (Guth, 1995). Organizations must also address the complex emotional dynamics that stakeholders experience during crises, including fear and uncertainty, by providing clear, actionable guidance. Following the crisis, the post-crisis phase requires organizations to evaluate their crisis management efforts, communicate lessons learned to stakeholders, and monitor media coverage and stakeholder sentiments to understand the long-term impact of the crisis. This phase is crucial for rebuilding trust and reputation as stakeholders assess the organization's response and recovery efforts, with ongoing communication ensuring that stakeholders remain informed and engaged in an environment of accountability and transparency.

Preparation and training represent cornerstones of effective crisis communication, garnering significant attention from both practitioners and academics. Training for spokespersons and crisis teams is essential to enhance communication skills and decision-making abilities. Research on effective communication practices has shaped guidelines for spokespersons, highlighting the importance of maintaining eye contact, minimizing vocal fillers, and presenting oneself confidently to convey credibility (Feeley & de Turck, 1995). These practices help prevent misinterpretations and ensure that stakeholders receive messages positively. Crisis team exercises are central for enhancing management skills and situational awareness and the ability to understand and respond to crisis dynamics based on available information. Effective communication provides the necessary insights for informed decision-making in developing situational awareness (Kolfshoten & Appelman, 2006).

Risk communication, though often underutilized in the pre-crisis phase, holds substantial potential for bolstering crisis preparation. The extended parallel process model (EPPM) explains how risk communication impacts community members (Witte, Meyer, & Martell, 2001), suggesting that fear can motivate individuals to take action if they perceive a threat as relevant and significant. For instance, residents near hazardous facilities may recognize the need for preparedness. Effective risk communication helps individuals understand actions they can take in response to potential threats, such as participating in preparedness exercises to learn about emergency plans, evacuation routes, and shelter-in-place strategies. This knowledge fosters self-efficacy and response efficacy, enhancing compliance with crisis communication (Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009). Integrating

risk communication into crisis preparation can cultivate vigilance among community members, countering complacency that often results from a false sense of security. Research indicates that when pre-crisis messages align with the audience's demographics and concerns, compliance and engagement are more likely to improve (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009).

Crisis communication represents a multifaceted discipline integral to effective crisis management. Understanding the types of crisis communication, the phases of crisis management, and the significance of preparation and training is vital for organizations aiming to navigate crises successfully. By fostering proactive communication strategies and incorporating risk communication into their preparations, organizations can enhance resilience and better manage stakeholder perceptions during crises.

2.2. Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the Theoretical Framework

The present study utilizes the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Timothy Coombs, as its primary theoretical lens to explain the mechanism by which administrative actions affect student trust. SCCT is a widely adopted framework in public relations that posits that crisis managers should select communication strategies based on the level of responsibility publics attribute to the organization for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The theory categorizes crisis response strategies along a continuum, ranging from highly defensive (denial, attacking the accuser) to highly accommodative (apology, compensation, corrective action).

SCCT is predicated on the idea that reputation and trust are directly linked to the crisis response. In contexts where the organization has high crisis responsibility, like an internal student conflict where administrative action or inaction is perceived as a contributing factor, accommodative response strategies are necessary for effective reputation and trust repair (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). These accommodative responses, which typically involve expressing sympathy, taking responsibility, and detailing corrective actions, align with the notion of transparent and sincere communication.

Conversely, defensive strategies like denial, minimizing, or shifting the blame are predicted by SCCT to severely erode stakeholder trust and compound reputational damage.

By measuring students' perception of the university's Crisis Communication (which encompasses the observed transparency, timeliness, and action taken), this study is essentially testing the success of the university's crisis response strategy as judged by SCCT's principles. The theory therefore provides the formal justification for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that perceived compliance with accommodative communication practices (the hallmark of effective crisis response under SCCT) will lead to higher levels of Student Trust.

2.3. Crisis Response, Transparency, and Trust Repair

Effective and transparent communication (or Confidence) is essential for building and maintaining trust during crisis management (Adams, Dust & Piccolo 2013). Trusted leaders' self-awareness strengthens crisis communication and trust-building (Belasen & Eisenberg, 2023). Crisis communication and trustworthiness go hand in hand, making it difficult to prioritize one over the other. (Badu, Kruke, & Saetren, 2023). A comparative analysis of crisis management across industries by Citrawijaya, Susanto & Amalia (2024) highlights that timely, transparent, and empathetic communication is key to maintaining reputation and building stakeholder trust. Reed (2014) argues that clear and transparent communication, particularly through accommodative and blended crisis response strategies, is essential for restoring consumer trust after a corporate crisis, with a significant positive impact on trust recovery across all media channels. Boyd (2003) argues that organizations build trust online through strategic rhetorical techniques, emphasizing transparency, consistency, and audience engagement to establish credibility in digital communication.

Hirschfeld and Thielsch (2022) state that denying a crisis leads to the most negative outcomes, while rebuilding trust or highlighting past good behavior are more effective strategies for maintaining public trust. Savo (2023) states that crisis communication and personalization are key to building and

maintaining consumer trust during crises. Transparent communication and adding customer-focused value, such as service improvement and expertise sharing, play critical roles in trust restoration. Nguyen (2024) states that effective social media crisis management requires rapid, transparent, and proactive communication to maintain stakeholder trust. Honesty and preemptive engagement are essential in mitigating misinformation and preventing crisis escalation. Marsen (2020) states that rapid crisis responses are essential in minimizing reputational damage and restoring control during organizational crises. Delayed responses are less effective and often exacerbate public and stakeholder concerns. Abdelzadeh and Sedelius (2024) claim that satisfaction with crisis communication directly enhances institutional trust during crises.

Hegner, Beldad, and Kraesgenberg (2016) suggest that a rebuilding response strategy is crucial for restoring consumer trust and boosting purchase intentions after a crisis, as it demonstrates the company's commitment to accountability and effectively addressing the issue. Kim et al. (2004) found that apologies are more effective than denials in repairing trust violations, with apologies best suited for competence-based violations and denials for integrity-based ones. In today's fast-paced world, managing public perception through effective crisis communication is crucial for maintaining trust and reputation (Dostuyeva et al., 2024). Alrawabdeh et al. (2020) state that proactive crisis communication, characterized by swift and transparent responses, is significantly more effective in trust repair than delayed strategies. Their analysis demonstrates that timely responses not only address public concerns more effectively but also help mitigate reputational damage more efficiently. Tye (2010) and Vistbacka (2017) discuss the challenges and strategies of communication in the social media era, emphasizing the need for organizations to adapt to the fast-paced, interactive nature of digital platforms while maintaining the organization's image through transparent communication. Shore (2003) emphasizes that during times of uncertainty, trust is essential for effective communication, highlighting its critical role in maintaining clear and reliable information flow.

2.4. Consumer Trust in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Consumer trust in higher education institutions (HEIs) is a critical factor that influences student satisfaction, loyalty, and overall reputation of the institutions. Trust is a fundamental element in the relationship between students and HEIs. According to Lewicka (2022), trust in student-university relations is essential for the quality of the educational process and the satisfaction achieved by students. Similarly, Wilkins (2018) emphasizes that university reputation and student trust are significant predictors of student identification with the institution, which in turn influences student satisfaction and loyalty.

Several factors contribute to building and maintaining trust in higher education. Zhou (2023) highlights the importance of trust between tutors and students, noting that trust is crucial for teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Additionally, Amzat (2021) found that student satisfaction, trust, social identification, and loyalty are interconnected, with trust playing a pivotal role in student satisfaction. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of crisis preparedness and management in higher education. Benner, Grant, and O'Kane (2022) discuss how HEIs have had to adapt rapidly to ensure continuity of educational services while maintaining student trust during the pandemic. This adaptation has highlighted the need for effective crisis management strategies to build and sustain trust.

Institutional reputation is closely linked to consumer trust. According to Locke and Sullivan (2014), trust is a key component of governance in higher education institutions, and it significantly impacts the institution's reputation. Trust violations can occur in higher education, and it is important to have mechanisms in place to repair trust. Lewicka (2022) identifies various trust repair practices, including ad hoc and informal methods, which are applied at HEIs to restore trust after violations. These practices are crucial for maintaining a positive relationship between students and the institution. Trust is also important in transnational education partnerships. Wilkins (2018) found that trust and

institutional reputation are significant predictors of student identification with partner institutions in transnational education.

Student engagement is influenced by the level of trust students have in their institution. Zhou (2023) argues that trust can be strengthened through co-engagement activities that aim at meaningful pedagogical ends. This approach fosters a sense of community and trust between students and educators. Service quality is another factor that impacts consumer trust in higher education. Sultan and Wong (2012) found that service quality influences student satisfaction and trust in HEIs. The authors suggest that universities should focus on providing high-quality services to build and maintain trust. Student loyalty is closely linked to trust. Najimdeen, Amzat, and Badrasawi (2021) found that trust is a significant predictor of student loyalty in Malaysian public universities. This finding highlights the importance of trust in fostering long-term relationships between students and HEIs.

Effective governance is essential for building and maintaining trust in HEIs. Ott and Matthews (2015) emphasize that trust is a critical component of effective academic governance, highlighting the importance of both structural processes and the cultivation of a culture that promotes trust among stakeholders. Similarly, Huisman and Currie (2004) argue that good university governance practices, such as transparency and accountability, enhance the quality of research and create a supportive learning environment. Moreover, Kezar (2004) discusses the role of trust in educational leadership and management, suggesting that strong relationships and trust are more important to effective governance than formal structures and processes. According to Abdelaziz (2022), good governance enhances the performance of higher education institutions by improving accountability, participation, inclusivity, and resource management. The study recommends strengthening organizational culture before implementing governance reforms. Additionally, Khalid Zaman notes that stronger governance indicators, like political stability and rule of law, significantly enhance educational outcomes and are essential for formulating effective policies that promote the internationalization of universities. Together, these perspectives highlight the role of effective governance in creating trust, improving performance, and achieving positive educational outcomes in higher education.

2.5. Hypothesis Development

Based on the synthesis of the literature, which emphasizes that timely, transparent, and responsive crisis communication strategies are fundamental to building and repairing consumer trust (as theoretically grounded by SCCT), the study tests the following key relationship:

Conceptual Research Model

The proposed conceptual model posits that Crisis Communication (Independent Variable) directly and positively predicts Student Trust (Dependent Variable), as formally tested by Hypothesis 1 (H_1).

Table 1. Research Model

| Hypothesis | Relationship | Rational based on Literature Review |
|------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| H_1 | Crisis Communication → Consumer Trust | The literature, supported by SCCT principles, indicates that effective, timely, and transparent communication is the primary mechanism for mitigating reputational damage and restoring trust among stakeholders during organizational crises (Reed, 2014; Nguyen, 2024; Abdelzadeh and Sedelius, 2024). |

The alternative hypothesis (H_1) posits a significant positive relationship, while the null hypothesis (H_0) states that Crisis Communication has no significant effect on Student Trust.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and sampling

Data for this study were collected using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey methodology administered through Google Forms. This approach was chosen for its efficiency in reaching a large student population and ensuring anonymity, which is crucial for sensitive topics related to administrative trust and conflict. The sampling method employed was non-random proportional quota sampling, a technique utilized to ensure the final sample was representative of the departmental structure within the target population, which was the student body of the Technical College of Administration (TCA) at Sulaimani Polytechnic University, where the conflict incident occurred. The population was stratified based on the four key academic departments within the TCA: Technical Accounting, Technical Media, Technical Management, and Public Relations (PR) and Marketing. The data collection process began by sending the Google Form link to the survey questionnaire initially to the heads of these four specified departments. The department heads were then asked to distribute the survey link to their respective students, who were invited to voluntarily participate. Data collection began on April 19, 2025, and continued until the predetermined target number of responses across the combined departmental strata was reached, concluding on April 28, 2025. This target was established in the same proportions as the actual enrolment numbers of students in those departments within the TCA, thereby ensuring the sample was proportionally representative of the college's population structure. This method mitigated some of the risks of non-random sampling by controlling for key demographic representation.

3.2. Variables and Measures

The study utilizes two primary constructs: Crisis Communication (independent variable) and Consumer Trust (dependent variable). Both constructs were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

To ensure that the measurement of the Crisis Communication construct was grounded in the specific events under study, the online survey presented participants with the university's official communications related to the conflict. Specifically, participants were shown one post published by the university on their official Facebook page on the day of the conflict, and a subsequent post on the official university website six days after the conflict detailing the university president's visit to the injured students in the hospital. The website post was also shared as a link on the Facebook page. Participants were asked to evaluate the perceived quality, accuracy, and thoroughness of the information provided by the institution in these communications during the conflict.

The construct of Crisis Communication was measured using a scale adapted from Bordia et al. (2004). The scale consisted of six items, focusing on the perceived quality, accuracy, and thoroughness of the information provided by the institution during the conflict. These items assessed various aspects of the university's response, such as its ability to keep students informed about policies and communicate the actions taken to deal with the student conflict. Two representative examples of the items included in the scale are: "The university kept me informed about the policies to deal with the student conflict at the university," and "The university provided as much information as possible about the student conflict and its investigation."

The construct of Consumer Trust, applied here as student trust in the university, was measured using an adapted version of the Delgado-Ballester Brand Trust Scale (BTS), an instrument recognized in consumer research (Ha & Perks, 2005). The trust scale included eight questions, focusing on the institution's perceived integrity, reliability, and goodwill during the crisis. The items covered the university's sincerity and effectiveness in addressing student concerns, including statements such as:

"Sulaimani Polytechnic University was honest and sincere in addressing my concerns about the student conflict," and "I feel confident in Sulaimani Polytechnic University's ability to manage crises." This adapted scale was used to measure student perceptions of the institution's ability to manage and resolve the crisis effectively. While both the independent and dependent variables were measured using the same method (self-report survey), which raises the potential for Common Method Bias (CMB), procedural remedies were employed during data collection, including ensuring respondent anonymity and separating the measurement of the constructs within the survey instrument, to mitigate this risk.

4. Data analysis and Hypothesis Testing

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

A total of 131 student participants from the Technical College of Administration (TCA) at Sulaimani Polytechnic University voluntarily completed the survey. The demographic profile of the participants was analyzed to ensure the sample adequately reflected the target population and the proportional quota sampling objectives. The sample included 53 male participants, representing 40.5% of the total, and 78 female participants, accounting for 59.5%. This slight majority of female respondents is reflective of typical enrolment trends in administration and technical fields. Consistent with the proportional quota sampling strategy, the distribution across the four specified departments was recorded, with the Management department contributing the largest share of respondents at 46 participants (35.1%). This was followed by Technical Accounting with 36 participants (27.5%), Public Relations and Marketing with 29 participants (22.1%), and Technical Media with 20 participants (15.3%). Furthermore, the sample was heavily skewed toward newer students, with Freshman students comprising the largest category at 67 participants (51.1%). The remaining academic years included 27 Sophomore students (20.6%), 22 Senior students (16.8%), and 15 Junior students (11.5%). This distribution suggests that the perceptions of first-year students, who may have been more recently affected or newly integrated, hold significant weight in the overall findings. The following table summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 131 respondents:

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics

| Variable | Category | No. of Participants | Proportion (%) |
|----------|------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 53 | 40.5% |
| | Female | 78 | 59.5% |
| Major | Accounting | 36 | 27.5 |
| | Management | 46 | 35.1 |
| | Media | 20 | 15.3 |
| | PR and Marketing | 29 | 22.1 |
| Year | Freshman | 67 | 51.1% |
| | Sophomore | 27 | 20.6% |
| | Junior | 15 | 11.5% |
| | Senior | 22 | 16.8 |

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics Overview

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were performed using SPSS version 27.0.1.0. The results, which include means, standard deviations (SD), and Pearson correlation coefficients (r), are presented in Table 2. This table provides an overview of the descriptive data and the interrelationships between the variables examined: Age, Crisis Communication, and Consumer Trust.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

| Variable | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------------------|-------|-------|--------|----------|---|
| Age | 22.54 | 5.630 | 1 | | |
| Crisis Communication | 4.572 | 1.361 | -0.020 | 1 | |
| Consumer Trust | 4.615 | 1.334 | -0.016 | 0.778 ** | 1 |

Note: $N = 131$; $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$

Correlation Analysis

The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between Crisis Communication and Consumer Trust ($r = 0.778$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals who perceive stronger crisis communication efforts are more likely to report higher levels of consumer trust. In contrast, Age showed negligible and non-significant correlations with both Crisis Communication ($r = -0.020$, $p > 0.05$) and Consumer Trust ($r = -0.016$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting that age does not play a meaningful role in shaping perceptions of crisis communication or trust in this sample.

4.3. The value of the Alpha Cronbach coefficient

The internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales (Crisis Communication and Consumer Trust combined) were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The analysis of the 14 items across both constructs yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.940. This value is well above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 and indicates an excellent level of internal consistency and reliability for the combined scale, confirming that the items cohesively measure the intended concepts within the student sample.

Table 4. Reliability Statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|------------------|------------|
| 0.940 | 14 |

4.4. Model Summary

The predictive power of Crisis Communication on Consumer Trust was assessed using simple linear regression. Table 4 presents the Model Summary, illustrating the fit and explanatory ability of the model.

Table 5. Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimates |
|-------|-------|----------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 0.778 | 0.605 | 0.602 | 0.84151 |

The results indicate a strong fit for the model, evidenced by a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.778, consistent with the earlier correlation analysis. The R Square value of 0.605 demonstrates that Crisis Communication accounts for approximately 60.5% of the variance in Consumer Trust. This substantial percentage signifies that the perceived quality of the university's crisis communication is a highly impactful predictor of student trust levels following the conflict. The Adjusted R Square value (0.602) confirms this strong effect size.

4.5. ANOVA

The ANOVA test was used to examine the overall statistical significance of the regression model, determining whether the linear relationship between Crisis Communication and Consumer Trust is statistically reliable.

Table 6. ANOVA Table

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|---------|-------|
| Regression | 140.077 | 1 | 140.077 | 197.811 | 0.000 |
| Residual | 91.394 | 129 | 0.708 | | |
| Total | 231.426 | 130 | | | |

The results from the ANOVA table confirm that the regression model is statistically highly significant $F(1, 129) = 197.811, p < 0.001$. The F ratio is far greater than 1, and the significance value (Sig. = 0.000) indicates that the probability of observing this result by chance is less than 0.1%. This confirms that the relationship between Crisis Communication and Consumer Trust is genuine and reliable within this sample.

4.6. Coefficients

The Coefficients table provides the necessary values to describe the magnitude and direction of the relationship between the independent variable (Crisis Communication) and the dependent variable (Consumer Trust), allowing for the formal testing of Hypothesis 1.

Table 7. Coefficients Table

| Predictor | Unstandardized Coefficients (B) | Std. Error | Standardized Coefficient (β) | t | Sig. |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|--------|-------|
| Constant | 1.129 | 0.258 | | 4.367 | 0.000 |
| Crisis Communication | 0.762 | 0.054 | 0.778 | 14.065 | 0.000 |

4.7. Hypothesis Test Results

The analysis of the coefficients confirms a highly significant positive effect of Crisis Communication on Consumer Trust, providing the formal test for Hypothesis 1 (H_1). The significance value for Crisis Communication is $p = 0.000$ (Sig. < 0.001); as this value is less than the conventional α level of 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0 : Crisis Communication has no significant effect on Student Trust) is rejected, and Hypothesis 1 (H_1) is supported. This relationship is robust, with the standardized coefficient Beta ($\beta = 0.778$) indicating that for every one standard deviation increase in the perception of Crisis Communication quality, Student Trust increases by 0.778 standard deviations, representing a very large and meaningful effect. The specific predictive equation derived from the unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.762$) and the Constant (Intercept = 1.129) is:

$$\text{Consumer Trust} = 1.129 + (0.762 \times \text{Crisis Communication}) \quad (1)$$

As it appears in Eq. (1), for every one unit increase in the perceived quality of Crisis Communication (on the 7-point scale), Consumer Trust increases by 0.762 units.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion of Findings

The central objective of this study was to examine the relationship between Crisis Communication and Student Trust at Sulaimani Polytechnic University following a period of internal conflict. The regression analysis yielded a statistically robust and highly significant finding, indicating a strong positive effect of the university's Crisis Communication on the students' Trust. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 (H_1), which posited that Crisis Communication positively affects Student Trust, was supported ($\beta = 0.778$, $p < 0.001$).

The model's substantial explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.605$) highlights the critical role communication played in shaping student perceptions of the institution's trustworthiness. By accounting for over 60% of the variance in trust, the study confirms that, in this crisis context, the manner and content of the university's messaging were paramount to trust repair. This finding strongly aligns with the established literature review, which emphasizes that timeliness, transparency, and accommodative strategies are key to mitigating reputational damage and restoring stakeholder confidence (Reed, 2014; Nguyen, 2024). The high β coefficient (0.778) suggests that students highly value clear, proactive information (as measured by the adapted Bordia et al. scale), confirming the theoretical premise that transparent communication is essential for public confidence (Shore, 2003).

The statistically significant positive relationship validates the application of general crisis communication theory, which is traditionally focused on consumer-brand relationships, to the Higher Education environment. It demonstrates that students act as critical stakeholders, whose trust in the institution's integrity and goodwill is directly contingent upon the administrative response during a crisis.

5.2. Conclusion

This research confirms that effective Crisis Communication is a very important determinant of Student Trust in Higher Education Institutions, particularly in the aftermath of internal conflict. The findings underscore that administrative efforts to provide clear, accurate, and timely information are not merely procedural requirements but are instrumental in maintaining the institution's legitimacy and fostering student confidence. For Sulaimani Polytechnic University, the quality of its communication response was the most powerful factor in either reinforcing or diminishing student trust.

5.3. Implications and Recommendations

5.3.1. Theoretical Implications

This study makes a theoretical contribution by successfully extending the established models of crisis communication and consumer trust into the specific, sensitive context of an HEI experiencing an internal conflict. It provides empirical evidence supporting the notion that the psychological and behavioral dynamics governing brand trust translate directly to institutional trust in an academic setting.

5.3.2. Practical Recommendations

Based on the highly significant findings, the administration of Sulaimani Polytechnic University and other HEIs should take several key actions. Institutions must Prioritize Proactive Communication by establishing a dedicated, rapid-response communication protocol that ensures the dissemination of accurate information within hours of an event, as delaying information creates a vacuum filled by speculation that ultimately erodes trust. Furthermore, communication must aim to foster transparency and sincerity by structuring messages to address the core issue honestly, specifically avoiding defensive or denial strategies, which the literature confirms have the most negative impact on trust (Hirschfeld and Thielsch, 2022). To ensure broad and consistent messaging given a diverse student body, institutions should utilize multiple channels, disseminating official updates across platforms like official email, the university website, and official social media. Finally, it is crucial to Embrace Accountability by using accommodative language that demonstrates institutional responsibility and clearly outlines specific corrective actions being taken, a process the literature shows is crucial for a successful rebuilding response strategy (Hegner, Beldad, and Kraesgenberg, 2016).

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, as a cross-sectional study, it captured student perceptions at a single point in time; it cannot establish causality or track how trust changes over the long term. Second, the use of non-random proportional quota sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings to the entire university population or other HEIs. A third, and most critical, limitation stems from the specific context: while the study highlights the importance of Crisis Communication in a non-Western, collectivistic culture (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), the current model does not explore the potential moderating role of cultural factors. Cultural dimensions, such as power distance (PD) and collectivism, may influence both how students perceive authority (the university) and their trust. Future research should be designed to address these limitations. Primarily, a longitudinal study is recommended to track the decay or recovery of student trust over several months following a crisis event, providing a clearer view of trust dynamics over time. Scholars should also explicitly test a moderated model where cultural variables (e.g., self-reported collectivism or PD) interact with Crisis Communication to predict Student Trust. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to expand the scope of the study to include multiple HEIs in different cultural settings to assess whether the strong relationship found between Crisis Communication and Student Trust is generalizable across various university contexts and cultural norms.

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