

Digital Crisis Governance: A Systematic Study of Government Crisis Communication in The Social Media Era (2020–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach guided by the PRISMA framework, with literature curated from the Scopus database covering the 2020–2025 period. The synthesis of 28 selected articles reveals three main findings. First, government crisis communication is evolving from a reactive model to a proactive and sustainable one, aligning with the Ongoing Crisis Communication (OCC) framework, which emphasizes pre-, during-, and post-crisis communication as integral elements of the governance process. Second, the effectiveness of digital crisis communication is primarily determined by the configuration of speed, accuracy, empathy, message consistency, and “adaptive transparency”—a concept that considers public literacy and the audience’s psychological state—as formulated in the CERC model and supported by empirical findings across multiple platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Weibo). Third, recent studies underscore that public trust is not built merely through data transparency but also through perceptions of the government’s goodwill, integrity, and capacity to manage collective emotions (affective publics), as well as collaboration with external actors such as independent media, fact-checkers, and citizen journalists to counter disinformation. Moreover, the political and cultural context moderates the success of communication strategies: authoritarian regimes tend to excel in speed and message consistency but are limited in substantive participation, whereas democracies often grapple with polarization and legitimacy contestation. This study concludes that government crisis communication in the digital era should be understood as digital crisis governance—an integrated process combining adaptive transparency, strategic empathy, and cross-actor collaboration to strengthen legitimacy and public trust sustainably.

KEYWORDS Government Crisis Communication; Social Media; Public Trust; Disinformation; Digital Crisis Governance.



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INTRODUCTION

Crises are an integral part of the dynamics of modern governance. Whether in the form of natural disasters, pandemics, political crises, or reputational damage, all require governments to communicate quickly, transparently, and empathetically with the public. Over the past two decades, government crisis communication has undergone fundamental changes alongside the development of digital technology and social media. Digital transformation has not only accelerated information dissemination but also changed the interaction patterns between the state and society, shifting from hierarchical relationships to more participatory and open two-way communication (Turunen, MacKay et al., 2022).

These developments have made crisis communication not merely a means of delivering messages but a crucial mechanism in trust-based governance. Governments are now expected not only to provide factual information but also to demonstrate empathy and emotional presence to reassure the public (Hassan & Lee, 2023; Ford et al., 2024). Numerous studies have shown that the effectiveness of crisis communication depends on the government’s ability to build trust, manage public emotions, and adapt to an interactive media ecosystem saturated with disinformation (Sheldenkar et al., 2024; Venkatraman & Larsen, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a pivotal moment for testing the crisis communication capacity of governments worldwide (Ajwang & Mac'Ouma, 2021). This crisis demonstrated that transparency without empathy can breed distrust, while empathy without accuracy can sow confusion (Narimani et al., 2023; Kahlawi et al., 2025). In this context, the role of social media is paradoxical: it accelerates the dissemination of official information but simultaneously opens space for misinformation and opinion polarization (Zhang, 2024; Erokhin, 2025). Therefore, government crisis communication in the digital era must be understood not only as a technical strategy but also as a complex social, emotional, and political process (Abbas & Ahmad, 2023; Taniguchi, 2022; Zheng, 2023).

The urgency of this research is reinforced by the increasing frequency and complexity of crises facing societies globally—from pandemics and climate-related disasters to cyberattacks and geopolitical instability. In each of these crises, effective government communication is not a luxury but a necessity for saving lives, maintaining social order, and preserving democratic legitimacy (García-García & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2023). Understanding how governments can communicate more effectively in the digital age, build and sustain public trust, and combat the corrosive effects of disinformation is, therefore, a matter of profound practical importance (Fernández Alcaide, 2023). This study is timely because it seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can help governments worldwide improve their crisis communication capacity.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive and systematic synthesis of the most recent literature (2020–2025) on government crisis communication in the social media era. Unlike earlier reviews that focused only on single dimensions—such as trust, technology, or specific crisis types—this study integrates findings across multiple domains, including emotional engagement, trust dynamics, disinformation challenges, and the moderating role of political context. From this synthesis, the study proposes a new integrated conceptual framework: digital crisis governance. This framework conceptualizes effective crisis communication not as a set of isolated tactics but as a holistic governance approach that combines adaptive transparency, strategic empathy, and multi-actor collaboration.

The primary purpose of this study is to systematically analyze and synthesize existing scholarly literature on government crisis communication in the social media era (2020–2025) to identify key trends, patterns, challenges, and effective strategies. The main research question is: How has government crisis communication evolved in the digital age, and what are the key factors determining its effectiveness in building and sustaining public trust? The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it advances the field by synthesizing fragmented findings into a coherent framework of digital crisis governance and by highlighting the limitations of pre-digital crisis communication models. Practically, it provides valuable insights and evidence-based recommendations for government officials, communication practitioners, and policymakers seeking to enhance their crisis communication strategies in an increasingly complex and volatile information environment. Ultimately, this research contributes to developing more resilient, trustworthy, and effective governance in the face of future crises.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), a structured method for evaluating and synthesizing existing research on a topic to provide a comprehensive understanding of knowledge in a particular field (Manterola et al., 2013). The SLR process includes defining the research question, determining inclusion and exclusion criteria, conducting database searches, extracting data, assessing research quality, synthesizing findings, and reporting results.

Integrating technology into SLR is essential to maintain rigor and transparency by adhering to established guidelines such as PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Athikarisamy & Patole, 2021). PRISMA provides a standardized checklist to improve the reporting of systematic reviews and meta-analyses, ensuring methodological clarity and reliability of findings. The PRISMA guidelines outline a series of key steps, including identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of appropriate studies (Page et al., 2021). The combined use of SLR and PRISMA strengthens the quality, consistency, and credibility of systematic reviews and is widely recognized across academic fields.

The data collection methodology involved curating academic literature from the Scopus database, limited to the period between 2020 and 2025. This study focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings published in English. The primary search terms used included “Government, Crisis Communication, Digital Innovation, Public Trust, Public Sector, Crisis Management, Digital Transformation, Transparency, Public Administration, Risk Communication, E-Government, Credibility, Emergency Communication, AI, Big Data, Citizen Trust, Social Media, ICT, Public Trust, and Government Crisis Communication.” These keywords enabled a focused and comprehensive exploration of scholarly works aligned with the research framework. This approach ensured the inclusion of diverse and credible sources relevant to digital innovation, government crisis communication, and public trust.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Of the total 28 selected scientific articles (2020–2025), the majority were published in the 2022–2025 period (82%), indicating that the topics of government crisis communication and digital innovation increased rapidly after the COVID-19 pandemic. The regional distribution of studies includes Asia (China, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan) with 12 studies, Europe (Portugal, UK, Sweden) with 6 studies, Africa and the Middle East (South Africa, Tanzania) with 3 studies, North America (Canada, USA) with 5 studies, cross-country/global with 2 studies.

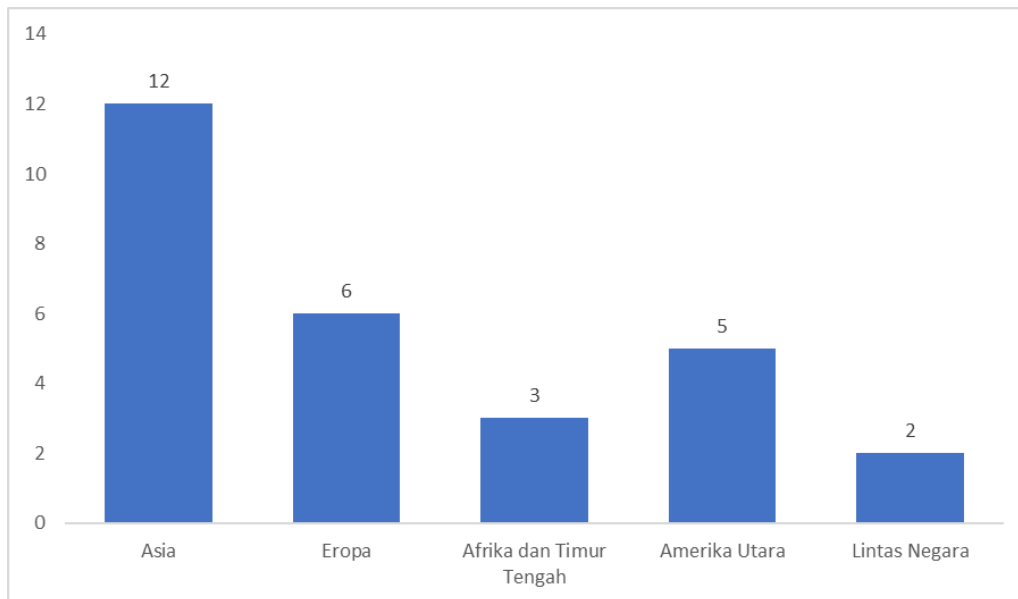


Figure 1. Distribution of Journals Related to Government Crisis Communication in the Digital Era

The most dominant methods were quantitative (surveys, regression analysis, experiments) at 46%, qualitative and case studies at 36%, and mixed methods at 18%. The most frequently encountered topics were public trust in government, the role of social media and digital innovation, risk and crisis communication strategies, disinformation and information transparency, and differences in political context (democratic vs. authoritarian).

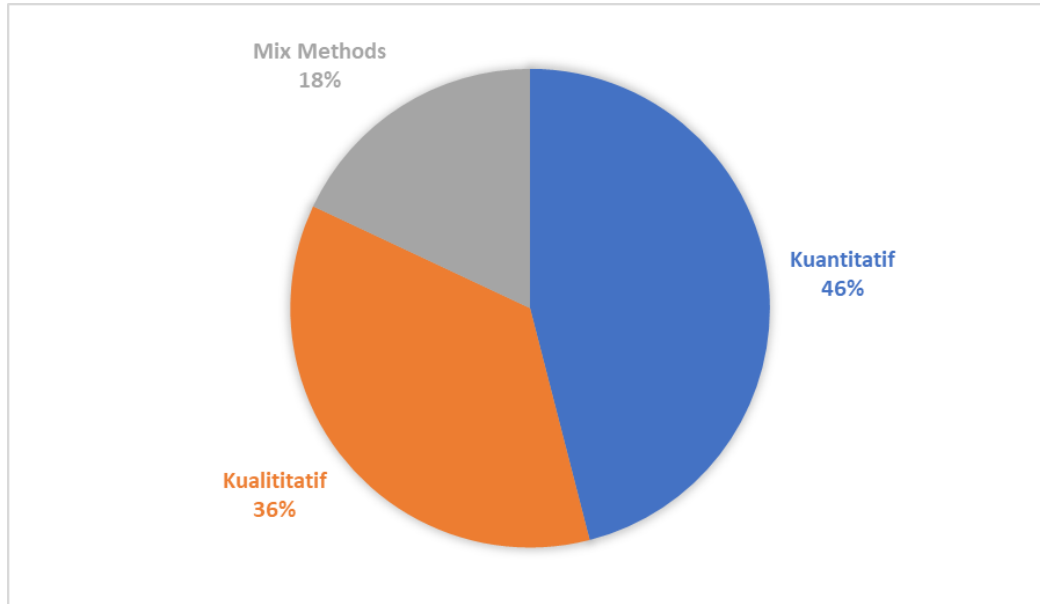


Figure 2. Distribution Diagram of Journal Article Research Methods

Nearly all studies confirm that digitalization is the most prominent dimension in contemporary crisis communication practices. Governments now utilize social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Weibo as primary channels for conveying crisis information. Studies by MacKay et al. (2022) and Ford et al. (2024) in Canada show that government messages delivered in an empathetic tone and conversational style generate high

public engagement, particularly among young people. Conversely, research by Turunen et al. (2022) in Sweden found that certain forms of digital interaction can influence government legitimacy: retweets tend to strengthen digital authority, while direct replies can erode credibility. Meanwhile, in China, Zhang and Sun (2025) found that the government employs specific framing strategies on social media to demonstrate institutional capacity and foster collective solidarity. However, horizontal interactions with citizens remain limited and largely symbolic. These findings indicate that the success of digital crisis communication depends on balancing institutional control with participatory openness.

Another aspect that consistently emerges is transparency and accountability as foundations of public trust (Hoştut & Güdekli, 2023; Konrad et al., 2024). However, nearly all studies confirm that transparency alone is insufficient to build sustainable trust. In the Iranian context, Narimani et al. (2023) found that self-efficacy and trust in official media were key factors influencing protective behavior. In Pakistan, Abbas and Ahmad (2023) highlighted that public participation through e-government platforms can increase trust in institutions, although progress remains constrained by low digital literacy. Meanwhile, research by Venkatraman and Larsen (2024) in Europe showed that strategies based on partnerships with independent media and fact-checking approaches were far more effective than censorship in maintaining government legitimacy. On the other hand, Wang, Demeritt, and Rothstein (2023) found that transparency policies in China failed to build trust due to a lack of local legitimacy and limited public understanding of official information. Overall, these results emphasize that transparency must be accompanied by empathy, accountability, and contextual relevance to strengthen public trust.

The emotional dimension has also been shown to significantly influence the effectiveness of government crisis communication. Many studies have found that the success of crisis messaging depends not only on speed and accuracy but also on its ability to evoke affective resonance. Zhang and Sun (2025) identified four emotional frames used by the Chinese government in its response to the Zhengzhou floods—disaster reporting, leadership, achievement, and moral support—strategically building a sense of national solidarity and pride. Experimental research by Hassan and Lee (2023) showed that messages combining rational and emotional elements were more effective in increasing public trust and compliance with government directives. In Portugal, Santos and Ribeiro (2024) found that social media posts related to hygiene and prevention elicited positive emotional reactions, while formal press conferences triggered anxiety and uncertainty. A similar pattern emerged in cross-cultural research by Kahlawi et al. (2025), showing that publics in developed countries respond more to rational messages, whereas those in developing countries tend to evaluate government communication through emotional and political dimensions. Therefore, effective crisis communication must balance factual information with empathy and remain sensitive to the audience's psychological state.

Furthermore, digital disinformation poses one of the greatest threats to successful government crisis communication. Several studies emphasize the need for cross-actor collaboration to maintain the credibility of public information. Venkatraman and Larsen (2024) and Martínez and Paredes (2023) demonstrated that collaborative approaches involving governments, independent media, and digital platforms are more effective at combating misinformation than coercive or repressive measures. In Hong Kong, Sheen, Tung, and Wu *Digital Crisis Governance: A Systematic Study of Government Crisis Communication in The Social Media Era (2020–2025)*

(2021) found that citizen journalism can even “lend credibility” to government messages lacking public trust. These findings reinforce the idea that, in the era of disinformation, crisis communication strategies must shift from a one-way approach to a co-created communication model—a collaborative effort among governments, civil society, and digital communities.

National political and cultural contexts also serve as important moderating variables influencing the effectiveness of crisis communication. Studies in authoritarian countries such as Vietnam (Taniguchi, 2022), China (Liu et al., 2021), and Iran (Narimani et al., 2023) show that public trust can remain high as long as governments demonstrate scientific credibility, information consistency, and responsiveness. However, public participation in these contexts tends to be top-down and episodic. In contrast, in democracies such as Sweden, Canada, and Portugal, transparency enhances public participation but also introduces challenges such as opinion polarization and pressures on institutional legitimacy. Interestingly, research in Tanzania by Ramaekers et al. (2025) showed that shifting political communication styles from denial to transparency can significantly restore public trust. These cross-contextual findings highlight that the effectiveness of crisis communication depends heavily on the compatibility among cultural values, political systems, and government institutional capacity.

Overall, the synthesis reveals five major patterns shaping the evolution of government crisis communication in the digital era. First, social media has become the primary platform for rapid and interactive public communication but requires strategic governance to prevent loss of narrative control. Second, public trust is shifting from “trust in information” to “trust in intent,” where citizens value government integrity, empathy, and sincerity beyond factual accuracy. Third, cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration has become a key strategy for strengthening credibility amid increasing disinformation. Fourth, crisis communication approaches now emphasize preparedness and early prevention rather than reactive responses. Fifth, effective crisis communication must be inclusive, multilingual, and sensitive to local socio-cultural contexts.

Findings from 28 journals indicate that crisis communication is now multi-level and multi-actor. Public trust depends not only on governments as authoritative sources but also on interactions between governments, media, and citizens. Thus, crisis communication can no longer be understood as a one-way activity but as a dynamic, participatory, and data-driven social ecosystem. Governments are no longer merely “conveyors of information” but also “meaning managers” who facilitate dialogue and mitigate disinformation.

The theory of public trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017) is also reinforced by these findings. Studies show that public trust is influenced not only by information transparency but also by the government’s intention, empathy, and consistency in action. In other words, the public assesses not only what is communicated but also how and for what purpose. The concept of trust in intention thus supersedes trust in information, signaling a shift from instruction-based communication to communication grounded in social relationships and public ethics.

Government crisis communication has evolved from a reactive to a proactive and participatory model. While classic models such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) emphasize post-crisis responses, recent research demonstrates that modern governments are building communication systems based on preparedness, empathy, and civic engagement. Venemyr (2024), through a meta-narrative review of crisis management innovations, asserts that proactive crisis management is now driven by predictive technologies,

big data, and cross-sector coordination. In the governmental context, this approach aligns with risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) strategies, such as those implemented in South Africa, where empathy-based communication and local participation have effectively increased public compliance (Leburu et al., 2022). This paradigm shift shows that crisis communication is no longer a one-time intervention but an ongoing process for cultivating long-term trust.

The digital era has introduced a new model of crisis communication governance grounded in collaborative ecosystems. Government communication no longer operates in isolation but within multi-actor networks comprising media institutions, healthcare agencies, influencers, and digital citizens. Research conducted in Indonesia (Putra & Rahman, 2024) and South Africa (Leburu et al., 2022) shows that two-way communication and the use of community media enhance public trust. This approach aligns with the concept of co-creation in public communication (Kim, 2022) and marks a transition toward collaborative governance.

An important development in government crisis communication research is the emergence of the concepts of adaptive transparency and emotional accountability. Adaptive transparency refers to the disclosure of information tailored to the public's literacy level and psychological capacity. Wang, Demeritt, and Rothstein (2023) found that the Chinese government's transparency policy—using a food hygiene barometer—failed to improve trust due to low local literacy and limited legitimacy. This aligns with findings by Abbas and Ahmad (2023), who showed that e-government initiatives in Pakistan strengthened institutional trust only when the government maintained clarity and consistency in its messaging.

Meanwhile, emotional accountability emphasizes empathy as an essential element in crisis management. Hassan and Lee (2023) demonstrated that crisis messages combining emotional and rational content increased citizens' willingness to comply with government recommendations. Similarly, Ford et al. (2024) found that empathetic, conversational messages on the Canadian government's Instagram account enhanced engagement among younger audiences. These studies highlight that, in the digital era, crisis communication depends not only on factual accuracy but also on a government's capacity to project its human side.

Cross-journal findings also show a theoretical shift from a responsibility management-based approach to a relationship management approach. Governments are now assessed not solely by their response speed but by how well they listen to citizens, demonstrate empathy, and co-develop solutions. This reinforces the Excellence in Public Relations theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), which positions two-way symmetrical communication as the hallmark of effective public relations—now adapted to fit digital-era realities.

The development of government crisis communication in the digital era thus reflects a major transformation: from informative to participatory bureaucracy, from rational to emotional messaging, and from hierarchical control to multi-actor collaboration. Crisis communication has become the government's key mechanism for building legitimacy, managing public sentiment, and strengthening trust. This transformation signifies the rise of a new era of digital crisis governance, in which governments not only respond to crises but also learn, adapt, and engage with citizens openly and compassionately.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review of 28 studies from the Scopus database (2020–2025) concludes that government crisis communication in the social media era has undergone a fundamental and multi-dimensional transformation. The synthesis of recent research reveals five major shifts: (1) a move from reactive, post-crisis messaging to proactive, participatory, and ongoing engagement; (2) a redefinition of public trust from a rational assessment of information accuracy to a relational and affective judgment of government intent, goodwill, and empathy; (3) the establishment of social media as the primary, contested arena where government legitimacy is publicly negotiated through dialogic and emotional performance; (4) the recognition of emotions as strategic political and social instruments for building solidarity and managing collective sentiment; and (5) the emergence of cross-actor collaboration with media, fact-checkers, and citizens as an indispensable strategy for combating disinformation and maintaining credibility. Crucially, the effectiveness of these strategies is consistently moderated by the broader political and cultural context, with significant differences observed between authoritarian and democratic settings. These findings collectively point to the inadequacy of pre-digital crisis communication models and support the conceptualization of a new, integrated paradigm: "digital crisis governance." This framework, built on the interconnected pillars of adaptive transparency, strategic empathy, and multi-actor collaboration, offers a more comprehensive and dynamic way to understand and practice crisis communication as a core function of modern, legitimate governance.

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