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Crisis, voice, reputation: organisational communication and university response to sexual violence cases

Vinda Maya Setianingrum[1*)], Pramana[2]

[1]*Department of Communication, Universitas Negeri Surabaya*
18 Ketintang Street, Surabaya, Indonesia
[2]*Department of Communication, Universitas Sebelas Maret*
36A Ir Sutami Street, Surakarta, Indonesia
Email: vindasetianingrum@unesa.ac.id, Phone: +62 31 8280009

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Abstract This study examined how organisational communication constitutes crisis response, voice, and legitimacy in university sexual violence cases in Indonesia, a socio-political context shaped by strong cultural hierarchies, legal–bureaucratic governance and an ongoing transition from a culture of silence towards digitally mediated transparency. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case study of Universitas Indonesia (UI), Universitas Riau (UNRI), and Universitas Andalas (UNAND), the study integrates the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective with Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) to move beyond what universities formally stated towards how organisational reality, authority, and moral legitimacy were communicatively produced during crises. The findings indicate distinct communicative patterns across cases. Dialogic engagement was associated with the preservation of legitimacy, reactive communication facilitated short-term reputational repair, whereas bureaucratic shielding—manifested through reliance on procedural language, regulatory formalism, and strategic silence—intensified public scrutiny and moral contestation. Within the Indonesian digital public sphere, viral social media discourse functioned as a secondary constitutional force, capable of overriding formal organisational texts and compelling institutional responses. More importantly, the study demonstrates that control-oriented crisis communication strategies frequently backfired, as attempts to manage or conceal crisis narratives amplified counter-narratives and weakened institutional moral authority. This reinforces the long-standing insight that the cover-up may be more damaging than the crisis itself. The study contributes to organisational and crisis communication scholarship by challenging assumptions of centralised control and reputational management. It shows that, in morally charged crises such as sexual violence, legitimacy in Indonesian universities is grounded less in image maintenance and more in moral authority enacted through communicative openness, accountability, and dialogic engagement.

Keywords: crisis communication; organisational communication; organisational legitimacy; rhetorical arena; sexual violence prevention

*) Corresponding Author

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence in higher education has emerged as a critical organisational crisis that challenges not only campus safety but also institutional legitimacy and public trust. Universities are increasingly scrutinised for how they communicate policies, manage reports, and respond to cases that rapidly escalate into reputational crises, particularly within digitally networked environments where information circulates beyond institutional control (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020). As organisations that claim moral authority and public accountability, universities face complex communicative demands when addressing sexual violence, requiring them to balance transparency, victim protection, and reputational concerns.

From an organisational communication perspective, sexual violence cases cannot be understood solely as instances of individual misconduct or policy failure. Rather, they constitute critical moments in which organisational realities are negotiated, contested, and reconstructed through communication. The Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective emphasises that organisations are not static entities but are continuously produced and sustained through communicative practices, interactions, and discourse (Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren, 2020). From this perspective, crises such as sexual violence cases reveal how organisational power, authority, and moral accountability are constituted through communication, including decisions about who may speak, whose voices are recognised, and when silence is enacted. The CCO perspective foregrounds how practices of formal silence, bureaucratic delay, and textual authority are not neutral responses but communicative acts that actively shape organisational legitimacy and responsibility in moments of moral crisis.

Recent international scholarship consistently shows that sexual harassment and sexual violence in higher education remain pervasive yet substantially underreported, with disclosure shaped by survivors' assessments of safety, anticipated institutional response, and perceived reputational or social costs (Malinen et al., 2024; Sarah McMahon et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2024; Webermann et al., 2024). Studies on campus reporting and nondisclosure highlight recurring barriers such as fear of retaliation or not being believed, uncertainty about procedures, and the heightened vulnerability of marginalised groups, including LGBTQ students and racial or ethnic minority women, which can further suppress reporting and help seeking (Malinen et al., 2023; S. McMahon & Seabrook, 2020; Nightingale, 2022; Spencer et al., 2017). Research also indicates that institutional capacity is uneven: policy and resource accessibility may be limited, and university representatives often report variability in preparedness and coordination when responding to dating violence and sexual assault, reinforcing the need to treat prevention and response as organisational systems rather than ad hoc compliance activities (Magnussen & Shankar, 2019; Moylan & Javorka, 2020; Sabina et al., 2017). On the prevention side, evidence supports multi-level approaches, but effects vary by design and sustainability: bystander programmes can improve willingness and self-efficacy to intervene, including brief scalable formats such as video based interventions, yet systematic reviews and meta analyses suggest stronger and more consistent effects on bystander behaviours than on perpetration outcomes, implying the need for booster strategies and complementary structural interventions (Jouriles et al., 2016; Kettrey et al., 2023; Kettrey & Marx, 2019). Accordingly, recent frameworks argue for prevention science-oriented programme development that integrates trauma-informed and equity-informed principles, addresses organisational culture, and avoids overreliance on generic training as a 'quick fix', especially within neoliberal university settings where reputational logics can complicate genuine accountability (Crusto et al., 2024; Phipps, 2020). Tailored prevention is also increasingly emphasised for high-risk subpopulations and contexts (for example, Greek life), and for campus communities where social norms and contextual variables strongly shape intervention likelihood, underscoring the importance of situating prevention within specific institutional ecosystems (Acosta et al., 2022; DeFazio et al., 2024; Mainwaring et al., 2023).

Crisis communication scholarship has increasingly recognised that contemporary crises unfold within multivocal arenas involving diverse stakeholders, media actors, advocacy groups, and online publics (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) conceptualises crises as dynamic communicative spaces in which organisations no longer monopolise meaning but must navigate intersecting and competing narratives. In cases of sexual violence, these rhetorical arenas are further intensified by moral outrage, power asymmetries, and demands for institutional accountability, thereby exposing the limitations of

control-oriented communication strategies. Taken together, the CCO and RAT perspectives reveal that organisational silence, voice management, and accountability are not merely strategic choices but constitutive processes through which universities negotiate power, legitimacy, and ethical responsibility in crisis contexts—dimensions that remain under-examined in conventional crisis communication approaches focused primarily on message effectiveness or reputation repair.

Central to these dynamics is the concept of voice. Organisational voice encompasses whose perspectives are heard, legitimised, or silenced within institutional processes and public discourse (Morrison, 2014). In university sexual violence cases, voice extends beyond formal spokespersons to include victims, student organisations, faculty members, activists, and digital publics. The management or suppression of voice has direct implications for perceptions of organisational justice, trustworthiness, and ethical responsibility (Butler, 2021; Johansen et al., 2016). Failure to engage voices constructively often exacerbates crises, whereas dialogic and inclusive communication can contribute to organisational resilience.

Reputation emerges as a critical outcome of these communicative processes. Organisational reputation is not merely an external image but a socially constructed evaluation shaped through ongoing communication with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Riel & Fombrun, 2007). In higher education, reputational damage linked to sexual violence cases can affect student enrolment, stakeholder confidence, and institutional credibility. Research suggests that transparent, responsive, and empathetic communication can enhance reputational recovery, whereas defensive or opaque strategies tend to intensify distrust (Huang & Ki, 2023).

Within the Communicative Constitution of Organisations perspective, organisational responses to sexual violence are shaped by an ongoing tension between authoritative texts and lived conversations. While universities rely on formal policies, regulations, and official statements to assert control and legitimacy, crisis situations expose the limitations of textual authority when confronted with competing conversational dynamics. This tension becomes particularly visible within rhetorical arenas where institutional narratives intersect with stakeholder voices, media framing, and digital discourse, often resulting in a loss of narrative control during morally charged crises.

In the Indonesian context, this communicative negotiation is further complicated by the coexistence of deeply rooted institutional hierarchies and an increasingly democratised digital public sphere. Universities have traditionally operated within bureaucratic cultures that privilege procedural order, formal silence, and delayed communication as mechanisms of risk management. However, within networked media environments, such strategies frequently collide with rapid, emotionally charged, and viral counter-narratives articulated by students, activists, and online publics. These counter-narratives do not merely challenge specific institutional decisions but actively redefine an institution's moral character and legitimacy in real time. As a result, organisational crises surrounding sexual violence become arenas of intensified communicative struggle, in which authority, voice, and reputation are negotiated beyond formal institutional control.

Despite growing attention to sexual violence in higher education, existing studies have predominantly focused on documenting prevalence rates, legal and policy frameworks, and individual victim experiences (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020), with comparatively limited attention to how organisational responses are communicatively constituted through internal coordination, voice management, and public engagement during crisis situations. There remains a significant gap in understanding how communication practices within prevention units, crisis teams, and leadership structures actively shape crisis trajectories, stakeholder voice, and reputational outcomes. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing organisational communication theory and for improving institutional responses to sexual violence.

This study addresses this gap by examining how organisational communication operates in university sexual violence cases through the interconnected lenses of crisis, voice, and reputation. Drawing on the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective and Rhetorical Arena Theory, this study analyses how communicative practices within and beyond the organisation constitute prevention efforts, crisis responses, and reputational positioning. By focusing on higher education institutions, this study contributes to organisational

communication scholarship by demonstrating how communication does not merely manage crises but actively constructs institutional accountability and trust in morally charged contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study approach to examine how organisational communication operates in university sexual violence cases, particularly in relation to crisis management, stakeholder voice, and institutional reputation. The multiple-case design followed a logic of theoretical replication, enabling systematic analytical comparison across organisational contexts rather than treating each case as an isolated narrative (Yin, 2018). Specifically, the analysis compared cases across three dimensions: (1) the communicative construction of organisational safety and prevention, (2) the management of voice, silence, and power relations during crisis response, and (3) engagement with multivocal rhetorical arenas and their implications for reputational outcomes. This comparative strategy is particularly appropriate for examining morally charged organisational crises, in which communication processes are closely intertwined with authority, legitimacy, and public accountability (Eisenhardt et al., 2002).

The research was conducted in three Indonesian public universities: Universitas Indonesia (UI), Universitas Riau (UNRI), and Universitas Andalas (UNAND). These institutions were purposively selected based on three criteria: the public exposure of sexual violence cases, the formal establishment of Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Forces (Satgas PPKS), and the intensity of media coverage and public discourse surrounding the cases. The selection of these campuses enabled comparative analysis across differing organisational communication patterns, ranging from integrated and participatory systems to more centralised and formalised communication structures (Patton, 2014). Together, these cases represent diverse organisational responses to similar regulatory demands and crisis pressures within the Indonesian higher education context.

Data collection involved multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and triangulation. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key organisational actors across the three universities: Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas. A total of 36 participants were interviewed, with 12 participants from each university, purposively selected to represent diverse organisational roles, including members of the Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Force (Satgas PPKS), university leaders, faculty members, administrative staff, students, and public relations officers. Key informant interviewing was employed to capture insider perspectives on communication practices, decision-making processes, and crisis responses related to sexual violence cases (Marshall, 1996; Pahwa et al., 2023).

The student participants interviewed were non-victim participants who were involved in organisational processes related to prevention, reporting, or advocacy. Survivors of sexual violence were not interviewed directly to avoid potential re-traumatisation and to uphold ethical safeguards. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol and continued until thematic saturation was reached. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and the research protocol received approval from an institutional ethics review board in accordance with established qualitative research ethics standards.

In addition to interviews, organisational documents from Universitas Indonesia (UI), Universitas Riau (UNRI), and Universitas Andalas (UNAND) were systematically analysed. These documents included university regulations, standard operating procedures, internal guidelines, official statements, press releases, and institutional social media content related to sexual violence prevention and crisis response. Document analysis enabled examination of how each university formally articulated policies, framed sexual violence issues, and positioned itself publicly during crises (Bowen, 2009). To capture the broader communicative environment, media coverage and social media discourse associated with sexual violence cases at the three campuses were also examined, enabling analysis of multivocal crisis dynamics within extended rhetorical arenas (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010)

Social network analysis was employed as a complementary and exploratory technique to support the qualitative analysis, rather than as a stand-alone analytical method. Network mapping was used to visually trace communication relationships among organisational actors

involved in sexual violence prevention and crisis response within and across the three universities, including members of the Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Force (Satgas PPKS), university leadership, and related organisational units (Eriyanto, 2014; Scott, 2012). Rather than generating independent network-level findings or relational metrics, this mapping functioned as an analytic aid to identify patterns of coordination, points of communicative concentration, and areas of fragmentation that informed the interpretation of interview data and organisational documents. In this way, social network analysis sensitised the qualitative analysis to structural communication dynamics, supporting a contextual understanding of how communication practices facilitated or constrained collective action across campus contexts.

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process that approached crisis communication not as a linear progression but as a discursive rupture marked by tension, contestation, and breakdowns in meaning. Interview transcripts, organisational documents, and digital materials were thematically coded using pattern matching to examine disjunctions between the university's formal voice—often articulated through legalistic, procedural, and defensive communication—and the public's moral voice, characterised by emotional outrage, ethical claims, and demands for accountability (Yin, 2018). Rather than smoothing these dynamics, the analysis foregrounded moments of communicative breakdown in which silence, delay, or textual authority intensified crisis escalation.

Guided by the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective, particularly the Four Flows model, the analysis examined how organisational membership, authority, and legitimacy were communicatively negotiated under conditions of hierarchical and patriarchal institutional structures prevalent in Indonesian universities (Boivin et al., 2017; Brummans et al., 2014). These structures shaped whose voices were authorised, deferred, or marginalised during crisis response, revealing how power asymmetries were reproduced through communication rather than merely reflected by it.

Rhetorical Arena Theory was applied to analyse crisis communication as a multivocal and uneven arena in which organisational narratives intersected with stakeholder discourse, media framing, and digital publics (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). Importantly, consistent with a constitutive communication perspective, digital platforms, viral hashtags, leaked documents, and online amplification were treated as non-human actors with agency, actively shaping the trajectory, visibility, and moral framing of sexual violence crises. These non-human communicative agents did not function merely as channels but participated in constituting the crisis itself by redistributing voice, disrupting institutional control, and reconfiguring organisational accountability.

To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation across data sources, methods, and informants was employed (Denzin, 2012). Member checking was conducted with selected participants from the three universities to ensure interpretive accuracy, and reflexive memoing was used throughout the analytic process to document analytical decisions and researcher positioning (Tracy, 2010). Given the sensitivity of sexual violence cases, strict ethical protocols were followed, including informed consent, anonymisation of participants and institutions in reporting, and the careful handling of potentially identifying information, in line with established qualitative research ethics standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on a comparative analysis of three Indonesian public universities: Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas. The findings are organised thematically to highlight how organisational communication practices shape sexual violence prevention, case handling, and crisis response across differing institutional contexts. Rather than presenting the findings as isolated institutional narratives, this section emphasises cross-case patterns and contrasts to demonstrate how communication constitutes organisational structures, mediates stakeholder voice, and influences reputational outcomes during crisis situations. Guided by the Communicative Constitution of Organisations perspective and Rhetorical Arena Theory, the findings show that variations in communication practices produce distinct organisational responses, levels of participation, and degrees of public trust. Taken together, these results illustrate that communication is not merely a

supportive function but a constitutive force that actively shapes institutional safety, legitimacy, and resilience in the face of sexual violence cases.

Communication and the constitution of organisational safety in crisis contexts

The findings reveal that organisational safety in the context of sexual violence is not primarily produced through formal policies alone but is constituted through ongoing communication practices across institutional levels. Across the three cases—Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas—organisational safety emerged as a communicative accomplishment shaped by how prevention messages were articulated, how reporting mechanisms were communicated, and how institutional commitments were enacted through everyday interactions. This finding reinforces the core CCO premise that organisational realities, including safety and protection, are continuously produced and reproduced through communication rather than merely implemented through formal structures or policy arrangements (Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011).

At Universitas Indonesia, crisis communication took the form of deliberate dialogic engagement, manifested through open forums, cross-unit coordination meetings, and timely public clarification. These communicative practices enabled the institution to foreground collective responsibility and procedural transparency, thereby containing moral outrage before it escalated into a broader reputational rupture.

In contrast, Universitas Riau exhibited a predominantly reactive communication pattern following public exposure of the case. Delayed official statements, followed by press releases oriented towards reputational repair, repositioned the institution as accountable only after external pressure had intensified. This pattern illustrates how legitimacy was negotiated retrospectively rather than proactively, underscoring that organisational safety can be communicatively constituted after a crisis has unfolded rather than embedded within routine organisational practices (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013).

By comparison, the response at Universitas Andalas was shaped by what can be characterised as a bureaucratic shield. Official communication relied heavily on regulatory language, formal procedures, and prolonged institutional silence, framing sexual violence primarily as an administrative concern rather than an ethical rupture. This approach constrained dialogic engagement, marginalised stakeholder voices, and weakened moral accountability, thereby intensifying public distrust and prolonging the dynamics of the crisis.

Across the cases, the presence or absence of dialogic communication played a decisive role in shaping how organisational safety was constituted. Institutions that enabled interaction, feedback, and participation were more effective in embedding safety as a form of collective responsibility, whereas those relying on unidirectional communication struggled to translate policy commitments into lived organisational practice. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasising that organisational safety and ethical climates are communicatively constructed through interaction, voice, and shared meaning, rather than imposed through formal authority alone (Borelli-Kjaer et al., 2021; Morrison, 2014).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that organisational safety in university sexual violence contexts is not a static condition but a dynamic communicative process. Safety is constituted through how organisations communicate prevention, recognise vulnerability, and enact responsibility over time. This reinforces the argument that communication is central to building protective organisational environments and that failures in communication directly undermine institutional capacity to prevent and respond effectively to sexual violence.

Voice, power, and organisational legitimacy

The findings indicate that organisational legitimacy in university sexual violence cases is closely tied to how voice is managed, enabled, or constrained within institutional communication processes. Across Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas, voice emerged as a contested communicative resource shaped by power relations, organisational hierarchies, and crisis conditions. Rather than being evenly distributed, opportunities to speak, be heard, and influence decision-making were mediated through both formal structures and informal communicative practices, reflecting underlying dynamics of organisational power.

Across the three cases, organisational voice functioned not merely as a normative principle but as a set of communicative practices through which underlying power relations were

enacted. At Universitas Indonesia, dialogic engagement expanded the range of authorised voices, enabling students, faculty members, and sexual violence prevention and handling task force participants to take part in meaning-making processes, thereby strengthening organisational legitimacy. By contrast, at Universitas Riau, voice became conditionally available only after public pressure intensified, illustrating how institutional authority retained control over timing and framing while conceding limited participation. At Universitas Andalas, the deployment of a bureaucratic shield effectively constrained voice by privileging legalistic and procedural language over moral engagement, marginalising stakeholder perspectives and reinforcing hierarchical power asymmetries. Taken together, these contrasting patterns demonstrate that voice in sexual violence crises is not evenly distributed but communicatively produced through power-laden practices that shape legitimacy outcomes.

In the case of Universitas Indonesia, these dialogic communicative practices strengthened organisational legitimacy by recognising multiple forms of voice as constitutive of institutional authority. Structured forums, cross-unit dialogues, and inclusive reporting mechanisms enabled processes of membership negotiation in which organisational actors were treated as legitimate contributors to the definition of institutional responses. Voice functioned not merely as expression but as a mechanism through which procedural justice, fairness, and moral responsibility were communicatively enacted, thereby reinforcing trust and legitimacy during crises.

At Universitas Andalas, the bureaucratic shielding of communication had direct consequences for voice and organisational legitimacy. Communication related to sexual violence cases prioritised institutional spokespersons, regulatory compliance, and formal documentation, while student and stakeholder voices were largely confined to administrative inputs rather than recognised as contributors to organisational meaning-making. This asymmetry weakened processes of membership negotiation and produced a legitimacy deficit, as institutional responses were perceived as procedurally correct yet ethically disconnected from lived experiences. When voice was treated as informational rather than dialogic, organisational legitimacy became fragile and increasingly vulnerable to public contestation.

At Universitas Riau, the conditional expansion of voice during moments of crisis illustrates an intermediate pattern of legitimacy negotiation. Following public exposure, institutional communication became more receptive to student demands, media narratives, and external scrutiny. While this responsiveness contributed to short-term legitimacy repair, voice remained contingent upon reputational pressure rather than embedded within routine organisational practices. As a result, legitimacy was negotiated reactively, revealing the limitations of crisis-driven inclusion in generating sustained organisational trust.

Across the cases, power relations played a decisive role in shaping whose voices were amplified and whose were marginalised. Organisational actors occupying formal authority positions retained disproportionate control over narrative framing, the timing of disclosures, and the strategic use of silence, confirming that voice is inherently political and closely tied to organisational power structures (Morrison, 2014). Attempts to suppress or tightly manage voice through hierarchical control frequently generated counter-voices within digital and public arenas, further challenging institutional legitimacy and intensifying crisis dynamics.

These findings demonstrate that organisational legitimacy is not derived solely from policy compliance or formal authority but is communicatively produced through inclusive and responsive engagement with voice. Institutions that enabled dialogic interaction and explicitly acknowledged asymmetrical power relations were more successful in sustaining legitimacy during sexual violence crises. Conversely, institutions that prioritised control over engagement experienced heightened scrutiny and an erosion of trust. Overall, this study underscores that voice operates at the intersection of communication and power, and that treating voice as constitutive rather than disruptive is central to navigating organisational crises and sustaining moral authority in higher education.

To move the analysis from abstract theoretical interpretation to concrete empirical evidence, this study identifies key communicative acts that shaped crisis dynamics across the three universities. Table 1 summarises the dominant communicative moves, the voices they privileged, the arenas in which they operated, and their implications for organisational legitimacy. By foregrounding these communicative acts, the table demonstrates how differing

patterns of organisational communication constituted divergent crisis trajectories, rather than merely reflecting pre-existing institutional characteristics.

Table 1. Communicative acts and crisis dynamics in university sexual violence cases

University	Communication act	Actors involved	Communication meaning	Primary arena	Constitutive effect on crisis dynamics
Universitas Indonesia	Open forums and cross-unit coordination meetings	University leadership, Satgas PPKS, students, faculty members	Communication framed safety and prevention as a shared organisational responsibility rather than a purely administrative obligation	Internal forums and digital platforms	Reduced moral outrage by enabling early dialogue and reinforcing organisational legitimacy through participation
	Timely public clarification	Institutional spokespersons and stakeholders	Communication signalled transparency and responsiveness by acknowledging public concern without adopting a defensive stance	Media and social media	Maintained public trust and prevented fragmentation of crisis narratives
Universitas Riau	Delayed official statements	Central university administration	Silence and delay communicated institutional uncertainty and reputational anxiety rather than care for affected parties	Media arena	Triggered public pressure and shifted control of the crisis to external actors
	Reactive press releases following public exposure	Institutional leadership	Communication prioritised reputational repair over moral accountability	Media and digital arena	Enabled short-term legitimacy recovery but failed to generate sustained trust
Universitas Andalas	Formal regulatory statements	University leadership and legal units	Communication framed sexual violence primarily as a procedural and regulatory matter rather than an ethical rupture	Formal documents	Deflected moral accountability and intensified public scepticism
	Institutional silence following allegations	Absence of institutional actors	Silence functioned as a strategic communicative act that marginalised victim voice	Digital arena	Enabled counter-narratives, accelerated crisis escalation, and weakened organisational authority
All cases	Viral social media posts and hashtags	Students, activists, and online publics	Digital discourse reframed crisis meaning through moral judgement and collective outrage	Digital public sphere	Functioned as authoritative non-human texts that redefined legitimacy beyond organisational control

***Note*:** Digital platforms, viral hashtags, and online documents are treated as non-human actors with constitutive agency within the crisis, consistent with the Communicative Constitution of Organisations perspective.
Source: Authors' analysis based on primary data from this study (2025)

Taken together, the communicative acts summarised in Table 1 illustrate that crisis dynamics in university sexual violence cases are not confined within organisational boundaries but unfold across multiple, intersecting communicative arenas. While formal organisational voices sought to manage meaning through procedures, official statements, and strategic silence, these efforts were repeatedly intersected and disrupted by external actors, digital publics, and media discourse. This pattern underscores that organisational communication operates within broader rhetorical arenas in which control over narratives is inherently limited. The following section, therefore examines how these multivocal rhetorical arenas shaped crisis trajectories, highlighting the conditions under which organisational authority was challenged, redefined, or displaced in digitally mediated contexts.

Rhetorical arenas and the limits of organisational control

The findings demonstrate that university sexual violence cases unfold within expansive rhetorical arenas in which organisational control over communication is inherently limited. Across Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas, crisis communication extended beyond formal institutional channels into dynamic spaces shaped by media coverage, social media discourse, student activism, and public commentary. These arenas functioned as sites of meaning contestation, where organisational narratives intersected with—and were frequently challenged by—alternative voices and interpretations. As illustrated in Table 1, these rhetorical arenas were shaped by concrete communicative acts that redistributed voice and constrained organisational control across cases.

In the Indonesian context, the digital public sphere functions not merely as a site of reaction but as a secondary constitutional force within the rhetorical arena. Viral social media posts, hashtags, and online testimonies—often amplified by what is colloquially referred to as *Netizen +62*—operate as authoritative texts that can rival or even override formal organisational documents, such as Rector's Decrees (*SK Rektor*). From a Communicative Constitution of Organisations perspective, these digital artefacts possess agency: they redistribute voice, accelerate moral judgement, and compel organisational response. Rather than serving merely as communication tools, digital platforms actively participate in constituting the crisis itself by reshaping institutional meaning, legitimacy, and accountability.

At Universitas Riau, the exposure of sexual violence cases triggered a rapid escalation within digital rhetorical arenas. Institutional statements were swiftly reframed by student groups, journalists, and online publics, generating parallel narratives that questioned organisational credibility and intent. Attempts to centralise communication through official spokespersons proved insufficient to contain the crisis, as social media platforms facilitated the circulation of emotional testimonies and critical commentary. The findings indicate that organisational silence or delayed responses intensified rhetorical fragmentation, enabling non-institutional actors to shape dominant interpretations of the crisis.

At Universitas Andalas, a strong reliance on formal communication channels coincided with weaker engagement within broader rhetorical arenas. Official communications emphasised regulatory compliance and procedural language, reinforcing a bureaucratic mode of engagement that displaced moral accountability and limited interaction with external voices. These discursive gaps were subsequently filled by speculative narratives and public criticism circulating in media and online spaces. The findings suggest that when organisations attempt to maintain control by restricting communicative engagement, rhetorical arenas become increasingly adversarial, thereby reducing the institution's capacity to influence processes of meaning construction.

In contrast, Universitas Indonesia demonstrated a greater capacity to navigate rhetorical arenas through adaptive communication strategies. Institutional actors actively monitored media discourse, acknowledged public concerns, and engaged in timely clarification across multiple platforms. While control over narratives remained partial, these practices enabled the organisation to participate more effectively in rhetorical negotiation rather than attempting unilateral message control. This mode of engagement moderated reputational damage and reduced narrative polarisation, illustrating how organisations can shift from control-oriented to participation-oriented approaches to crisis communication.

Across the cases, the findings confirm that rhetorical arenas are characterised by multivocality, emotional intensity, and the rapid circulation of discourse. Organisational authority does not automatically translate into discursive dominance within these arenas. Rather, legitimacy is negotiated through responsiveness, acknowledgement of competing voices, and sustained communicative presence. The study further reveals that attempts to suppress or tightly manage discourse often exacerbate crisis dynamics, whereas openness and dialogic engagement enhance organisational capacity to influence rhetorical outcomes.

These findings reinforce Rhetorical Arena Theory by demonstrating that crisis communication is not a linear process of message transmission but a complex interaction among multiple actors operating within overlapping communicative spaces (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). The study further extends RAT by illustrating how digital media amplify the limits of organisational control, particularly in morally charged crises such as sexual violence. Within

these arenas, organisations are compelled to navigate uncertainty, emotionally charged discourse, and power asymmetries rather than rely on strategic message dominance.

Overall, the findings highlight that organisational control in crisis communication is inherently constrained by the structure of rhetorical arenas. Universities that recognised these limits and engaged constructively with multivocal discourse were better positioned to manage reputational risk and sustain legitimacy, whereas institutions that pursued control through restriction and silence faced intensified scrutiny and diminished influence over crisis narratives. From a constitutive perspective, these arenas did not merely host crisis communication but actively participated in producing organisational legitimacy and accountability.

Communication, reputation, and organisational resilience

The findings indicate that organisational resilience in university sexual violence cases is closely linked to how communication practices shape reputational trajectories over time. Across Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas, reputation emerged not as a fixed asset but as a dynamic outcome of communicative responses enacted before, during, and after crisis events. Institutions that integrated communication into their organisational processes demonstrated a greater capacity to absorb reputational shocks and to restore public trust.

At Universitas Indonesia, reputational resilience was supported by sustained communication practices that extended beyond discrete crisis moments. The integration of sexual violence prevention narratives into routine institutional communication, combined with consistent engagement across organisational units, enabled the organisation to maintain credibility even under sustained public scrutiny. Communication functioned as a stabilising mechanism, reinforcing institutional identity and signalling long-term commitment rather than reactive damage control. This pattern suggests that reputation is strengthened when communication is embedded as an ongoing organisational practice rather than activated solely in response to crisis situations.

At Universitas Riau, reputational resilience took the form of adaptive responsiveness following reputational threats. Public acknowledgements, policy clarification, and increased openness to stakeholder concerns contributed to partial reputational recovery. However, the findings also indicate that resilience built primarily through crisis-driven communication remains vulnerable to future disruption if not institutionalised. While short-term trust repair was achievable, long-term resilience depended on whether communicative changes were translated into sustained organisational routines.

In contrast, Universitas Andalas faced greater challenges in developing reputational resilience due to limited communicative engagement. Communication strategies prioritised procedural compliance and institutional defence, resulting in diminished public confidence and prolonged reputational vulnerability. The absence of dialogic communication constrained the organisation's capacity to demonstrate learning and moral accountability, thereby weakening its resilience in the face of recurring scrutiny.

Across the cases, the findings reveal that transparency, timeliness, and the acknowledgement of uncertainty played critical roles in shaping reputational outcomes. Organisations that communicated openly about processes and limitations were perceived as more trustworthy, even when outcomes remained contested. Conversely, strategic silence and attempts at message control intensified scepticism and reputational risk. These findings support the view that reputational resilience is a communicative achievement grounded in relational trust rather than symbolic image management.

The study further demonstrates that organisational resilience is inseparable from communicative learning. Institutions that reflected on past crises and adjusted their communication practices exhibited greater preparedness for subsequent challenges. This learning process was facilitated through internal coordination, feedback mechanisms, and openness to critique. Communication thus functioned as both a protective and adaptive resource, enabling organisations to navigate complex moral crises while sustaining institutional continuity.

Overall, the findings underscore that reputation and resilience are co-constructed through communication. Universities that treated communication as a constitutive organisational function were better equipped to withstand crisis pressures and to maintain legitimacy. These results extend organisational communication scholarship by highlighting how reputational

resilience emerges from communicative practices that align ethical commitment, stakeholder engagement, and organisational learning.

Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of this study generate significant theoretical and practical implications for organisational communication scholarship, particularly in relation to crisis communication, organisational legitimacy, and the communicative constitution of safety in higher education institutions. Theoretically, the study extends the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective by demonstrating that organisational safety and protection are not merely outcomes of policy implementation but are constituted through sustained communication practices. By situating sexual violence prevention and response within everyday organisational communication, the findings reinforce the view that communication actively produces organisational realities, including moral authority, accountability, and institutional trust (Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011).

The study further contributes to crisis communication theory by empirically validating and extending Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) within the context of higher education. The findings demonstrate that sexual violence crises unfold across overlapping rhetorical arenas in which organisational control is structurally constrained, and legitimacy is negotiated through interaction rather than message dominance. This extends existing RAT scholarship by showing how morally charged crises intensify multivocality and accelerate reputational dynamics, particularly within digitally mediated environments (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). By integrating the Communicative Constitution of Organisations (CCO) perspective with Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT), this study advances an analytical framework that captures both internal communicative processes and external discursive contestation, offering a more holistic understanding of organisational crisis communication.

Another theoretical implication concerns the concept of voice in organisational communication.

The findings demonstrate that voice functions not only as an expression of dissent or participation but as a constitutive mechanism through which organisational legitimacy is shaped. Voice emerges as relational and power-laden, mediated by organisational structures and crisis conditions. This insight contributes to organisational voice scholarship by illustrating how the inclusion or exclusion of voice directly affects legitimacy and resilience, particularly in contexts involving vulnerability and moral accountability (Borelli-Kjaer et al., 2021; Morrison, 2014).

Practically, the findings offer important implications for university governance and communication management. First, the study underscores the strategic role of Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Forces (Satgas PPKS) as communicative actors rather than merely administrative units. Effective prevention and crisis response require these units to function as hubs of dialogue, coordination, and organisational learning. Universities should therefore invest in strengthening the communicative capacity of such units, including cross-unit coordination, stakeholder engagement, and media responsiveness.

Second, the findings suggest that reputational resilience is best achieved through proactive and embedded communication practices rather than reactive crisis messaging. Institutions that normalised transparency, participation, and ethical communication prior to crises were better equipped to withstand reputational threats. This underscores the importance of integrating crisis preparedness into routine organisational communication, rather than treating it as an exceptional or episodic function (Coombs, 2007; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).

Third, the study indicates that attempts to control or silence discourse during sexual violence crises are counterproductive. Within contemporary rhetorical arenas shaped by digital media, legitimacy is sustained through engagement rather than suppression. Universities are therefore encouraged to adopt dialogic communication strategies that acknowledge uncertainty, recognise multiple voices, and demonstrate responsiveness to stakeholder concerns. Such practices enhance trust and reduce the escalation of reputational damage (Huang & Ki, 2023; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

Overall, these implications position communication as a central organisational resource in addressing sexual violence in higher education. By treating communication as constitutive rather than merely instrumental, universities can move beyond compliance-driven responses towards building resilient, legitimate, and ethically grounded organisational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how organisational communication constitutes crisis response, voice, and legitimacy in university sexual violence cases. The findings not only extend existing organisational and crisis communication scholarship but also challenge several dominant assumptions that continue to underpin these fields. Rather than treating crisis communication as a matter of message control, strategic alignment, or reputational repair, this study demonstrates that crises—particularly morally charged crises such as sexual violence—are constituted through contested communicative practices that redistribute voice, disrupt authority, and reconfigure organisational legitimacy in real time.

First, the findings challenge the enduring assumption that organisations retain primary control over crisis narratives through formal authority and procedural communication. Across the cases, organisational control proved fragile and contingent, particularly within digitally mediated rhetorical arenas. Viral social media content, public testimonies, and online discourse functioned as authoritative texts that frequently rivalled or even exceeded the influence of formal institutional documents. This reconfiguration of communicative power challenges conventional crisis communication models that prioritise centralised message management and foregrounds the constitutive role of distributed, non-human actors in shaping crisis trajectories.

Second, this study reshapes prevailing understandings of voice in crisis contexts. Rather than viewing voice as a normative or optional organisational value, the findings demonstrate that voice is a constitutive and power-laden communicative practice. Who is authorised to speak, when voice is acknowledged, and how silence is strategically enacted directly shape legitimacy outcomes. The contrasting communicative patterns observed across the three universities illustrate that dialogic engagement, reactive inclusion, and bureaucratic shielding are not merely stylistic differences but structurally consequential practices that produce divergent moral and organisational consequences.

More importantly, these dynamics must be understood within the specific socio-political and cultural context of Indonesia. The findings reveal a critical tension between a historically entrenched culture of silence—rooted in hierarchical authority, bureaucratic formalism, and patriarchal norms—and an emergent regime of digital transparency driven by student activism, media scrutiny, and networked publics. Indonesian universities are thus positioned at a crossroads where traditional modes of institutional control increasingly collide with digitally amplified demands for accountability, visibility, and moral clarity. This transition fundamentally reshapes how crises unfold and how legitimacy is negotiated within the Indonesian higher education sector.

Within this context, the Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Force (Satgas PPKS) emerges as more than an administrative unit. The findings suggest that the Satgas functions as a communicative engine of the university: a key organisational site where voice is articulated, coordinated, and translated into institutional action. When empowered, the Satgas facilitates dialogic communication, bridges hierarchical divides, and anchors moral accountability within organisational processes. Conversely, when marginalised or constrained by bureaucratic logics, its capacity to generate legitimate crisis responses is significantly weakened. Conceptualising the Satgas in this way contributes to organisational communication theory by highlighting how specialised institutional actors can operate as constitutive infrastructures of voice and legitimacy.

Finally, this study reframes the notion of reputation in university crisis communication. While much crisis communication scholarship emphasises image repair and reputational management, the findings underscore that universities are not merely reputational actors but moral institutions. In the Indonesian context, legitimacy is less about maintaining *citra* (image) and more about sustaining *wibawa*—moral authority grounded in ethical conduct, responsiveness, and justice. Attempts to prioritise image over moral engagement, particularly through bureaucratic shielding or strategic silence, undermine institutional character and intensify public distrust. Conversely, communicative practices that foreground accountability, dialogue, and ethical clarity strengthen moral authority even under crisis conditions.

Taken together, this study contributes to organisational communication scholarship by demonstrating that crisis communication in morally charged contexts is a constitutive process shaped by power, voice, and cultural context, rather than a controllable managerial function. By centring Indonesian universities as sites of theoretical insight, the findings invite scholars to reconsider universalised models of crisis communication and to engage more seriously with

non-Western contexts, where digital transformation, cultural norms, and moral authority intersect in distinct and consequential ways.

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