

Public Relations Communication Strategy in Public Image Restoration: A Case Study of BULOG's Digital Response to the “Rice Stone” Crisis In 2021

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ABSTRACT: The development of digital technology has created both challenges and opportunities in public institution crisis communication. In this context, an organization's reputation can be significantly threatened by the spread of negative information via online media and social platforms. This study examines the digital communication strategies employed by the Public Relations Division of Perum BULOG in responding to a public image crisis in 2021, following viral news coverage of low-quality rice aid during the PPKM program—often referred to as resembling stones. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with BULOG's PR team and documentation from official digital channels, and analyzed using William Benoit's Image Repair Theory framework. The findings indicate that BULOG strategically implemented a combination of denial, corrective action, and institutional image enhancement approaches. These efforts were delivered through press releases, digital campaigns, and the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to directly and transparently engage audiences. Prompt responses supported by message consistency and information openness significantly contributed to short-term public image recovery. This study contributes theoretically to the crisis communication literature in Indonesia and offers practical implications for public institutions in designing responsive, credible, and relevant digital communication strategies amid increasingly fragmented information dynamics. It also extends the application of image repair theory to the context of state-owned enterprises and enriches academic discourse on digital reputation crises in public institutions.

KEYWORDS: Communication strategy, image restoration, crisis communication, public relations, bulog

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed the landscape of interaction between organizations and their publics. In today's digital era, communication is no longer linear or one-directional but occurs in an open, instant, and highly participatory environment. The speed at which information spreads—particularly through social media and online news platforms—creates a dynamic communication ecosystem, where public perception can be shaped and reshaped in a very short time. For public institutions, this dynamic poses a serious challenge in maintaining credibility and public trust, especially during reputation-related crises.

One of the primary challenges in digital communication is the potential for crisis escalation due to the virality of negative content. A locally confined issue can rapidly evolve into a national or even international controversy through a single social media post. Unverified information tends to circulate faster than official clarification. In this context, institutions are expected not only to respond quickly but also to strategically manage public perception with adaptive communication approaches. Hence, the role of public relations has become increasingly central—not merely as a message distributor but as a reputation manager and perception strategist within a complex digital space.

This shift also demands a transformation of the public relations function—from a technical role to a strategic actor in issue management and crisis communication. Within public institutions such as state-owned enterprises (SOEs), public relations professionals are now expected to possess managerial capacity to build and maintain reputation across multiple digital platforms in real time. Indonesia's Ministry of SOEs has emphasized the importance of digital communication as part of bureaucratic reform and public service modernization, including specialized training for PR divisions across SOEs. This reflects that communication strategy is no longer a peripheral activity but a core element of institutional risk management.

This study also reflects the evolving role of public relations in crisis contexts—from a technical function to a strategic one aimed at long-term public trust. In the case of BULOG, crisis response was not merely a damage-control effort but part of a broader process of reconstructing the relationship between the institution and its stakeholders.

Public institutions in Indonesia, such as SOEs, face unique challenges in crisis communication. Positioned between business imperatives and public service responsibilities, SOEs operate within a highly complex organizational framework. On one

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hand, they are expected to function efficiently and competitively like private corporations, yet on the other, they are held accountable as state-owned entities. This duality makes crisis management in SOEs particularly complex—especially in the context of transparency and intense public scrutiny in the digital age.

A case that illustrates this dynamic is the public reputation crisis faced by Perum BULOG in 2021, following negative reports about the quality of government rice aid distributed during the COVID-19 lockdown period (PPKM). Reports suggesting that the rice resembled "stones" spread rapidly through online media and social platforms, provoking public concern and shaping negative perceptions of BULOG, a key institution tasked with maintaining national food security. In such a situation, BULOG's institutional credibility was at stake, given its vital role in food logistics during the pandemic.

The reputational crisis that emerged in mid-2021 was widely covered by national online media, reinforcing the issue's prominence. CNN Indonesia (2021) reported public complaints regarding clumped, stone-like rice in the aid packages. Detikcom (2021) published similar stories, highlighting responses from residents in Pandeglang. These reports quickly spread across social media, fueling negative sentiment toward BULOG. In crisis communication, such online news functions not merely as supplementary data but as early documentation of how public opinion is initially formed. Thus, referencing digital media becomes crucial in this study to understand the origins and evolution of a digitally driven crisis.

This crisis marked a critical test of BULOG's digital communication capacity in reputation management. The response from BULOG's Public Relations Division included a series of digital communication strategies involving institutional websites, social media accounts (Instagram, Twitter, YouTube), press releases, and value-driven digital campaigns. Through these channels, BULOG aimed to refute negative allegations while constructing an alternative narrative that was credible, informative, and emotionally resonant with the public.

In crisis communication theory, BULOG's approach can be analyzed through William Benoit's Image Repair Theory. This theory posits that when an organization's reputation is under attack, several strategies can be employed, including denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1995). This theoretical framework is relevant to this study as it provides a systematic categorization of strategic responses organizations adopt under public pressure.

While other models like Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) could also be considered, this study chooses Benoit's framework because of its focus on post-crisis image restoration, rather than reactive response matching. SCCT mainly emphasizes crisis typology and reactive communication, whereas Image Repair Theory is more applicable for analyzing how strategic messaging and narrative construction are actively formed by organizations. Thus, this framework aligns better with the research objective of exploring how BULOG's digital communication strategy was structured and executed in response to a reputation crisis.

Previous literature also underscores the significance of digital communication in crisis scenarios. Schultz, Utz, and Görlitz (2011), as well as Jin et al. (2014), highlight that social media serves not only as an information tool but also as a dialogic space for meaning negotiation. Their studies show that digital platforms are effective in shaping public perception during crises—provided they are used with participatory, consistent, and data-driven approaches. However, in the Indonesian context, particularly among SOEs, the implementation of digital crisis communication strategies remains limited. Arief, Gregory, and Pangestu (2022) find that digital communication in SOEs often maintains a top-down orientation, lacking interactive engagement, which may hinder trust-building efforts during crises. This is reinforced by Lisdiono et al. (2022), who emphasize the need for integration between leadership, digital communication, and risk management in managing reputation threats in Indonesian SOEs.

This gap forms the rationale for this study, which focuses on the PR communication strategy of BULOG in addressing the "rice stone" crisis of 2021. The study uses a qualitative case study design to explore how these strategies were constructed, communicated, and narrated in the digital realm. Utilizing the Image Repair Theory as the analytical lens, this research examines BULOG's choice of strategy, message construction and delivery, and the public's response. The focus is on the effectiveness of these strategies in restoring institutional image in the short term while reinforcing long-term credibility.

This study contributes not only practically as a documented case but also theoretically by extending the application of the Image Repair Theory to state-owned institutions operating in digital environments. It demonstrates how public institutions can deploy digital communication not just for information dissemination but also as a platform for image reconstruction, value reinforcement, and trust recovery. The uniqueness of the BULOG case lies in the institution's ability to integrate digital communication with field-level corrective actions swiftly and to craft a public narrative that is not merely defensive but also proactive in asserting its institutional identity.

Therefore, this research offers not only a concrete illustration of crisis communication in the digital era but also a new perspective in the study of organizational communication in the public sector. It is hoped that this study can serve as a vital reference for other public institutions in designing more adaptive, strategic, and transparent crisis communication systems. Amid rising public expectations for institutional performance and openness, the ability to manage crises swiftly, transparently, and in a coordinated manner through digital channels has become an indispensable necessity.

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Given the background, identified gap, and BULOG's complex position as a strategic SOE in national food distribution, this study specifically aims to understand how digital communication strategies were actively utilized to mitigate a reputation crisis. It responds to both theoretical needs in enriching public sector crisis communication literature and practical demands in examining how state institutions adapt their communication practices to the realities of digital information flow. Therefore, it is critical to analyze how BULOG's PR division strategically designed messages, selected channels, and timed its responses amid intense and rapid public pressure.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This method was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of the reputation crisis faced by Perum BULOG and the digital communication strategies implemented to address it. A case study is deemed appropriate to portray complex contexts that cannot be fully captured through quantitative data, as it focuses on meanings, processes, and strategies enacted by social actors within specific situations.

The research is descriptive-qualitative in nature, aiming to systematically and thoroughly describe the communication strategies used by BULOG's Public Relations Division, rather than testing hypotheses. The study centers on a specific case—the "rice stone" crisis of 2021—which serves as an entry point to examine patterns and dynamics in digital-based crisis communication within public institutions.

The object of this research is BULOG's public relations communication strategy in responding to negative news coverage regarding the distribution of rice aid during the COVID-19 pandemic under the government's PPKM program. The subjects of the study include internal actors involved in executing the communication strategy, such as the PR team, and external actors contextually engaged, such as local officials in distribution areas. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select informants who had direct knowledge and experience related to the crisis.

The study was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. The primary location was BULOG's central office, complemented by observation of digital activities via the institution's official communication channels. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews with five informants, consisting of PR staff at BULOG and the head of a local district in Pandeglang, who represented the public voice during the rice distribution controversy. Interviews were conducted both in-person and online, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and guided by a semi-structured interview framework. Questions were designed based on Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory, allowing for the exploration of communication strategy dimensions such as denial, corrective action, and image bolstering.

In addition to interviews, data were also obtained through digital documentation, including BULOG's social media posts (Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter), press releases, and online media coverage. Observations were carried out on the institution's digital activity throughout the crisis period. All data were verified through source and method triangulation to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, consisting of several stages: (1) data reduction, (2) identification of main themes, (3) interpretation of findings, and (4) categorization of strategies based on theoretical constructs. An inductive approach was used to identify communication patterns emerging from institutional narratives and public responses. This analytical process followed Benoit's five core image repair strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. However, not all strategies were explicitly applied in BULOG's context; thus, the analysis also considered institutional factors and the bureaucratic communication culture in public sector entities. According to Huang, Wu, and Cheng (2016), the political and regulatory structures surrounding state-owned institutions often create rigid crisis response frameworks, which hinder speed and flexibility in addressing public sentiment in digital spaces.

To enhance the study's reliability, the researcher ensured consistency in interpretation through cross-checking of sources and engaged in critical reflection on positionality and subjectivity throughout the analytical process. Accordingly, the study not only aims to provide descriptive insights but also to generate a deeper understanding of how public institutions manage crisis communication in the digital age.

The entire research process adhered to core principles of qualitative data validity, such as informant credibility, source triangulation, and maintaining an audit trail for data documentation. Reflective practices and confirmation with informants were conducted to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations. Through this approach, the study presents not only descriptive data but also explores the underlying meanings of BULOG's communication strategies, as reflected in digital narratives, field actions, and public perception responses. This enables a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between crisis communication strategies and institutional image restoration in a contextual manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that BULOG's Public Relations Division implemented a crisis communication strategy through official digital channels in response to the reputational crisis caused by negative media coverage of the government's rice aid distribution

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during the 2021 PPKM period. The approach reflects the principles of William Benoit's Image Repair Theory, with denial, corrective action, and image bolstering emerging as the most prominent strategies. The strategic mapping of BULOG's response, using Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory framework, is presented in Table 1. This table outlines the specific strategies, practical implementations, and digital channels employed to restore institutional image during the crisis.

Table 1. BULOG's Communication Strategies Based on Image Repair Theory

Image Repair Strategy	Implementation by BULOG	Media Channels
Denial	Refuting allegations that poor rice quality originated from internal production processes	Press releases, official Instagram statements
Corrective Action	Replacing clumped or damaged rice and conducting field visits to ensure proper distribution	YouTube video documentation, coordination with local officials
Bolstering (Image Reinforcement)	Highlighting BULOG's institutional role in food distribution and sharing positive narratives	Social media posts, testimonials, and narrative-driven video content

Source: Processed by Author, 2025

In various press releases and social media posts, BULOG stated that the rice damage was due to external factors in the distribution process, rather than internal production errors. This assertion was supported by documentation of corrective actions in the field, including rice retrieval and replacement, and direct monitoring by field teams. The information and visuals of these actions were actively shared through BULOG's official YouTube and Instagram accounts to rebuild public trust in a more personal and transparent manner.

BULOG's prompt response and use of visual formats demonstrate its adaptability to public communication expectations in the digital age. This aligns with Jin et al. (2014), who emphasized the importance of message format and source credibility in shaping public perceptions during crises. Value-based campaigns promoting BULOG's food distribution mission were amplified through social media, represented bolstering strategies by emphasizing institutional values amid circulating negative issues. The study also found that BULOG not only relied on narrative clarification but also collaborated with media to disseminate institutional narratives. This approach supports Schultz et al. (2011), who argue that effective crisis communication should be multivocal, whereby institutions not only convey top-down messages but also create spaces for public discussion and engagement through digital platforms.

An analysis of public responses on social media revealed dynamic sentiment patterns. Initially, responses to the "rice stone" issue on BULOG's Instagram account were predominantly negative, including criticisms of logistics quality and institutional performance. However, following the active dissemination of clarification videos and field responses, there was a shift toward more neutral and even positive interactions. The public began to appreciate BULOG's swift actions, with some acknowledging discrepancies between media reports and field realities. This shift indicates that responsive and transparent digital communication can gradually transform negative sentiment and improve public perception. These findings align with Liu and Fraustino (2014), who noted that public perception of crises is heavily influenced by institutional openness and perceived sincerity in crisis handling.

The integration of communication strategy elements across public interaction, institutional messaging, and visualized response can be illustrated in Figure 1.

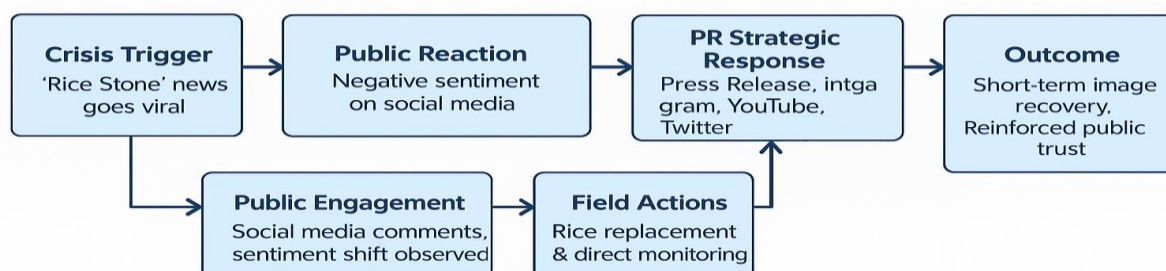


Figure 1. BULOG's Digital Crisis Communication Strategy Flow (2021)

Source: Processed by Author, 2025

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Thousani and Setiyawan (2021) demonstrated that corporate use of social media, such as at PT Angkasa Pura I, is effective for rapid reputation management and trust rebuilding. While similar in purpose, BULOG's approach appears more integrated and agile in managing public perception. The strategy also reflects a deep understanding of today's digital communication landscape. Nonetheless, challenges persist, especially regarding moderation of negative comments on social media, which demands consistent messaging and sufficient human resources to maintain communication flow. BULOG chose to keep comment sections open as a form of accountability, although this added to the communication management burden. Mayangsari (2020) emphasized that crisis communication effectiveness during the pandemic was closely tied to inter-agency coordination and message consistency. In Indonesia, the Australian case offers valuable insights into the need for stakeholder synergy to build public trust in times of crisis.

Conceptually, compared to common strategies employed by other public institutions in Indonesia, BULOG's approach demonstrates a quicker and more adaptive use of digital channels for reputation recovery. While many institutions still focus on technical narratives and one-way communication, BULOG integrates clarification, action documentation, and public engagement. Although this study does not directly analyze other institutions, the comparison highlights that in the SOE context, quick response and transparency remain universal elements of effective crisis communication strategies.

BULOG's strategy also included visible corrective actions. The institution did not merely refute allegations, but immediately replaced damaged rice and delivered direct clarifications to affected communities. This strengthened the institution's credibility and demonstrated its commitment to public service. In interviews, one PR staff member stated: "As soon as we received reports about clumped rice, we immediately checked the field and replaced it. We also sent a team to ensure the next distribution went smoothly." This statement affirms that crisis communication must be linked to concrete, verifiable actions.

Furthermore, bolstering strategies were evident in the dissemination of positive narratives about BULOG's role in ensuring national food security. Visuals of rice distribution, public testimonials, and official statements were used to balance public opinion. Isnaini and Antaufhan (2023) noted that digital communities can play a strategic role in building public trust during crises, especially through participatory and measured use of social media. Although their study focused on the private sector, the insights are applicable to SOEs. BULOG's reinforcement of its historical role in food supply served as a central narrative in calming public concerns. Lisdiantini, Zubair, and Perbawasari (2025) found that applying public relations ethics in SOEs such as PT KAI significantly boosts public trust and institutional reputation. Thus, BULOG's narrative strategy must also incorporate ethical dimensions and consistency to strengthen its institutional legitimacy. Similarly, Huang and Kim (2018) highlighted that crisis communication practices in state institutions are strongly influenced by organizational culture and public expectations for transparency. In the Indonesian SOE context, bureaucratic culture and reluctance to disclose information can hinder effective digital communication strategies.

Zhang and Zhang (2024) further emphasized that crisis communication effectiveness is shaped by the types of media used and public perceptions of the information source's authority. Their findings reinforce the importance of selecting appropriate digital channels and communication styles to sustain public trust during reputation crises.

From a theoretical perspective, BULOG's strategy reflects a combination of responsive and proactive crisis communication. Beyond denying and correcting misinformation, the institution also actively constructed a positive identity aligned with the emotional and informational needs of the public. Coombs (2015) stressed that transparency and swift response are essential in restoring public trust after a crisis—principles that BULOG exemplified.

BULOG's crisis communication efforts demonstrate an awareness of the need to manage public perception in a highly dynamic digital space. During a crisis, the public is not only an information recipient but also a key actor in shaping opinion through comments and message redistribution. Public responses to the rice issue were visible in social media interactions and news coverage. While some criticized the aid quality, others acknowledged BULOG's openness in issuing clarifications. This illustrates how reputation crises may evolve into contested zones of public perception. BULOG responded by maintaining open communication channels and addressing comments directly—a transparency-based approach not widely adopted by other public institutions facing similar crises.

BULOG's strategy also aligns with the principle of multivocality in crisis communication. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argued that effective organizational communication cannot be monopolized by institutions but must allow space for participation and diverse voices. BULOG leveraged official social media platforms to issue clarifications, display field activities, and maintain open dialogue with the public. This approach not only improved short-term perception but also reinforced long-term institutional legitimacy by demonstrating a commitment to transparency and public engagement.

Thousani and Setiyawan (2021) noted that corporate social media can be a rapid and responsive image restoration tool, as shown by PT Angkasa Pura I. BULOG went a step further by engaging in both digital and physical outreach—replacing rice promptly and reporting actions publicly via social media. This comparison illustrates that BULOG has adopted a more adaptive crisis communication strategy aligned with the demands of the digital era. This supports Coombs' (2007) assertion that institutional

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reputation is shaped not only by message content but also by the nature of interaction between the institution and the public in real time.

BULOG's communication strategy also has long-term implications for institutional-public relations. By fostering open dialogue on social media and displaying visual accountability, BULOG not only restored its image in the short term but also cultivated more stable public trust. This approach strengthens BULOG's role as a public actor that is open to criticism and responsive to information needs. The strategy is relevant in modern governance, where public institutions are expected to be not only administrative but also communicative and participatory.

Given the bureaucratic complexity of state institutions like BULOG, these findings are significant in expanding the application of image repair theory in the Indonesian public sector. Most previous studies have focused on private entities or local governments, making this study a valuable contribution to understanding how SOEs manage reputation crises in digital spaces. The findings affirm that effective crisis communication strategies rely on internal coordination, digital channel utilization, and sustained transparency. Thus, BULOG's approach can serve as a practical reference for similar institutions facing reputational challenges in the age of information openness.

Overall, the findings underscore that crisis communication effectiveness is determined not only by message content but also by delivery method, response timing, and the emotional engagement established in digital spaces. BULOG demonstrates that crisis communication strategies can be flexibly articulated without compromising institutional accountability, as long as organizations understand their audiences and remain open to evolving communication models. Therefore, this study affirms the importance of integrating responsive, multivocal, and value-driven communication strategies in managing reputational crises amid the era of information disruption.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the digital communication strategy implemented by the Public Relations Division of Perum BULOG in response to the reputational crisis triggered by negative media coverage of the 2021 PPKM rice aid reflects the application of key principles from Image Repair Theory, particularly denial, corrective action, and institutional image bolstering. These strategies were executed simultaneously through digital channels such as press releases, social media, and value-driven campaigns. The combination of swift responses, concrete field actions, and transparent communication significantly contributed to rebuilding public trust. The study affirms that effective crisis communication relies not only on speed but also on message consistency, visualized actions, and the organization's sustained ability to manage public perception through digital platforms. This research offers a novel contribution by extending the application of image repair theory into the underexplored domain of Indonesian state-owned enterprises, where bureaucratic dynamics intersect with modern communication demands. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for public institutions on how to design adaptive, credible, and responsive digital communication systems that align with both institutional mandates and public expectations. Future studies may expand this model by incorporating comparative cases across different institutional settings to further enrich the theoretical discourse on digital-era crisis governance.

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