



# Crisis Communication Strategies in Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Stakeholders Perceptions and Reputation

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## ABSTRACT

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This study investigates crisis communication in higher education through a mixed-methods analysis of stakeholders' perceptions and institutional reputation in the context of a 2021 virtual graduation technical-failure crisis at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines–Cagayan de Oro (USTP-CDO). Guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the research examines how 105 stakeholders evaluated the perceived effectiveness of the university's crisis communication response strategy, how they attributed responsibility

for the crisis (victim, accidental, preventable), and how these factors shaped their perceptions of institutional reputation in terms of trust, integrity, and



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competence. Using convergent parallel mixed methods design centered on a single scenario-based vignette of the virtual graduation platform failure, the study identifies key patterns in crisis perception, response evaluation, and reputational impact. Findings indicate that higher perceived communication effectiveness was associated with lower attribution of organizational responsibility and more favorable reputation scores, particularly on trust and integrity. Practical implications suggest that higher education institutions should adopt transparent, timely, and stakeholder-centered communication strategies for virtual-event crises, including pre-testing technical systems, providing clear real-time updates, and framing messages that reduce blame and rebuild confidence. Drawing on these results, the study proposes a preliminary stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework for Philippine and regional higher education institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Crises are unavoidable, as they can happen to anyone, anywhere. A crisis is defined as a major unexpected, non-routine, high-impact event, and a complex situation that threatens and has the potential to do great harm to an organization, a system, or an individual's reputation, financial stability, or very existence, influencing public perception and policy responses (Coombs, 2007; De Michelis & Garruccio, 2022; Iftikhar et al., 2023).

Reputational crises are unexpected events or negative situations that significantly damage the public perception, trust, and credibility of an organization; such crises often arise from internal failures such as social irresponsibility, misconduct, or regulatory breaches or from external pressures amplified by media and social-media narrative (Coombs, 2007; Ke, 2025). Consequently, they tend to evoke widespread negative attention that threatens brand image and stakeholder loyalty. A collective definition of a reputational crisis describes it as a situation in which an organization's brand image is at stake and its credibility is threatened, often due to perceived unethical behavior, mismanagement, or failure to meet stakeholder expectations. Hence, this paper posits that immediate response and transparent communication with stakeholders are vital for rebuilding trust and managing perceptions during a crisis; organizations must act quickly to address stakeholders' concerns (Harriot, 2024; Schermer, 2021) through effective crisis communication strategies. In this sense, communication is vital in the academe. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to foster disaster resilience through effective communication systems and coordination (Alburo, 2025). Thereby, it can mitigate damage and facilitate reputation repair, which is essential

for organizational resilience. Failure to do so may result in social irresponsibility and failure.

In today's interconnected world, where information spreads rapidly through digital channels, social media plays a significant role in the spread and escalation of reputational crises. The ability to manage a crisis is no longer a reactive measure but a strategic imperative. Social media's rapid information diffusion fundamentally challenges traditional crisis communication, requiring proactive and strategic management to protect organizational reputation, including the use of effective digital branding strategies (Noor et al., 2024). A strong reputation is recognized as a vital marketing tool that can improve educational quality and attract resources, making reputation management a priority for university leaders (Kamenova, Valeriia, 2023). The field of crisis communication has evolved to address this challenge, moving beyond simple information dissemination to a more nuanced approach focused on protecting an organization's most valuable asset: its reputation. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework continues to serve as a foundational theory in contemporary studies, systematically analyzing how organizations' crisis responses influence stakeholder perceptions and reputational outcomes, especially amid social media-driven crises (Noor et al., 2024; Dominic et al., 2025).

The digital age has amplified these challenges, making institutions' responses more visible than ever. Negative events, whether actual or perceived, can rapidly escalate into a reputational crisis, substantially affecting institutional outcomes such as enrollment, funding, and stakeholder trust (Hong, Kim, & Lee, 2023). One real-world example was the Operation Varsity Blues case of 2019, where admissions were flawed at some of the most prestigious universities in the United States, such as Yale, Stanford, and the University of Southern California. Rick Singer manipulated admissions by falsifying athletic profiles and securing spots for students who otherwise would not have qualified. The scandal resulted in fines, prison sentences for parents, and the dismissal or prosecution of university staff (Hextrum, 2019). The universities were unprepared to handle such a crisis; their initial responses were marked by delayed acknowledgments, inconsistent messaging, and a failure to proactively engage stakeholders, thereby amplifying public outrage and skepticism about the institutions' integrity. According to Coombs (2020), the lack of a coordinated and transparent crisis communication strategy exacerbated reputational damage, as universities appeared reactive rather than proactive, undermining public trust. Despite corrective measures and public statements following the scandal, restoring public trust has been a slow, ongoing process, as perceptions of unfairness and institutional privilege persist (Pikos, 2022). In Saudi Arabia, universities are aligning their reputation strategies with

Vision 2030 by implementing organizational integrity management practices, which are perceived to enhance academic reputation (Almudara, 2024).

Furthermore, studies in Indonesia show that universities in the digital era use online platforms and social media to maintain reputation during crises, often combining transparency, apology, and corrective action strategies (Asfia and Sari, 2024). Effective crisis communication is therefore critical for universities seeking to maintain their standing and stakeholder trust in a highly competitive and scrutinized environment. Universities must develop crisis communication plans that identify potential crises and establish clear protocols for response (Mwandembo, 2024). Hence, it is high time to integrate disaster risk reduction (DRR) education into curricula, which is considered essential for preparing students and staff for emergencies (Alburo, 2025). The effectiveness of these response strategies is amplified in social media contexts, where timely and transparent communication is crucial for maintaining public trust (Kartikawati et al., 2025).

In the Philippines, institutions of higher learning are not exempt from these global trends. The rise of social media has made it easier for students, faculty, and other stakeholders to voice their concerns and share information about campus-related incidents, especially during the pandemic that forced rapid adjustments in curriculum and policy, with educational leaders playing a crucial role in sustaining learning through innovative strategies and community support initiatives (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Toquero & Ramos, 2024). For a university, a single event, such as a protest, a viral social media post about misconduct, or a natural disaster, can pose a significant threat. One incident was the CHED's issuance of a show-cause order against Bestlink College for unauthorized activity lacking proper permits. This resulted in public outrage among students on social media over severe logistical problems, including being stranded for hours due to a lack of transportation after an off-campus activity in Hermosa, Bataan (Philippine News Agency, 2025). Negative posts can trigger widespread criticism, leading to protests and a loss of trust in the institution. For instance, Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) in Indonesia faced public dissatisfaction over perceived lack of transparency in its crisis response, leading to social protests (Shadrina et al., 2025). Navigating these local crises requires a proactive and strategic approach that accounts for the region's specific cultural and social dynamics, ensuring that communication is both culturally sensitive and effective in managing the crisis. Effective communication during crises requires real-time awareness of public sentiment, which can be achieved through social media scanning (Ouellette, n.d.). Consistent and clear communication helps maintain control over narratives and reduces the spread of misinformation

(Moerschell & Novak, 2020).

In the local context, the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines in Cagayan de Oro (USTP CDO) has faced various crises, ranging from campus-specific incidents to broader institutional challenges. USTP is a state university that aims to be a nationally recognized science and technology university providing a vital link between education and the economy. More than its aim to provide timely and relevant technological solutions to pressing industrial and societal problems, it also wants to maintain its clean reputation and integrity. However, it is not immune to reputational crises. Reputational crisis pertains to negativity in social media and news coverage, which serves as a proxy for reputational impact, as crisis amplification in digital discourse magnifies stakeholder perceptions (Nuortimo et al., 2024; Jackson & Aulia, 2024). The university has experienced such crises, including technical problems during the 2021 virtual graduation, when only the graduates' names were called out. Still, photos failed to display on screens, resulting in negative social media posts that challenged the university's reputation.

The USTP CDO's crisis response strategy for social media-driven crises remains undefined, a gap this research aimed to address. This study investigated stakeholders' perceptions of appropriate university response to the 2021 Virtual Graduation Technical Failure, along with the attribution of responsibility. Scenario-based vignettes are standardized, brief descriptions of crises adapted from real events, enabling controlled experimental testing of SCCT propositions on the single scenario-based vignette (Coombs, 2007). Unlike case studies, vignettes prioritize theoretical variable manipulation while maintaining ecological validity through institutionally relevant scenarios. Ultimately, this research examined whether stakeholders' perceptions and attributions in this vignette influenced their views of the institution's reputation, generating evidence to inform a crisis communication framework that USTP CDO can adopt to enhance crisis readiness.

The scenario-based vignette was chosen as a representative reputational crisis in the higher education institution (HEI) setting. This crisis was distinct, with different attribution patterns that are highly relevant in USTP and other HEIs. The online-event crisis vignette, which was the 2021 virtual graduation technical failure, clearly falls under the reputational crisis because it directly affects how students, parents, and external observers view the university's technical competence, preparedness, and capacity to deliver key academic milestones. The social media post after the technical failure mirrored the effect it caused to the students and parents who had really looked forward to the event. Expressions of disappointment and frustration were evident in their social media post.

This underscored the failure of institutional planning and therefore depicted a reputational threat to trust and institutional image.

The post, amplified by public comments, portrayed the university in a negative light and suggested that the institution was either complicit or negligent in addressing the issue. This situation constitutes a reputational crisis, as it posed a direct threat to the university's public image, particularly concerning ethical standards, governance practices, transparency, and institutional integrity. A social media firestorm can have lasting reputational consequences. The intensity and reach of negative sentiments can escalate quickly, affecting the institution's public image and stakeholder relationships (Nuortimo et al., 2025). The resulting online discourse and reputational pressures made the vignette particularly suitable for examining how attribution, stakeholder anxiety, and pre-decision disclosure affect expectations for crisis response.

In every crisis, there is a need for information. Not responding to negative posts can lead to perceptions that the brand or individual is not open to consumer feedback, which can harm their image, brand value, and reputation, and reduce the effectiveness of persuasion (Daniels & Wu, 2024; Zang et al., 2023). Leaving a negative social media post unanswered can have significant repercussions for brands and individuals. Unaddressed negative posts can lead to a perception of insincerity and lack of receptiveness, potentially damaging the reputation and trustworthiness of the entity involved. This can trigger a cascade of negative engagement behaviors that may escalate into more severe backlash, such as online firestorms.

While USTP has an existing incident management team that initiates responses, it lacks formalized, theory-driven crisis communication strategies for specific crises to guide its actions. This reliance on an ad hoc approach is often driven by immediate needs or opportunities rather than a long-term strategic vision, which can lead to a gap between the university's intentions and its stakeholders' perceptions, potentially resulting in reputational damage that takes years to repair (Ad Hoc Approach, 2022; Kinoshita, 2020).

This study sought to bridge the gap by providing comprehensive, context-specific studies on crisis communication response strategies for reputation within higher education institutions (HEIs), especially in the Philippine setting. While global research has identified key factors affecting crisis communication effectiveness, such as leadership communication, stakeholder engagement, and integration with risk management, these insights have not been sufficiently explored or applied in Philippine universities. Most existing literature focuses on Western or general contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how crisis communication theories and practices function locally. Additionally, there

was limited empirical data detailing how ‘HEIs’ leadership teams perceive and manage communication challenges during crises, as well as investigating stakeholders’ perceptions, such as faculty, administration, graduates, and the university’s external stakeholders. This gap highlighted the need for research that provides culturally relevant, theory-informed frameworks and practical strategies tailored to Philippine HEIs to manage crises and protect institutional reputation effectively. As supported by Nurgraha et al. (2024), a well-structured communication framework is vital for disseminating information effectively, as demonstrated by the One ASEAN One Response Roadshow, which highlighted the importance of intercultural communication in disaster preparedness. The ASEAN framework emphasizes collaboration among member states to enhance disaster response mechanisms, showcasing the need for shared learning and adaptation of strategies across different cultural contexts.

By analyzing the stakeholders’ perceptions of USTP CDO’s crisis response strategies categorized as deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster aligned to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) postures, this research has determined how such online failure crisis response strategies influenced the university’s reputation across key dimensions: trust, integrity, and competence through stakeholders’ attribution of its crisis responsibility. The central problem this research aimed to solve was the absence of an evidence-based crisis communication framework tailored to HEIs such as in the local context of USTP CDO. The goal was to provide data-driven insights that can inform and guide the university in developing a comprehensive crisis communication framework that proactively protects its reputation and strengthens stakeholder relationships.

The importance of this investigation stems from its integration of theoretical communication frameworks with a real-world organizational context. Its findings provided the necessary data for USTP CDO to move from a reactive to a proactive crisis communication framework. Without the findings from this research, the university would have continued implementing communication strategies without clear evaluative criteria for assessing their impact on stakeholder trust and organizational credibility. The absence of this knowledge leaves the institution vulnerable to future crises, potentially leading to irreparable reputational harm and a decline in its standing as a leading academic institution. This research offered a pathway to a more resilient and prepared institution.

This research addressed a contextual gap in the existing literature by providing a context-specific analysis of how SCCT functioned within a Philippine higher education institution (HEI). Although SCCT has been widely applied across various organizational settings, few studies have examined stakeholder perceptions in a local university context and offered tailored, evidence-based

recommendations for crisis communication frameworks. This gap underscored the need for effective crisis communication strategies, in which timely apologies, corrective actions, and appropriate alignment of responses could help manage the virality of negative content and mitigate further reputational damage (Langaro et al., 2022).

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By situating the findings within SCCT’s theoretical assumptions, this study contributed to the growing body of knowledge on crisis communication in higher education institutions. It provided a practical foundation for USTP CDO in strengthening its stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework to safeguard institutional reputation.

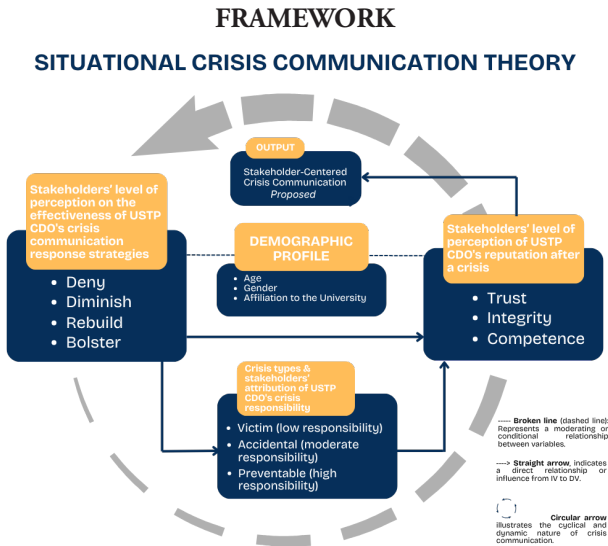


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework anchored in Situational Crisis Communication Theory

This section presented the theoretical foundation of the study by explaining the theory that guided the research and the key concepts that shaped the proposed framework. It clarified how the main variables stakeholder perceptions, crisis response strategies, attribution of crisis responsibility, and institutional reputation were conceptually related, thereby providing a basis for interpreting the study's findings and for developing the proposed stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework.

Guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007), this framework operationalizes the theory's core assumptions that (a) stakeholders naturally attempt to understand why a crisis occurred by assigning blame, (b) the degree to which stakeholders blame the organization is the most critical variable dictating reputational threat, and (c) if an organization is held responsible for a severe crisis, reputational damage is greater. In this model, the perceived effectiveness of crisis communication response strategies (independent variable) reflects SCCT's emphasis on matching response strategies to crisis type and attributed responsibility. Attribution of crisis responsibility (theoretical explanatory variable: victim, accidental, preventable) is positioned as a cognitive evaluation process that helps explain how stakeholders interpret the organization's response, consistent with SCCT's view that responsibility attribution is a key mechanism linking crisis type and response strategies to reputational outcomes. Institutional reputation (dependent variable), operationalized as trust, integrity, and competence, represents the reputational outcome variable in SCCT. The framework illustrates how SCCT assumptions about crisis type, responsibility attribution, and response strategy are operationalized in the context of a Philippine higher-education institution, specifically through stakeholders' perceptions of the 2021 virtual graduation technical-failure crisis.

SCCT outlines four primary crisis response strategies: deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster. Denial strategies, such as rejecting responsibility or shifting blame to an external party, are considered most appropriate when the organization bears little to no responsibility for the crisis. Diminishment strategies acknowledge the crisis but attempt to minimize its perceived severity, typically by emphasizing that the event was accidental or unintentional; these strategies are generally appropriate when responsibility is low to moderate. Rebuilding strategies involve accepting responsibility and offering apologies or compensation, particularly when the organization is perceived as highly responsible. Bolstering strategies emphasize the organization's past good works and positive attributes and may be used alongside other strategies to strengthen its image. Overall, SCCT aims to guide crisis managers in selecting response strategies that minimize reputational damage and reduce negative stakeholder reactions.

Central to SCCT is the concept of crisis types and stakeholders' attribution of crisis responsibility, categorized into three clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable. The victim cluster refers to situations where stakeholders perceive the organization as having little or no responsibility for the crisis. The accidental cluster involves crises viewed as unintentional or due to unforeseen circumstances, where responsibility is considered low to moderate. The preventable cluster refers to crises perceived as resulting from negligence, intentional actions, or mismanagement, leading to high responsibility attribution.

The study's positioning of *attribution of crisis responsibility* as a cognitive evaluation process aligns closely with SCCT assumptions. SCCT is grounded in attribution theory and assumes that when a crisis occurs, stakeholders naturally attempt to understand why it happened by assigning blame. The degree to which stakeholders blame the organization is a critical variable that dictates reputational threat: if an organization is held responsible for a severe crisis, the reputational damage is greater (Coombs, 2007).

In this study, attribution of crisis responsibility (victim, accidental, preventable) was treated as a theoretically grounded explanatory variable consistent with SCCT. While the theory conceptualizes responsibility attribution as a mechanism that explains how crisis response strategies influence reputational outcomes, formal statistical mediation testing was not conducted. Instead, the study examined the direct relationships among (a) perceived effectiveness of crisis communication response strategies, (b) stakeholders' attribution of responsibility, and (c) institutional reputation, using correlational and comparative analyses.

Thus, attribution was positioned as a cognitive evaluation process that helps explain stakeholder perceptions, rather than as a statistically tested mediating variable. This interpretation remains consistent with SCCT's core assumption that responsibility attribution is the key cognitive mechanism linking crisis type and response strategies to reputational outcomes. The analysis therefore operationalizes SCCT by showing how these theoretical constructs are interrelated in a Philippine higher-education context, even without formal mediation paths.

Anchored in SCCT, the study assumed that reputational outcomes were shaped not solely by the university's objective actions, but by stakeholders' perceptions of the university's crisis communication response strategies. Furthermore, institutional reputation was treated as a measurable construct composed of the dimensions of trust, integrity, and competence. Although SCCT had been developed and extensively tested in Western contexts, the study considered it applicable to a higher education institution in the Philippines. It served as a theoretical lens for analyzing the relationships among crisis response strategies, responsibility attributions, and institutional reputation within this

specific cultural and institutional setting. The survey responses were assumed to reflect stakeholders' genuine perceptions of the university's crisis communication efforts and its reputation following the crises examined.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study generally aims to examine stakeholder perceptions of crisis communication and institutional reputation in the context of a Philippine higher education institution, guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Specifically, it seeks to: (1) Identify the demographic profile of USTP-CDO stakeholders in terms of age, gender, and affiliation, and examine how these characteristics relate to their perceptions of crisis communication and institutional reputation. (2) Determine stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of USTP-CDO's crisis communication response strategies, operationalized through SCCT postures (deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster), and analyze how these perceptions differ across stakeholder attributes. (3) Identify stakeholders' attributions of crisis responsibility (victim, accidental, preventable) and examine how these attributions are linked to their perceptions of USTP-CDO's institutional reputation following the crisis. (4) Assess stakeholders' perceptions of institutional reputation after the crisis, focusing on the dimensions of trust, integrity, and competence.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a **mixed-methods survey design** with an embedded qualitative component. The primary data collection instrument was a scenario-based vignette survey that included both closed-ended quantitative items (four-point Likert scale) and open-ended qualitative questions. The quantitative items measured stakeholders' perceptions of crisis communication strategy effectiveness, attribution of crisis responsibility, and institutional reputation (trust, integrity, competence). The open-ended questions were designed to capture stakeholders' reasoning, interpretations, and suggestions regarding the university's crisis response.

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical methods, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The two strands of data were then integrated during interpretation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perceptions in the context of the 2021 virtual graduation technical-failure crisis at USTP-CDO.

## Research Site

The study was conducted at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, Cagayan de Oro (USTP CDO), a state university mandated to be a nationally recognized science and technology institution linking higher education with economic and social development. USTP CDO aims to provide advanced education and training in science, technology, engineering, agriculture, and mathematics; conduct research and develop technological solutions for industrial and societal problems; and support technopreneurial and community-based development. The university's mission and institutional size make it an appropriate site for examining stakeholder perceptions of crisis communication and institutional reputation.

## Respondents

The study focused on key stakeholders associated with USTP-CDO, including administrators, faculty, staff, students, 2021 graduates, parents, and external community members. The researcher used a multi-stage purposive sampling technique. In the first stage, the scenario-based vignette on the 2021 Virtual Graduation Technical Failure was identified as the main crisis context. In the second stage, relevant stakeholder groups for the scenario were defined. In the third stage, respondents were purposively selected from each category based on their direct involvement, exposure, or informed knowledge of the event. In the final stage, recruitment followed a target of 180 respondents for the crisis scenario. Through online and printed survey distribution, a total of 80 stakeholders responded via online surveys and 25 via printed forms, resulting in 105 usable responses.

While the purposive sampling approach ensured that participants were relevant and informed stakeholders with direct or close exposure to the crisis, the study's representativeness should be critically acknowledged. The sample of 105 respondents does not constitute a statistically representative sample of the entire USTP-CDO stakeholder population, and findings should therefore be interpreted as context-specific insights rather than generalizable population estimates. Purposive sampling was chosen because the study aimed to capture informed stakeholder perspectives on a specific virtual graduation crisis rather than to produce population-level prevalence data. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups (administrators, faculty, staff, students, graduates, parents, and community members) enhances the breadth of perspectives and supports the study's aim of developing a stakeholder-centered framework, even if the sample is not population-representative. Future research may employ larger, stratified samples to test the generalizability of the proposed framework across different

institutional contexts.

**Instrumentation**

The instrument was a validated researcher-made survey questionnaire. Through utilizing a convergent parallel design mixed-methods research strategy, the quantitative and qualitative data through open-ended questions were collected simultaneously in the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was floated through online google forms and face-to-face printed hard copies.

Each survey questionnaire consisted of several sections: (a) Demographic Profile that collected age, gender and affiliation to the university, (2) Stakeholders’ level of perception of the effectiveness of USTP CDO’s crisis communication response strategies, framed according to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) postures: *deny*, *diminish*, *rebuild*, and *bolster*, (3) stakeholders’ attribution of crisis responsibility such as victim, accidental, or preventable, (4) Stakeholders’ level of perception of USTP CDO’s reputation after the crisis, measured along trust, integrity, and competence, (5) Open-ended questions capturing respondents’ feedback on how they perceived the university’s response and their recommendations for improving crisis communication. The survey was administered in bilingual form (English and Cebuano) to ensure accessibility and comprehension among diverse stakeholders.

The survey questionnaire used a four-point Likert Scale to identify the respondent’s agreement on the effectiveness of the university crisis communication response strategies, crisis attribution, and institutional reputation. The agreement was rated (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, (4) Strongly Agree.

**Figure 1**  
*Rating Scale Measurement*

| Mean        | Descriptive Equivalent |
|-------------|------------------------|
| 1.00 – 1.75 | Strongly Disagree      |
| 1.76 – 2.50 | Disagree               |
| 2.51 – 3.25 | Agree                  |
| 3.26 – 4.00 | Strongly Agree         |

**Construction, Try-out, Reliability, and Validity**

The instrument was initially conceptualized based on SCCT, crisis communication literature, and higher-education reputation studies. It underwent content validation by expert faculty members specializing in research methods and communication, who assessed clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study’s variables. The Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed to

confirm scale quality.

A pilot was conducted with a small group of stakeholders to check readability, timing, and response patterns. Based on feedback, ambiguous items were refined and wording was simplified. The final version demonstrated good internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.85 for the main constructs (perceived effectiveness, crisis attribution, and reputation dimensions).

### **Research Ethics Protocol**

For institutional approval, the study underwent rigorous review by the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines–Cagayan de Oro (USTP-CDO) Research Integrity Office, which serves as the institutional Ethics Review Board. The board evaluated the research instrument and procedures for clarity of questions, risk minimization, safeguarding of confidentiality and anonymity, alignment with informed consent principles, and protection of participant rights and dignity. After confirming that the study minimized risks, ensured voluntary participation, and complied with institutional standards, the Research Integrity Office issued formal ethical clearance, certifying that data collection could proceed.

Prior to data collection, all stakeholders were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights, including the explicit right to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. A clear and comprehensive informed consent form was provided to each participant, and a signed copy was secured before data collection began. The consent form was written in language that was clear, culturally appropriate, and easy to understand, ensuring that participants fully comprehended the nature of their involvement. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no coercion or undue incentives offered.

All collected data were anonymized and assigned unique codes; no personally identifiable information appeared in the processed data or in any published outputs. Identifiable documents, including signed informed consent forms, were stored securely in a locked repository and accessed only by the researcher and the designated research advisor. All data handling procedures complied with national ethical guidelines and USTP-CDO institutional policies on data protection and privacy.

The researcher ensured that the study posed no probable harm or discomfort to human participants. No discrimination was observed toward any subject in the study. The informed consent process and research language were culturally appropriate and sensitive to participants' context. The study was designed to uphold social value and to avoid exposing participants to vulnerability issues,

thereby safeguarding their rights, dignity, and welfare throughout the research process.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection followed a standardized protocol designed to ensure consistency and rigor. The researcher ensured that the instrument directly measured the intended constructs and then obtained formal administrative approval from the USTP CDO Chancellor's Office through an endorsement chain that included the Dean and the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

The online and printed surveys were administered across different stakeholder groups, with clear instructions provided for completion. Quantitative data were collected via Likert-scale items, while qualitative data were gathered from open-ended questions within the same questionnaire. This convergent parallel approach allowed the simultaneous collection of numerical and narrative data without requiring separate qualitative interviews beyond the survey.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The study employed a comprehensive statistical analysis plan integrating descriptive, inferential, and correlation techniques to test Situational Crisis Communication Theory propositions.

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to describe the demographic profile of stakeholders, perceived effectiveness of response strategies, crisis responsibility attributions, and reputation dimensions such as trust, integrity, competence.

Inferential analyses used variance (ANOVA) in comparing for example their perceptions based on age, attributions and effectiveness scores. Pearson correlation was utilized to assess relationships among crisis responsibility attribution, perceived effectiveness of response strategies, and institutional reputation. Statistical analyses were performed using Jamovi, and results were interpreted considering the study's conceptual framework and research questions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the salient findings of the study in relation to the research objectives and integrates them with relevant literature, particularly Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The results are organized by subheadings drawn from the objectives, and where appropriate, summary tables and key statistical outputs are highlighted.

Overall, the respondents of the 2021 Virtual Graduation were young adults

under 35, predominantly male, and belong to different university affiliations such as academic personnel or students. This demographic profile suggests that the perceptions and responses to crises are largely shaped by younger stakeholders, who might be more active on digital platforms and engaged with university affairs.

**Table 2**  
*Virtual graduation technical failure respondent's profile*

| Age                            | Counts | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|--------|------------|
| Under 25                       | 0      | 0.0        |
| 25-34                          | 45     | 42.9       |
| 35-44                          | 26     | 24.8       |
| 45-54                          | 27     | 25.7       |
| 55-64                          | 6      | 5.7        |
| 65 and above                   | 1      | 1.0        |
| Total                          | 105    | 100.0      |
| Gender                         | Counts | Percentage |
| Male                           | 60     | 57.1       |
| Female                         | 43     | 41.0       |
| Prefer not to say              | 2      | 1.9        |
| Total                          | 105    | 100.0      |
| Affiliation with USTP          | Counts | Percentage |
| Administrator                  | 14     | 13.3       |
| Technical Team                 | 1      | 1.0        |
| Academic Personnel             | 38     | 36.2       |
| Non-academic Personnel         | 32     | 30.5       |
| Batch 2021 Graduates           | 12     | 11.4       |
| Parent of Batch 2021 Graduates | 8      | 7.6        |
| Total                          | 105    | 100.0      |

Table 2 data show that the majority of the respondents are 25-34 years old (42.9%), male (57.1%), and academic personnel (36.2%). This indicates that the key stakeholders perceiving and responding to the crisis, specifically the virtual graduation technical failure, are mostly early- to mid-career professionals within the university, likely involved in administrative and academic functions.

The 25-34 age group is often characterized by heightened technological savviness and familiarity with digital communication channels, which is critical during crises involving virtual events. This implies that they are actively engaged in crisis response and communication strategies, influencing stakeholder

perceptions broadly. Young adults utilize social media to increase awareness of social issues, leading to online engagement and discussions (Seelig & Deng, 2022). A predominantly male stakeholder group might influence communication strategies that consider gender perspectives in message framing and engagement. Moreover, academic personnel form a significant stakeholder group; their perceptions can influence the university’s reputation and the effectiveness of crisis responses, especially since they directly influence students and parents. Research supports these findings, indicating that stakeholders’ demographic profiles, especially age and professional affiliation, significantly influence perceptions of crisis response effectiveness, corroborating the pattern observed in your data (Liu et al., 2017). Young citizens engage continuously with crisis content across various platforms, including social media, national media, and messaging apps (Volkmer, 2021).

Literature supports the importance of tailoring crisis communication strategies to stakeholder-specific demographics, emphasizing transparency, engagement, and role-specific messaging. Acknowledging these patterns aligns with established theories and empirical findings across Western contexts, informing effective crisis communication frameworks suited to similar stakeholder compositions.

**Table 3**  
*Stakeholders’ level of perception on the effectiveness of the USTP CDOs crisis communication response strategies*

| Crisis Response Strategies | Mean | Standard Deviation | Descriptive Equivalent |
|----------------------------|------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Deny                       | 2.42 | 0.712              | Disagree               |
| Diminish                   | 2.71 | 0.690              | Agree                  |
| Rebuild                    | 2.64 | 0.819              | Agree                  |
| Bolster                    | 2.70 | 0.682              | Agree                  |

Table 3 reveals that stakeholders generally perceived USTP’s response strategy as more focused on diminish, rebuild, and bolster strategies, with mean scores indicating agreement. Conversely, deny was perceived as ineffective or less appropriate, indicated by disagreement. This implies that respondents viewed the university’s crisis responses to the perceived severity of the event as something that acknowledged responsibility, provided corrective action, and reinforced the institution’s positive attributes. The findings are supported by Coombs (2007), who states that effective crisis communication involves rebuilding and bolstering strategies that foster trust and credibility, rather than denial strategies that can damage an organization’s reputation.

The denial strategy received negative evaluation, suggesting that stakeholders

considered denial, evasion, or refusal to accept responsibility as an ineffective response in the context of the crisis scenarios. Studies show that organizations denying responsibility face greater reputational harm when later deemed guilty. For instance, initial denial followed by a determination of guilt significantly decreases reputation scores (Coombs et al., 2016). Respondents generally agree with the use of the diminish strategy. The relatively low standard deviation (0.690) indicates that responses were fairly consistent; most respondents share similar perceptions. This suggests moderate support and stable consensus for using diminish strategies. Consequently, respondents also agree with the rebuild strategy. However, the standard deviation is higher (0.819) compared to the other two strategies. This indicates there is more variation in opinions. While the general tendency is agreement, some respondents may be neutral or slightly disagreeing. This suggests rebuilding strategy in responding to crisis is supported, but perceptions are less uniform.

Stakeholders in ASEAN countries increasingly demand transparency from organizations during crises, as in the case of the Malaysian halal industry, where they expect clear and honest communication amid controversies (Lai et al., 2025). Moreover, Denial strategies can lead to perceptions of evasiveness, damaging reputations. Consequently, the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Digital opted against denial during a data breach crisis, focusing instead on rebuilding trust through apologies and transparent communication (Faizal & Masitoh, 2025). However, in some cases, like Indonesia, BULOG, Indonesia's state-owned food logistics agency, faced negative publicity as beneficiaries shared photos and videos of hardened, inedible rice resembling gravel or stones, and the narrative quickly spun out of control online. Despite the threat to its reputation, BULOG employed a mix of denial and corrective actions. Still, the emphasis on transparency and engagement through digital platforms was crucial for restoring public confidence (Muhammad & Purwatiningsih, 2025).

The qualitative data from the open-ended questions supports the "Agree" level of perceptions regarding the use of diminish, rebuild, and bolster strategies. Although stakeholders generally agreed that these strategies were applied, their responses did not reach the "Strongly Agree" level, implying reservations about their adequacy. This is reflected in statements that the crisis response lacked empathy, warmth, and care, which affected stakeholders' emotional evaluation of the university's communication. Some participants acknowledged that the university recognized the lapses but felt that the responses were merely formal acknowledgments of technical problems without substantive resolution. The "deny" strategy, in contrast, was met with disagreement, as stakeholders described the communication as defensive and perceived the university as not fully accepting

responsibility or as insincere in its apologies.

Moreover, these reactions are exemplified by verbatim statements such as: *"They shouldn't have just released a statement; there could have been an actual graduation ceremony after COVID for the graduates of 2020 and 2021, at least a chance to march, because that was really the dream of all students back then. Especially for me, after eight years in college, I was so excited to march for graduation in 2020."* Others stated: *"What should have been a meaningful and memorable experience turned into something frustrating and disappointing for many students; instead, all we received was an official statement. We deserved better."* External stakeholders expressed feelings of insecurity, saying: *"Naga hatag kini karun ug insecurities sako kay naka witness pod kog virtual graduation, tsada man lage ilaha"* (*It makes me feel insecure because I have witnessed other virtual graduations that were well-presented*). Internal stakeholders also criticized the communication, noting: *"USTP communication fell short; they owned up the problems, yet missed the chance to rebuild trust with timely, empathetic, and solution-driven messages."* Another internal respondent commented: *"The communication is straightforward and lacks warmth."* Together, these qualitative comments explain why the "Agree"-level ratings for diminish, rebuild, and bolster did not translate into enthusiastic support, and they highlight the need for more empathetic, student-centered, and transparent follow-up communication from the institution.

A crisis like the virtual graduation technical failure reflects how stakeholders generally expect organizations, particularly higher education institutions, to respond with openness, accountability, and empathy in the face of reputational threats. A recent empirical study found that when organizations matched their responses to stakeholder expectations and situational context, they achieved better trust recovery, reinforcing SCCT's core proposition about strategic communication and reputational outcomes (Salem et al., 2026). A mixed-method study that supports the findings is from Nigerian financial institutions. Guided by SCCT, findings indicated that institutions that exercised transparent and proactive communication (aligned with SCCT recommendations) were more resilient and maintained customer trust post-crisis (Dike, 2025).

The study further examined how these perceptions of response effectiveness were related to institutional reputation dimensions: trust, integrity, and competence. When an institution employs rebuilding strategies such as apologies, compensation, or corrective measures, it signals responsibility and may help restore trust. These strategies tended to report higher levels of trust in the university, perceived the institution as more honest and ethical (integrity), and judged it as more capable of handling crises (competence). Providing accurate details about initiatives and performance helps stakeholders understand

the organization's commitment to its values (Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024). Since compensation is essential in rebuilding trust from stakeholders, such as the 2021 virtual graduation failure, implementing mental health and financial support initiatives can address immediate and long-term needs (Triantafyllidou & Yannas, 2024). Consequently, bolstering strategies that remind stakeholders of the organization's past accomplishments or positive values may help protect the reputation, but only when used alongside clear and responsible messaging. While the focus is often on immediate responses, it is essential to consider the long-term implications of crisis management strategies. Stakeholders may also perceive corporate actions as insufficient if they lack genuine engagement and follow-through, highlighting the need for sustained efforts beyond the crisis (Contreras-Pacheco et al., 2022). Hence, response timelines also highlighted the importance of collective leadership in implementing regional strategies for cooperation and recovery (Nguyen et al., 2022). These altogether show that stakeholders prefer communication that is transparent, corrective, and reputation-oriented rather than messages that simply reject blame.

These patterns reflect SCCT's core assumption that stakeholders evaluate response strategies based on their attribution of responsibility. When responsibility is attributed to the organization, diminish and rebuild strategies are preferred, while deny strategies are rejected. This interpretation is consistent with Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which argues that response strategies should match the level of crisis responsibility and stakeholder expectations. Coombs emphasizes that rebuild strategies are most effective when an organization faces strong attribution of responsibility, while bolstering can support reputation repair by reminding stakeholders of positive organizational qualities. During the 2021 virtual graduation, the university President released an official statement clarifying to stakeholders the shortfall due to technical glitches. Transparency reduces skepticism and enhances credibility, making stakeholders more likely to support the organization during crises (Shi, 2022). Denial, on the other hand, is generally less effective when stakeholders believe the organization had some role in the crisis, because it may be seen as evasive or untrustworthy. In this case, findings reinforce SCCT's claim that effective crisis communication depends not only on the message content but also on whether the response is perceived as honest, accountable, and appropriate to the crisis.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emphasizes that organizations should adopt strategies that are perceived as honest and proactive, especially post-crisis, to manage stakeholder perceptions effectively. Given this alignment between quantitative and qualitative data, the study recommends building trust through accountability and responsibility, such as explicit

acknowledgment of fault, corrective action, and commitment to improvement, supported by enhanced transparency, open dialogue, and continued stakeholder feedback.

**Table 4**  
*Crisis responsibility attribution by stakeholders*

| Crisis Responsibility Clusters | Mean | Standard Deviation | Descriptive Equivalent |
|--------------------------------|------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Victim                         | 2.44 | 0.728              | Disagree               |
| Accidental                     | 2.72 | 0.683              | Agree                  |
| Preventable                    | 3.28 | 0.665              | Strongly Agree         |

Table 4 demonstrates that stakeholders attribute the crisis primarily to the university itself, considering it preventable and therefore a reflection of organizational responsibility rather than an unavoidable accident or external victimization. This indicates a perception of organizational fault, affecting trust levels and the need for corrective actions to rebuild confidence. The results emphasized that stakeholders do not perceive the university as a victim of the 2021 virtual graduation technical failure. This implies that they do not believe uncontrollable external forces caused the technical failure; therefore, they attribute a certain level of responsibility to the university. The standard deviation of 0.728 in the victim clusters shows relatively consistent perceptions among stakeholders.

The 2021 virtual graduation technical failure qualifies as an accidental and preventable crisis under SCCT attribution-based crisis communication. The findings therefore conclude that stakeholders perceived USTP CDO as responsible for the crisis. This suggests that stakeholders think the technical failure may have been unintended. Still, since preventable gained the highest mean score of 3.28 and a standard deviation of 0.665, which shows strong consensus, this signifies that stakeholders attribute high responsibility to the university. They believe the technical failure could have been avoided. This implies perceived negligence or inadequate preparation. In this case, stakeholders are more likely to expect acknowledgment, corrective action, and visible accountability before trust can be restored (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Moreover, this also implies that the university cannot rely on defensive messaging alone; instead, it must respond with communication that addresses stakeholder concerns, clarifies what happened, and demonstrates that concrete steps are being taken to prevent recurrence (Gillespie et al., 2021; Ji et al., 2025). When responsibility is strongly attributed to the institution, reputation repair becomes more difficult if the response appears evasive, because stakeholders tend

to interpret denial or minimization as a lack of sincerity (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Ji et al., 2025). This result is similar to a study at a university in Indonesia, where crisis communication during digital-era issues found that stakeholders attributed organizational responsibility when universities failed to uphold academic integrity. The researchers noted that universities that adopted SCCT-aligned diminishing and rebuilding strategies were more successful in mitigating reputational damage, suggesting that stakeholders perceived these institutions as having a preventable responsibility rather than as victims of external forces (Asfia & Sari, 2024).

As support to the findings, qualitative statement further emphasized that the university lack proactive planning and preparedness. Respondents conveyed that the university lack better planning, rehearsals, and contingency preparations impacting the effectiveness of communication. Batch 2021 graduates said, *“A better preparation is a must. They could extend the virtual graduation date if they think they are not ready at the moment including testing the program accordingly.”* Similarly to other expressions noting that, *“They could have rescheduled the initial date and did test runs if the program or streaming fails.* Other said to make back up plan and give priority to the preparation conveying how important to them the graduation is, *“Siguro mas tagaan ug taas nga priority ang maong preparation labi na nga ang graduation isa sa pinka gi hulat sa tanang studyante, ilabi na sa mga working student sama nku”* (I think they should prioritize preparations, especially on events like the graduation, which is considered one of the most awaited moment in the student life like me as a working student).

Additionally, technical-error crises usually sit in the accidental cluster when they are seen as mechanical or software glitches (Coombs, 2023). But contextual factors can push responsibility upward: prior reputation, crisis history, media framing, severity cues, and perceptions that the organization should have prevented or managed the failure all intensify the blame (Coombs, 2023; Zhang, 2020; Mason, 2019). In relation to this, stakeholders' observation on the lack of preparation noted that when issues arise, it is suggested that the university must communicate honestly and in real time, rather than attributing everything to vague technical issues, stating that *“They should provide timely updates and clear instructions to students, so everyone knows what is happening and what to expect”*. Several respondents emphasized the need for a dedicated support or communication channel during major events so that concerns can be addressed quickly. *In one participant's words: “Having a dedicated support or communication channel during the event would also help address concerns quickly. Lastly, USTP should take accountability when problems occur and offer concrete solutions, such as rescheduling or providing an alternative experience that still honors the significance*

*of graduation. Proactive planning, clear communication, and genuine accountability would greatly improve future events and restore students' trust.* This strongly supports the preventable attribution responsibility where institutions are seen highly responsible because the crisis resulted from intentional, negligent, or mismanaged actions.

For a higher education institution, this is especially important because institutional credibility is tied not only to operational performance but also to trust, integrity, and moral responsibility (Gillespie et al., 2021). In ASEAN higher education, universities are treated as socially responsible actors that are expected to protect stakeholder welfare through planning, communication, and accountable action during crises (Rosilawati, 2023; Godonoga, 2023). Effective crisis communication is essential to manage public sentiment and prevent misinformation, as demonstrated by the case of Sichuan University. Universities should actively monitor social media and public discourse to address potential crises promptly, thereby mitigating negative impacts (Zou, 2023). Thus, the findings suggest that effective crisis communication should prioritize transparency, responsibility-taking, and remedial action to reduce blame and begin restoring stakeholder confidence (Ji et al., 2025). With the combined quantitative and qualitative data, the study recommends implementing proactive and prepared planning, suggesting the need for comprehensive plans, including backup strategies, rehearsals, and clearer communication protocols for future crises.

The result implies that respondents did not simply see the crisis as a random occurrence, but as something that could have been managed better by the university. That perception matters because perceived controllability is closely linked to reputational judgment and response expectations: the more controllable or preventable the crisis is believed to be, the more the organization is expected to own the issue and engage in corrective communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Ji et al., 2025). Therefore, organizations should use rebuilding strategies; an apology combined with high responsibility attribution to crises requires accommodative responses; conversely, using deny or diminish strategies may damage reputation further and require compensation.

**Table 5**  
*Stakeholders’ level of perception of USTP CDOs’ institutional reputation after the crisis*

| Institutional USTP CDO<br>Reputation After Crisis | Mean | Standard Deviation | Descriptive Equivalent |
|---------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Trust                                             | 2.58 | 0.761              | Agree                  |
| Integrity                                         | 2.86 | 0.584              | Agree                  |
| Competence                                        | 2.61 | 0.793              | Agree                  |

The findings in Table 5 demonstrate that stakeholders generally agreed on the university’s trust, integrity, and competence, even though they viewed the 2021 Virtual Graduation crisis as preventable. This suggests that respondents distinguished between blaming the organization for the incident and evaluating its overall credibility and ability, which is consistent with higher-education crisis studies indicating that reputation can remain relatively stable when stakeholders perceive leaders as accountable and institutions as value-driven (Coroado & Frateur, 2025). However, it didn’t reach the strongly agree level that could’ve strengthened their positive agreement on the university’s institutional reputation. Therefore, the rate of agreement level indicates they see room for improvement or lapses in specific crisis management or decision-making processes that led to the crisis being preventable.

The qualitative data partially support this mixed pattern. Themes such as calls for better planning and preparedness in future events, lack of proactive planning and preparedness, and perception of poor crisis management show that stakeholders locate the fault in specific management failures rather than rejecting the university’s overall integrity or competence. This is consistent with the quantitative finding that trust, integrity, and competence are still rated positively. Majority of the thematic themes from the parents geared towards they have waited with no direct and prompt response of what really happened. Some parents said, *“I can say maybe they did their best but not good enough. There was no prompt and transparent communication during and after the event, natulog pa gyud ayha nagpagwas ug statement, di ba unta diretso man na para makabalo ang mga graduates ug mga ginikanan unsa nahitabo. Halos di me katulog ato nga time kay wala statement diretso gipagawas”* (We have already slept then they released a statement. Shouldn’t it have been released immediately so that the graduates and parents would know what happened? We could hardly sleep at that time because no statement was issued right away).

Additionally, others noted frustration of long hours of waiting, *“Technical failure daw pero nag handa baya sad me naghulat hulat taman gabii pero wala*

*man gibasa ra ang pangalan*” (They said it was a technical failure, but we had prepared and waited until late at night, yet no names were even read). Others expressed disappointment, “*Ulaw kaayo kay naghulat me ug uban parente, pero wala nahitabo ana nga adlaw nag expect me, nag resched na pero wala gyud me remembrance sa virtual graduation man lang*” (It was very embarrassing because we waited with our relatives, but nothing happened that day. We were really expecting it. It was rescheduled, but we did not even have any remembrance from the virtual graduation).

Research on universities’ crisis responses during the COVID-19 public-health crisis shows that accommodative strategies such as apology, corrective action, and bolstering are positively associated with organizational trust and perceived transparency, even when the university is held responsible for negative outcomes (Hong et al., 2023). In short, perceiving a crisis as attributable to the university does not automatically undermine trust, integrity, or competence, especially when the response is transparent, fair, and grounded in ethical principles. U.S. higher education leaders have emphasized the importance of integrating shared values such as transparency, accountability, and fairness into crisis management plans to ensure ethical responses during crises (Liu et al., 2021). Addressing the underlying reasons for a loss of public trust is essential. Institutions must focus on maintaining their integrity and trustworthiness to prevent what can be termed “ethical sepsis,” which poses an existential threat if unaddressed (Marks, 2023).

Given that stakeholders distinguish incident fault from overall reputation and still affirm the university’s trust, integrity, and competence. Stakeholders do not always collapse incident fault into total reputational failure. Crisis meaning is socially constructed so that the same event can produce blame without total trust collapse (Contreras-Pacheco, 2023; Giglioti, 2020). Although Media controversies can damage image, stakeholders still anchor judgments in quality, confidence, commitment, responsibility, and achievement; these four factors sustain corporate image despite controversy (Adnan, 2025). The study recommends the importance of owning mistakes, issuing sincere apologies, and providing concrete solutions, including follow-up updates. This should be supported by implementing proactive, well-prepared planning in which stakeholders emphasize the importance of planning, including creating contingency plans, rehearsals, and technical tests before the event to prevent failures, address specific lapses, and prevent similar preventable crises in the future.

**Table 6**  
*Significant differences in stakeholders’ perceptions of USTP CDO’s effectiveness of crisis communication strategies by age, gender, and affiliation*

|             | F-value | p-value | Interpretation  |
|-------------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| Age         | 0.750   | 0.533   | Not Significant |
| Gender      | 0.0932  | 0.914   | Not Significant |
| Affiliation | 5.35    | 0.002   | Significant     |

Table 6 shows that stakeholders’ perceptions of the effectiveness of crisis communication response and institutional reputation, when grouped by age and gender, do not differ significantly. However, when they are grouped according to affiliation, their perceptions significantly differ. This means that their perception of effectiveness is significantly affected by their affiliation in the 2021 virtual graduation scenario.

When stakeholders’ views on USTP CDO’s crisis response and reputation do not vary by age or gender, it suggests that personal demographics are not the primary drivers of how they judge a crisis. Instead, research indicates that the severity of the crisis and the organization’s previous reputation are far more influential than the individual’s personal traits (Coombs, 2020). Research indicates that the institutional context significantly shapes people’s views on state responsibility. Crises in universities and other organizations are socially constructed, meaning stakeholders help determine whether a situation becomes a crisis and how severe it appears (Guglioti, 2020; Contreras-Pacheco, 2023; Alharthi, 2024)—stakeholder roles, political orientations, cultural norms, and institutional settings are major drivers of judgments of responsibility. For instance, citizens with higher education levels tend to support state interventions more than those with lower education, reflecting a belief in institutional responsibility over personal demographic factors (Helland et al., 2022).

The qualitative data help explain these affiliation-based differences. Themes such as slow or delayed response, inadequate or inconsistent updates, and lack of empathy and warmth in communication indicate that students and parents experienced the graduation-day disruption more acutely than other groups, which may account for their lower ratings of effectiveness. Similarly, the theme limited two-way communication reflects a demand from students and parents for direct interaction and feedback, which formal channels did not fully provide. The recurring theme of perception of poor crisis management was also stronger among these groups, reinforcing that affiliation shapes how the crisis is interpreted and judged.

The result is consistent with the SCCT framework, which emphasizes the

importance of understanding stakeholder needs and perceptions during crises. Crises are interpreted through stakeholder perceptions, not just through the event itself, so organizations need to understand what stakeholders think, fear, and expect during disruptions (Giglioti,2020; Contreras-Pacheco, 2023). Effective communication strategies can mitigate reputational damage by addressing the unique concerns of different groups, including students, faculty, and staff (Sherrill, 2018). While stakeholders broadly recognize the communication and technical issues, their specific role and emotional investment in the event, especially as students or parents amplify their perceptions of ineffectiveness. This matters because trust, compliance, reputation, and perceived competence all depend on whether communication is timely, credible, transparent, and responsive to stakeholder concerns (Zahari, 2023). The study calls for fostering two-way and open dialogue, allowing stakeholders to voice concerns and receive direct responses, complemented by establishing multiple and effective communication channels.

**Table 7**  
*Significant differences in stakeholders’ perceptions of USTP CDO’s reputation after a crisis by age, gender, and affiliation*

|             | F-value | p-value | Interpretation  |
|-------------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| Age         | 0.543   | 0.658   | Not Significant |
| Gender      | 1.17    | 0.416   | Not Significant |
| Affiliation | 4.45    | 0.007   | Significant     |

Table 7 shows the same significant difference for affiliation and no significant difference for age and gender. This means the lack of significant demographic effects reinforces the idea that “who you are” within the organization, your identity as an employee or student, matters more than your personal identity, such as age or gender, for building trust. Employees’ willingness to defend and support the organization, to feel a sense of belonging, and to align their goals with organizational goals is associated with higher trust (Tekingündüz, 2020). This denotes that stakeholders’ proximity to the university can influence organizational commitment, which is linked to enhanced community engagement and, in turn, institutional credibility (Wang, 2021).

The significant effect of affiliation suggests that USTP CDO should not treat “stakeholders” as a single audience, but as multiple publics with different expectations and perceptions. Relationship-building increases employee organizational identity even after controlling for gender, age, education, work years, position, and organization type (Sun et al., 2021). This is supported by

research on stakeholder perceptions in organizational and higher-education crisis management, which shows that affiliation moderates trust, reputation, and support after a crisis. Practically, this means communication strategies should be tailored to each stakeholder group, such as more detailed, policy-oriented messages for faculty and staff, and more relational and reassurance-oriented messages for students, parents, and external communities rather than assuming the same message will work for all. Ultimately, the strength of the relationship between the stakeholder and the institution serves as a more reliable predictor of trust than simple demographic categories (Coombs, 2020).

**Table 8**  
*Crisis communication and institutional reputation relationship*

|                             | Pearson's r | p-value | Interpretation |
|-----------------------------|-------------|---------|----------------|
| Effectiveness vs Reputation | 0.619       | <0.001  | Significant    |

Table 8 shows a significant relationship between stakeholders’ perceptions of the effectiveness of crisis communication response strategies and their perceptions of USTP CDOs’ reputation following a crisis. This suggests that the two concepts are not independent of each other. As their perception of the effectiveness of crisis communication increases, their perception of reputation also increases, indicating a positive correlation between communication effectiveness and reputational judgment. This aligns with empirical studies showing that well-perceived crisis strategies such as apology, corrective action, and restoration messages are positively associated with organizational reputation and stakeholder trust (Hong et al., 2023; Nöhammer et al., 2022).

The data shows a strong positive link between how well USTP CDO communicates during a crisis and how people view the university’s reputation afterward. This suggests that when stakeholders perceive the university’s communication as clear, honest, and effective, their respect for the institution’s reputation grows. Effective crisis communication involves continuous monitoring and strategic response management to mitigate reputational damage. Speed and accuracy in communication are critical factors that positively influence stakeholder perceptions (Nuortimo et al., 2024). Institutions that utilize adaptive communication strategies can mitigate reputational damage and enhance public trust (Suhendra et al., 2025). Stronger crisis communication is consistently associated with more favorable reputational judgments, though the magnitude of this effect depends on crisis type, prior reputation, and message design (Lee, 2022; Jiang, 2025; Dwiedienawati, 2021).

The qualitative findings provided deeper insights that supported a positive

correlation with crisis communication effectiveness. Themes included a lack of transparency and clarity, with stakeholders noting that communication was insufficiently transparent, and some explaining that explanations lacked detail about the causes of the issues. A slow or delayed response lacked promptness, leaving stakeholders waiting for updates. Furthermore, they added that the updates were inadequate or inconsistent, emphasizing that communication was either not regularly updated or inconsistent, leading to confusion among stakeholders and a lack of empathy and warmth in communication. This feedback showed low-rated communication practices directly linked to lower reputational evaluations. The presence of defense and blame-shifting and limited two-way communication further reinforces the idea that stakeholders view unreceptive or defensive communication as ineffective and damaging to trust. The recurring theme of poor crisis management **suggests** that weak communication is interpreted as a sign of broader institutional failure, further undermining reputation.

In higher education contexts, similar research reports that transparent, timely, and sincere crisis communication reinforces stakeholder confidence and protects institutional image, especially when the university is seen as responsible for the crisis (Hong et al., 2023). The fact that this relationship is significant for the 2021 Virtual Graduation case means that stakeholders' evaluations of USTP CDO's crisis response and their judgment of the university's reputation move in the same direction; favorable views of the effectiveness of crisis communication led to more favorable views of the institution's reputation. Kreutzer's research indicates that utilizing at least five different crisis communication strategies is necessary for effective reputation recovery (Nohammer et al., 2022). This finding further elaborates that the effectiveness of communication strategies varies with the type of crisis, necessitating tailored approaches for different scenarios. Interestingly, some studies indicate a negative correlation between certain integrity dimensions and reputation, suggesting that not all integrity practices yield positive outcomes (Almudara, 2024).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the study affirms that stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of crisis communication response strategies and of USTP CDO's institutional reputation are closely interconnected and significantly shaped by stakeholder attributes, particularly their affiliation with the university. The 2021 Virtual Graduation Technical Failure results show that stakeholders' evaluations of the crisis communication effectiveness are something the university has acknowledged responsibility for, further stating that effective crisis communication

involves rebuilding and bolstering strategies that foster trust and credibility, rather than denial strategies that can damage an organization's reputation. The denial strategy received a negative evaluation, suggesting that stakeholders considered denial, evasion, or refusal to accept responsibility ineffective in the context of the crisis scenarios.

The qualitative findings further enrich this conclusion by showing that stakeholders distinguish between the university's moral character and its operational capability. These integrated findings support the assumptions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which posits that the appropriateness and perceived effectiveness of crisis response strategies depend on the level of attributed responsibility, the type of crisis, and the characteristics of the audience.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that USTP CDO can sustain or even strengthen its reputation in social-media-driven crises by adopting stakeholder-centered, SCCT-informed crisis communication prioritizing accountability, transparency, empathy, fairness, and proactive preparedness rather than defensive, delayed, or minimization-oriented strategies that risk alienating key publics.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to guide USTP CDO in developing a more proactive and stakeholder-centered crisis communication approach grounded in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). For an attributable, partly accidental but fully preventable online-event crisis such as the 2021 virtual graduation technical failure, the recommended crisis response strategy is to acknowledge the crisis, offer sincere apologies, and provide appropriate compensation to affected stakeholders. Moreover, communication should be transparent, empathetic, and accompanied by clear follow-through actions to demonstrate accountability. This will position USTP CDO to navigate future crises more effectively, maintain stakeholder trust, and uphold institutional integrity.

The recommendations led to the development of a Stakeholder-Centered Crisis Communication Framework designed to guide the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines in responding to crises in a proactive, coordinated, and empathetic manner. It links the nature of the crisis, particularly its type and perceived preventability, with appropriate response strategies to protect stakeholder trust and preserve institutional reputation. The framework is

built around core communication principles and stakeholder dynamics; however, it has not been fully validated. Therefore, any replication or adaptation by other higher-education institutions can be adapted by other universities by adjusting stakeholder groups, communication channels, and context-specific procedures. HEIs should align response strategies with the crisis type and stakeholders' attributed responsibility, prioritizing rebuild and bolster strategies (e.g., apology, remediation, acknowledgment, and reinforcement of positive attributes) over deny strategies when organizational responsibility is evident. Unlike many existing frameworks that are derived primarily from international case studies or generalized organizational contexts, this model is built directly from the findings of this study, particularly in relation to how stakeholders perceive crisis attribution, preventability, and appropriate response strategies during online-event crises. The framework is structured according to a context-specific model derived from the identified gaps and patterns in the data.

It is also recommended that institutions should establish clear protocols for virtual events, including technical rehearsal, backup platforms, and rapid response mechanisms to minimize preventable failures. Crisis readiness should be integrated into institutional policies and regular training for administrators, faculty, and communication teams. Due to its significance, this study created an acronym R-E-S-P-O-N-D, which serves as a response Guide for specific crisis cases. RESPOND embodies the core conceptual-operational principle of the framework by providing a structured yet practical sequence for crisis communication: **R** means to recognize the crisis type and the stakeholders involved, **E** to evaluate stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis and their attribution of responsibility, **S** to select the most appropriate response strategy based on those perceptions, **P** to provide transparent and timely communication, **O** to offer corrective and supportive actions to address the impact of the crisis, **N** to nurture stakeholder relationships through continued engagement and reassurance, and **D** to demonstrate accountability and follow-through in order to restore trust and reinforce institutional reputation. To further elaborate on the context of each letter in the acronym, please see below:

**R – Recognizing the crisis type and stakeholders** involved means identifying the nature of the crisis as early as possible and determining who is affected. This step requires the university to assess whether the situation is accidental, preventable, or victim-based, and to clearly identify the primary and secondary stakeholders who need attention, such as the batch 2021 graduates, parents, faculty, staff, or the wider community.

**E – Evaluate stakeholder crisis perceptions and attribution**, means understanding how stakeholders interpret the crisis and how much responsibility

they assign to the institution. This step is important because stakeholder reactions are shaped not only by what happened, but also by whether they believe the university could have prevented it, responded well, or failed in its duty.

**S – Select appropriate response strategy**, means choosing the crisis response that best fits the type of crisis and the level of responsibility attributed to the university. For example, a preventable crisis may require stronger rebuilding strategies such as apology and corrective action, while a victim crisis may require clarification and information-sharing.

**P – Provide transparent and timely communication** means delivering clear, honest, and prompt updates to stakeholders through appropriate channels. This involves avoiding vague statements, acknowledging what is known and unknown, and making sure the university communicates before misinformation spreads or stakeholder concerns intensify.

**O – Offer corrective and supportive actions**, means taking concrete steps to address the problem and lessen its impact on stakeholders. This may include fixing the cause of the crisis, offering assistance or compensation where appropriate, and showing that the university is actively working to remedy the situation.

**N – Nurture stakeholder relationships**, mean sustaining communication and engagement even after the initial crisis response. This involves listening to concerns, providing updates, and showing genuine care for stakeholders so that trust can be repaired, and long-term relationships can be maintained.

**D – Demonstrate accountability and follow-through**, means showing that the university takes responsibility for its actions and is committed to implementing its promises. This includes reporting on what was done, what improvements were made, and how the institution plans to prevent similar crises in the future.

The stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework also has the following context: Crisis Decision Formula, Sample Message Template, and Response Clock. The following are the detailed description and operational functions of the framework.

With this proposed framework, HEIs should ensure that crisis messages are timely, transparent, and empathetic, explicitly acknowledging responsibility when appropriate and outlining corrective actions. This approach supports stakeholder trust, integrity, and competence perceptions, which are critical dimensions of institutional reputation. Furthermore, Institutions should create channels for stakeholders to voice concerns, provide feedback, and participate in post-crisis reviews, thereby fostering a culture of accountability and continuous

improvement in crisis communication practices.

The findings suggest that HEIs should institutionalize crisis communication as a policy priority, with clear guidelines for response strategies, stakeholder engagement, and reputation management. Crisis readiness should be embedded in institutional governance, including; Regular assessment of technical systems and operational risks, Integration of crisis communication training into staff and faculty development programs, and Development of cross-departmental crisis committees to ensure coordinated and timely responses.

To further strengthen the theoretical and practical contributions of this study, future research should conduct longitudinal studies that examine how stakeholder perceptions of crisis communication effectiveness and institutional reputation evolve over time, particularly in the aftermath of repeated or prolonged crises. Next is to pursue cross-institutional comparisons across Philippine and ASEAN higher education institutions to test the generalizability of the proposed stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework and to identify context-specific variations in crisis attribution and response preferences. Another is to explore the impact of emerging technologies such as social media platforms, AI-driven communication tools on crisis communication practices and stakeholder perceptions, providing insights into how digital transformations influence crisis readiness and reputation management. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that USTP-CDO and other HEIs can sustain or even strengthen their reputation in social-media-driven crises by adopting stakeholder-centered, SCCT-informed crisis communication that prioritizes accountability, transparency, empathy, fairness, and proactive preparedness rather than defensive, delayed, or minimization-oriented strategies that risk alienating key publics.

### **Proposed Pilot Implementation of the Stakeholder-Centered Crisis Communication Framework**

To translate the study's findings into practice, it is recommended that USTP-CDO, and potentially other higher education institutions, conduct a **pilot implementation** of the proposed stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework. The pilot would aim to test the feasibility, usability, and effectiveness of the framework in real or simulated crisis contexts, such as virtual event failures, technical disruptions, or reputational incidents.

The pilot would involve training crisis communication teams, administrators, faculty, and student leaders on the framework's components, including the **RESPOND Guide, Crisis Decision Formula, Message Templates, and**

**Response Clock.** These tools would be integrated into existing administrative protocols such as emergency plan SOPs and instructional materials.

Evaluation of the pilot would rely on stakeholder feedback through post-crisis surveys, interviews, and review meetings, focusing on dimensions such as perceived trust, integrity, competence, clarity of communication, and response timeliness. Findings would inform iterative refinement of the framework and provide evidence for broader adoption across Philippine and ASEAN higher education institutions. This pilot approach would enhance the translational value of the study by moving from theoretical recommendations to practical, evidence-based implementation in institutional settings.



*Figure 3. RESPOND GUIDE: Core Conceptual-Operational Framework Principle*

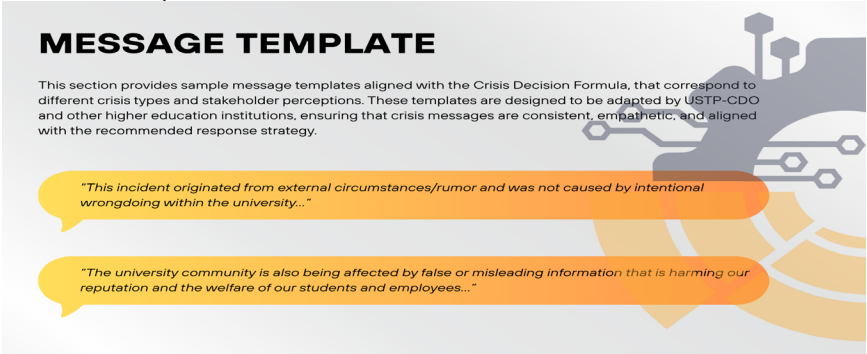
**CRISIS DECISION FORMULA:** *A Structured Tool for Crisis Identification and Selection of Crisis Communication Response Strategy*



Figure 4. Victim Response Strategy Decision Formula

**6.6 MESSAGE TEMPLATE:** *A Ready-to-Use Guide for Crisis Response Strategy Alignment*

The message template serves as a practical complement to the Crisis Decision Formula by providing a clear, standardized format for communicating the chosen crisis response strategy in a consistent and empathetic manner. It translates the decision made through the formula such as acknowledging responsibility, offering corrective action, or clarifying the situation into ready-to-use language that aligns with stakeholders’ expectations and reinforces transparency, accountability, and institutional reputation.



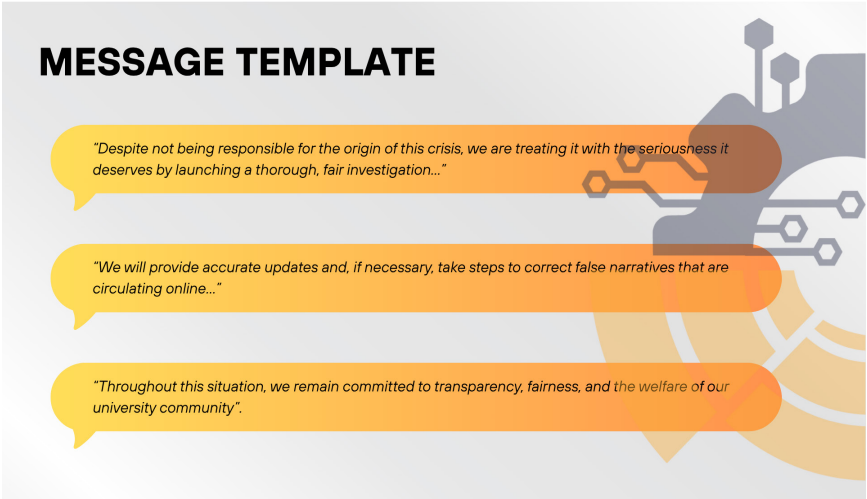


Figure 5. Message Template for Victim Response Strategy

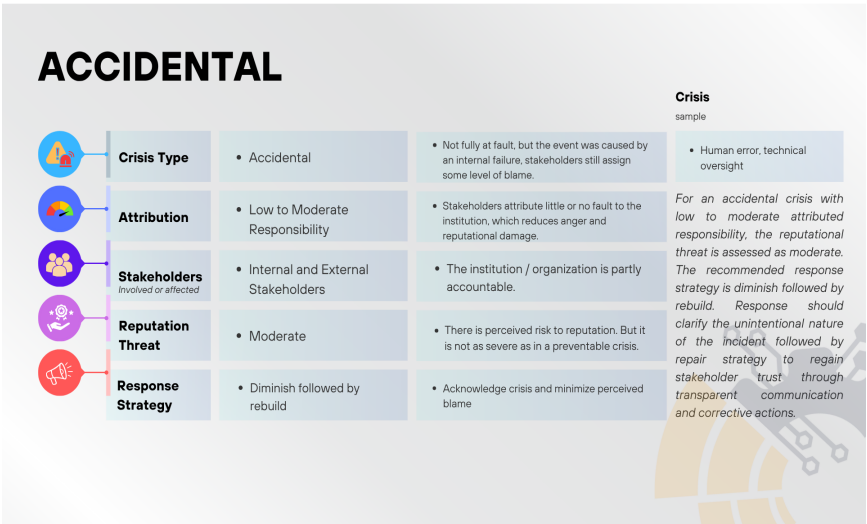


Figure 6. Accidental Response Strategy Decision Formula

## MESSAGE TEMPLATE

*"This situation resulted from an unintended technical oversight, not from intentional wrongdoing..."*

*"While the situation was disruptive, no permanent harm has occurred, and the issue is now being contained..."*

*"We have already corrected the technical problem and implemented safeguards to prevent recurrence..."*

## MESSAGE TEMPLATE

*"We sincerely regret that this incident caused confusion and concern for our students and stakeholders..."*

*"This does not reflect our usual standards of reliability, and we are committed to upholding them..."*

*"We recognize that, as an institution, we are accountable for how such events are managed and for maintaining the trust of our community..."*

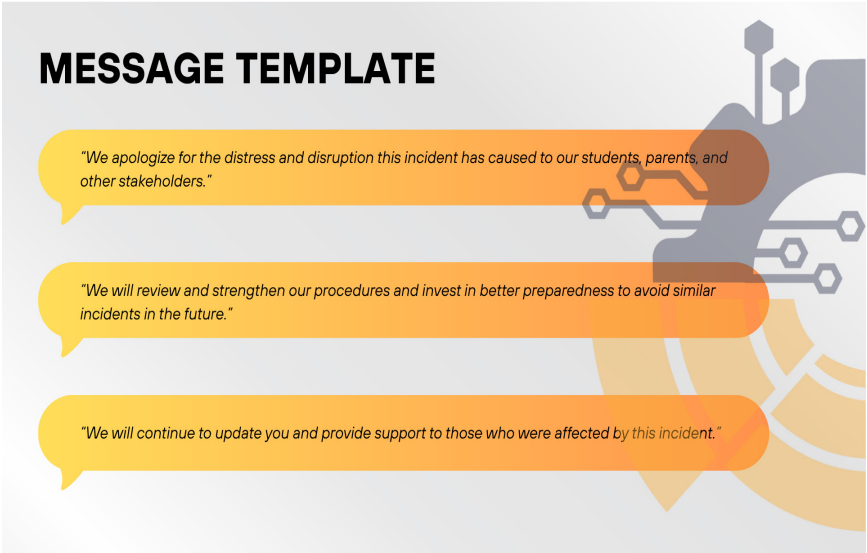


Figure 7. Message Template for Accidental Response Strategy

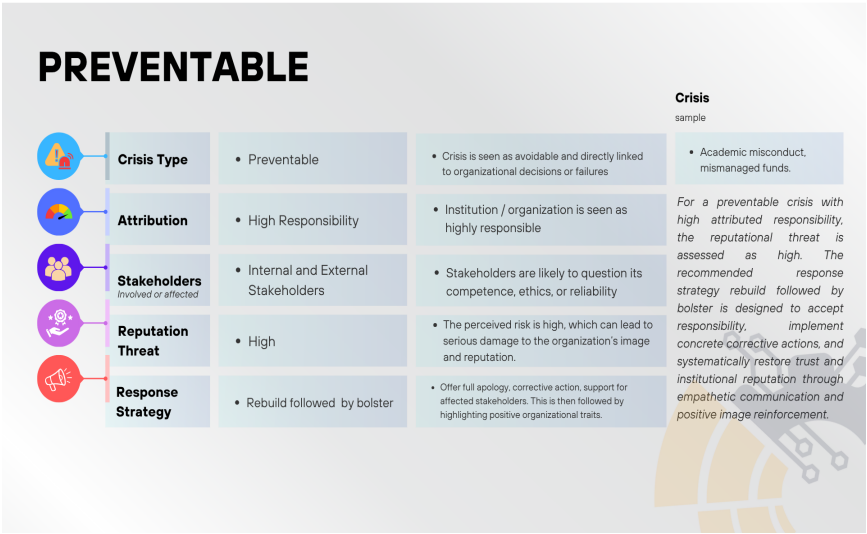


Figure 8. Preventable Response Strategy Decision Formula

## MESSAGE TEMPLATE

*"The university accepts responsibility for the incident and the harm it has caused to affected individuals and the broader community..."*

*"We offer our sincere apologies to the individuals and stakeholders affected by this preventable crisis..."*

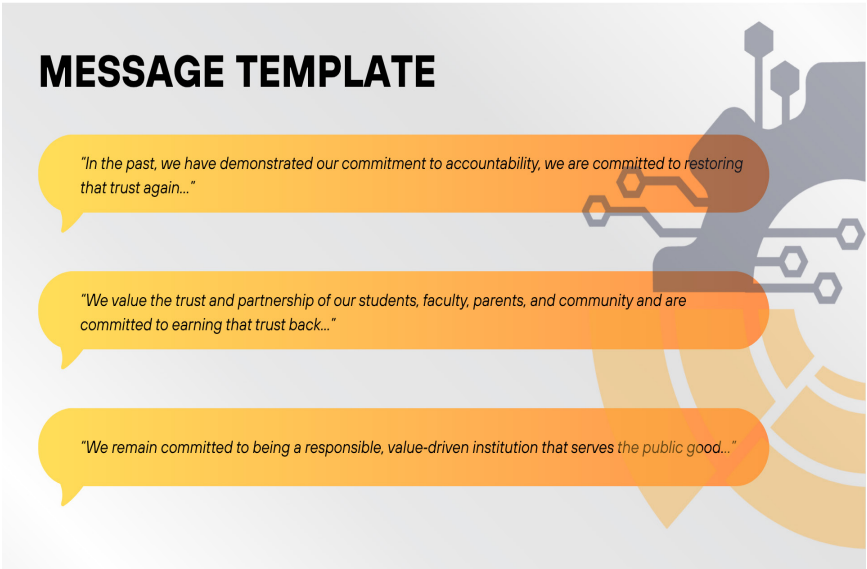
*"We will conduct a thorough review, enforce appropriate disciplinary measures, and strengthen our policies and safeguards to prevent recurrence..."*

## MESSAGE TEMPLATE

*"The university will provide appropriate support, protection, and follow-up for those who were harmed by this incident..."*

*"We will continue to update you on the outcomes of our investigation and on the corrective actions we are taking."*

*"While this incident is serious, it does not negate the university's long-standing commitment to integrity, service, and student development..."*



*Figure 9. Message Template for Accidental Response Strategy*

**6.7 RESPONSE CLOCK:** A Time-bound Crisis Communication Action for the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines

The Response Clock is a time-bound action guide that outlines key communication and response milestones for the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines during a crisis. It specifies what the university should do within 4 hours, within 24 hours, and during the first week after the incident, ensuring that information is released promptly, corrective and supportive actions are provided, and stakeholder relationships are nurtured to demonstrate accountability and follow-through. In short, the Response Clock translates the stakeholder-centered crisis communication framework into a practical, time-phased roadmap for crisis managers.

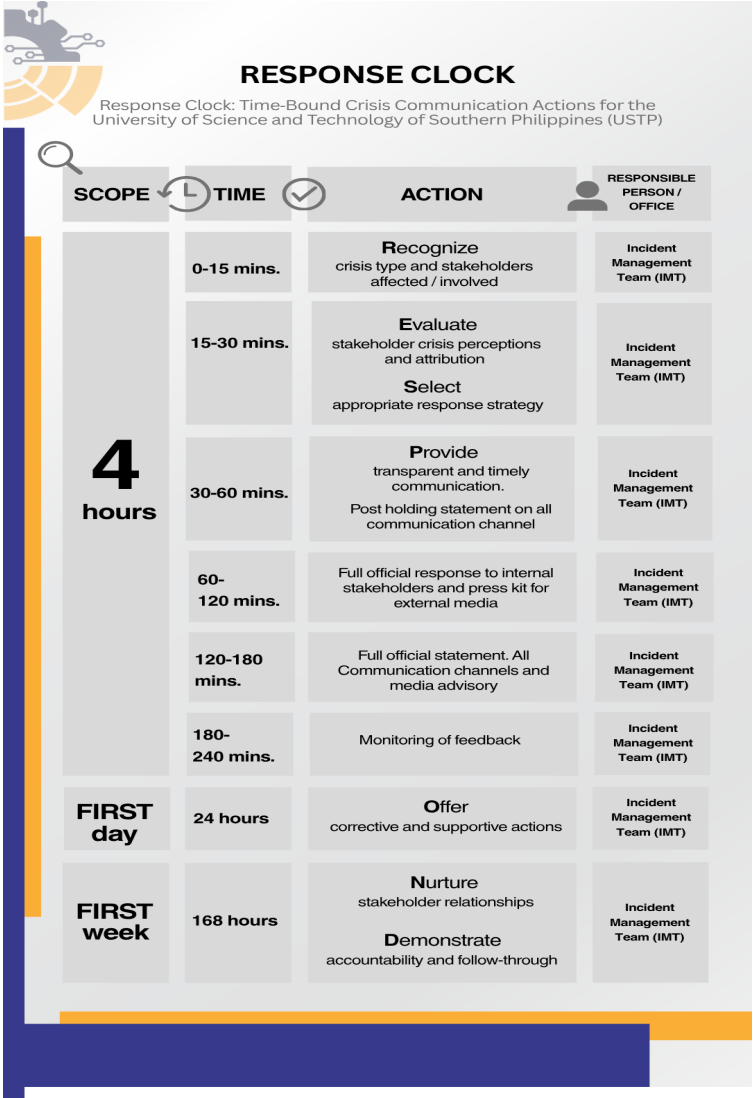


Figure 10. Response Clock: A Time-bound Crisis Communication Action for USTP CDO

Legend:

CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES:

|          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Deny     | crisis response strategy where USTP CDO rejects responsibility for the crisis, denies any involvement, or blames external parties to deflect accountability (Coombs, 2007).                                                             |
| Diminish | crisis response strategy where USTP CDO acknowledges the crisis but seeks to minimize the perceived severity or intent explaining it was accidental or unintentional, aiming to reduce stakeholder attribution of blame (Coombs, 2007). |
| Rebuild  | crisis response strategy where USTP CDO takes full responsibility, offers apologies, compensates victims, and actively works to repair trust and reputation damaged by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).                                       |
| Bolster  | crisis response strategy where USTP CDO emphasizes its past good works, positive traits, or support from loyal stakeholders to strengthen its reputation and mitigate reputational damage during crisis (Coombs, 2007).                 |

CRISIS TYPES/ ATTRIBUTION:

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Victim      | is a crisis responsibility where stakeholders' attribution of crisis to <b>USTP CDO is a victim of crisis</b> , with low, little or no responsibility for the event. The crisis is beyond USTP control (Coombs, 2007).                                                                              |
| Accidental  | is a crisis responsibility where stakeholders' attribution to <b>USTP CDO crisis is unintentional or accidental actions</b> . Responsibility is moderate, and the event was not deliberate but occurred due to errors or unforeseen circumstances (Coombs, 2007).                                   |
| Preventable | is a crisis responsibility where stakeholders' attribution of crisis to <b>USTP CDO is highly responsible because the crisis resulted from intentional, negligent, or mismanaged actions</b> . Stakeholders believe the event could have been avoided if proper measures were taken (Coombs, 2007). |

*“Crisis is inevitable in this digital age, where rumors can spread in seconds across multiple platforms. In every crisis, timely information is essential. Delaying the response heightens reputational damage. Institutions can succeed or fail depending on the effectiveness of their crisis communication. Choosing the right strategy according to stakeholders’ perceptions and attributions of responsibility can help retain and repair institutional reputation”.*

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