

## **Crisis Communication During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global crisis, including in the hotel business. Occupancy rates have fallen drastically as governments around the world put restrictions on mobility. This study focuses more on crisis communication conducted by hotels and does not examine crisis management in general. The purpose of this research is to find out the steps taken by the hotel in crisis communication. This study uses a qualitative research method, where data is collected through in-depth interviews and observation. Data collection took place from February 2021 to July 2021, where the crisis still occurred. The object of research is three five-star hotels in Yogyakarta. The results showed that there were two models of crisis communication, namely isolates and egalitarian. Isolate is when communication results in proletarian solidarity due to poor communication. The hotel with an egalitarian crisis communication model is a hotel with good crisis communication, able to show empathy, and can build employee solidarity in dealing with crises.

**Keywords:** *Crisis Communication, Hotel, Isolate, Egalitarian*



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Covid-19 has spread rapidly to various parts of the world, including Indonesia. This pandemic has shocked all parties because it happened so quickly and has never happened in the modern age. All affected countries have imposed restrictions on population mobility to reduce the spread of the virus. In Indonesia, with the government's policies, it turns out that the spread of the virus is still high. Until August 2021, there were 223 infected countries, 205,338,159 confirmed people, and 4,333,094 people who died. In Indonesia, as many as 3,833,541 people were positive, and as many as 116,366 people died (COVID-19, 2021)

Various economic activities are eliminated or run very limited. Production, transportation, and trade activities are sectors that this pandemic has severely disrupted. If we look closely, the tourism sector has also suffered a severe impact from this pandemic. Tourism, which cannot be separated from travel, is practically paralyzed. As a result, people worldwide put off their desire to travel and focus on maintaining the health of themselves and their family members.

According to a 2019 UNWTO report, the human population on this planet traveled 1.4 billion miles in 2019. Travel has become an inseparable part of human life. Global problems and the threat of terrorism cannot beat the passion for travel (Streimikiene et al., 2021). This condition is in contrast to 2020, where there has been a pandemic. International tourist arrivals fell 83% in the first quarter of 2021 as widespread travel restrictions remained in place. Between January and March 2021, destinations worldwide welcomed 180 million fewer international arrivals compared to the first quarter of last year. Asia and the Pacific continued to experience the lowest activity levels with a 94% decline in international arrivals over the three months. Europe recorded the second-largest decline with -83%, followed by Africa (-81%), Middle East (-78%), and the Americas (-71%). These all follow the 73% decline in international tourist arrivals worldwide recorded in 2020, making it the worst year for the sector (UNWTO, 2021).

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31098/bmss.v1i4.312>

Research Synergy Foundation

The same thing happened in Indonesia. The tourism sector was hit hard because of the pandemic. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2021, there was a significant decrease in local and foreign tourists. Total foreign tourist visits to Indonesia in 2020 amounted to 4,052,923 or decreased by 74.84% compared to 2019, which amounted to 16,108,600 (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2021). In fact, before the crisis, tourism had become an essential pillar of a country's income (Musa Hussein Gibreel, Mulyana Deddy, Atwar, and Santos, 2020).

The number of tourists decreased drastically because all tourist attractions were closed to the public. As a result, all stakeholders in the tourism business are affected, including hotels. Hotels play an essential role in most countries by providing business transactions, meetings and conferences, recreation, and entertainment facilities. In this respect, the hotel is as important as other areas of the community's economy, such as transportation, communication, and retail distribution of various goods and services. (Ingram, 2000).

Hotels in Yogyakarta are also experiencing the impact of the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, some hotels were forced to close their operations due to customers' absence. This has become a crisis for the hotel business. A crisis like this has no precedent. The crisis that occurred was a management crisis that also became a communication crisis. Management must convey the conditions that are being experienced to all human resources in it. This is not easy because what has to be conveyed is something unpleasant. Crisis communication supports crisis management and is a rapidly growing field of study (Lehtonen, 2002). Strategic analysis of crises is a necessary first step toward crisis communication excellence. (Palttala and Vos, 2012). Crisis communication is a niche discipline suitable for discussion and application by organizations or individuals (such as professional athletes or entertainers) that others may perceive as Crisis (Heath and O'Hair, 2010). This unique nature is the novelty of this research. Generally, researchers are more interested in examining more macro crisis management.

More seriously, the crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic is very sudden and does not have a pre-crisis stage. This is in contrast to several crises that are often mentioned in the literature, such as a boycott of company products or services, falling stock prices, serious lawsuits, loss of credit, possible bankruptcy, severe damage to company image and reputation, the threat of losing senior and middle management of the company, possible closure of the company or its parts (Anthonissen, 2008) This study aims to provide a comparison of how crisis communication was carried out during the pandemic. The contribution of this research theoretically is to update the crisis communication study and practice it will be an input for the hotel industry in managing the crisis.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature highlights the importance of communication during a pandemic. In communicating with the public during a crisis, what is essential is not only "what" is communicated (e.g., message content) but also "who" conveys the information and "how" it is communicated (Larson & Heymann, 2010). Quinn (2013) found that during In a pandemic, "who" is responsible for communication (e.g., government and health officials) must pay attention to not only "what" is communicated (i.e., the content of communication) but also "how" it is delivered (Lee and Li, 2021).

This study uses Cultural Theory which differs from the conventional approach to risk perception because it assumes people are active, not passive. Moreover, these observers are not individuals but institutions or organizations driven by the organizational imperative to select risks for attention management or suppress them from view (Douglas, 1985). Thus, the question is not how individuals think about the risk itself but how institutions think. According to cultural theory, the institutional structure is

the leading cause of risk perception; risk management is the closest stimulus to the outcome. In addition to being proactive, management strategies in cultural theory include various coping and adaptive behaviors that tend to be ignored in conventional approaches. Finally, communication risk in cultural theory emphasizes the creation of shared meaning and trust over the transfer of quantitative information (Rayner, 1988). Thus, the cultural theory is a social theory concerned with dynamic relationships among humans.

In crises, Gross and Rayner identify it by making a typology, namely the grid model as below:

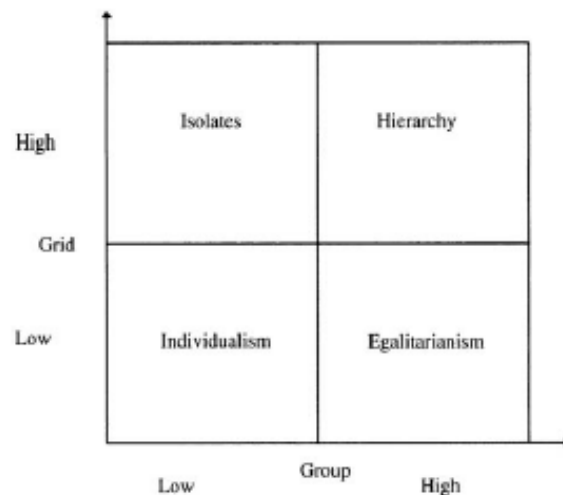


Figure 1. Grid/Group Dimensions and Solidarities

Douglas (1982) establishes the basic assumptions behind the two typological axes. First, it is considered the minimum form of commitment to life in society postulated by political theory. It represents the strength of allegiance to a group, and the axis varies from weak to vigorous. Second, it considers the extent of regulation within or outside the axis-grid groups. Again, the grid varies from low to high (Tansey and Rayner, 2009). The principle of crisis communication is to prepare for the worst, good planning, not wasting time, prioritizing people, and aspects of speed (Anthonissen, 2008).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a descriptive qualitative approach. Qualitative research elucidates the conditions surrounding the research problem and delves deeply into the data. In-depth interviews with managers of two five-star hotels in Yogyakarta yielded the data. Additionally, researchers conducted interviews with employees and consumers to ascertain the effectiveness and impact of management performance. However, in light of company secrets and the ongoing crisis, the sources requested that their identities and the hotel they work in remain anonymous. Therefore, the researcher used the initials, namely Hotel A, B and C. The researcher conducted interviews with them on various occasions to obtain more convincing information.

In addition, researchers also observed the condition of the hotel and recorded directly the activities carried out by the management team. Data were collected from February 2021 to July 2021, which was still a pandemic that impacted the hotel business. The data that has been obtained is sorted according to the similarity of themes. In the end, the researcher analyzes the research findings by using relevant

theories and references. The whole analysis is directed to answer the problem formulation and achieve the research objectives.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The research object consists of three five-star hotels that have their characteristics. Hotel A has a characteristic of colonial heritage, Hotel B carries the image of Javanese culture, and Hotel C is a hotel that has a modern image. Hotel A and C are international chain hotels, while Hotel B is a hotel with local management. The crisis equally hit all three hotels due to the pandemic. As a result, the occupancy rate becomes 0 or close to 0.

In this situation, management initially expressed surprise, as they had never encountered a crisis of this magnitude before. With hotel revenue plummeting, it will become an internal issue, particularly in terms of human resources. A hotel has complex parts and requires many human resources (Martin et al., 2020). Researchers agree that human resources are an essential aspect (Ingram, 2000).

All research objects believe in the importance of human resources, but the three operate in different ways in practice. For example, hotel A uses an authoritarian approach when conveying crisis conditions to employees. This hotel does not give employees much choice, and most of them have to quit their job. The way the manager tended to communicate arrogantly had made many employees feel disappointed. In times of crisis like this, all parties are in a sensitive condition.

Many employees feel that their performance has not been appreciated. Some managers who were not dismissed also felt disappointed with the way their superiors communicated, eventually resigning from the hotel. This was never expected by the management and made the situation even more difficult. When an excellent resource should handle a crisis, they choose to leave. Here crisis communication becomes crisis communication. Thus, communication becomes a barrier for organizations in dealing with crises.

In hotel B and hotel C, the situation is different. Managers have the sensitivity to raise this serious issue. They put empathy in their communication. Moreover, in hotel B, many employees have worked for more than 20 years. Managers try to feel what employees are feeling and provide several options. The option to terminate is inevitable due to the drastic drop in demand levels. For laid-off employees, there is an option to hire incidentally when the number of occupancy increases. During the pandemic, there was an increase in occupancies due to the government relaxing the social restrictions policy. Management also promised that once the crisis has passed, priority will be given to former employees to re-apply for jobs.

In hotels B and C, managers act not as individuals but as institutions or institutions. This is as stated by Rayner in Cultural Theory (Tansey and Rayner, 2009). Meanwhile, hotel A acts as if it were an authorized individual without considering the other person. In this hotel, there was tension in communication between managers and employees.

This manager's way of communicating is related to the communication style, namely, the presentation style is related to how the message is communicated. The style of the communicator accumulates over time so that it becomes comprehensive. The communicator's style may be viewed as an overall impression, the image of a communicator, consisting of at least ten characteristics: impressionable, controversial, open, dramatic, dominant, precise, relaxed, friendly, attentive, and passionate (Stephen Littlejohn, 2009). In crises, appropriate and empathetic communication styles need to be developed.

When the employee structure is complete, managers still need to plan for a crisis quickly. After that, however, the wheels of business must turn. The next step to do is to build solidity among the remaining employees. Managers still have to act institutionally and take employees' hands in a joint move. For

example, at hotel B, employees receive attention by getting a nutritious meal at the hotel. Nutritious food is expected to increase the body's immune system to reduce the possibility of virus transmission.

At hotel C, the manager sets an example by going down to operations. He does not just sit behind a desk. The remaining employees are also rolled out to all departments. For example, the marketing department is also rolled out to the receptionist, housekeeping, and even security departments. However, because managers also set an example, employees are eager to do their jobs.

In dealing with crises, the issue of speed of action is essential. Management should not spend time confused about a crisis. For Hotel B, during the first five months of the pandemic, hotel operations were closed. Meanwhile, hotel A and hotel C continue to operate even though the occupancy rate is meager. However, based on observations, in the second year of the pandemic, hotel B and hotel C have started to experience an increase in visitors.

Using the grid model from Gross and Rayner, hotel A is included in the grid isolates, where solidarity is low, but the grid group is high. As for hotel B and hotel C, they are on an egalitarian grid. As a result, this hotel can show empathy to employees and move together to deal with crises.

## **CONCLUSION**

Communicating is not only about what will be conveyed but also how to convey it. Communication becomes problematic when it has to be done in a crisis. The crisis management situation necessitated the development of crisis communication. The results show that hotels with isolated crisis communication are detrimental to themselves. The hotel loses the best human resources because they choose to resign.

Meanwhile, hotels with egalitarian crisis communication are better able to survive. They can communicate difficult situations to be easier to understand. After structuring employees, egalitarian hotels maintain solidarity by giving more attention to employees. In addition, managers also provide hands-on practice and do not hide from the crisis.

This study focuses on crisis communication, but the results of the study found a communication crisis. This needs to be explored by future researchers. This research also has a weakness to dig in more depth because most of the data is confidential.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors would like to thank the Institute for Research and Community Service at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for providing funds for this research.

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