

Can Trust Be Restored? Institutional Communication in Addressing Sexual Violence in Indonesian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

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Sexual violence in higher education has emerged as a critical issue that threatens the safety of academic communities and undermines public trust in educational institutions. In Indonesia, increasing reports of sexual violence on campuses have prompted regulatory responses and the establishment of institutional mechanisms for prevention and handling. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms largely depends on how institutions manage communication in preventing, responding to, and addressing such cases. This study examines how institutional communication operates in addressing sexual violence within Indonesian higher education institutions and how it relates to the restoration of public trust. Using a qualitative multiple case study approach, this research investigates three Indonesian public universities that have implemented institutional frameworks for the prevention and handling of sexual violence. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with institutional actors, including members of prevention task forces, faculty, administrators, and students, as well as through document analysis. The findings reveal that institutional communication plays a pivotal role in shaping transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in handling sexual violence cases. Effective communication practices not only facilitate coordination among institutional actors but also contribute to rebuilding trust among campus communities and the broader public. The study highlights that communication governance within institutions is essential in addressing sexual violence as both a crisis and a structural issue. By demonstrating how communication practices influence institutional credibility, this research contributes to broader discussions on public trust, institutional accountability, and social impact in higher education governance.

1. Introduction

Sexual violence in higher education has increasingly been recognized as a serious institutional issue that extends far beyond individual misconduct. It threatens the safety of academic communities, disrupts educational environments, and challenges the moral and organizational legitimacy of universities as public institutions. In recent years, universities in many parts of the world have faced growing pressure to respond more effectively to sexual violence, not only through legal compliance and administrative procedures but also through transparent, accountable, and victim sensitive institutional practices (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020). These developments suggest that sexual violence in higher education should not be understood solely as a matter of regulation or disciplinary enforcement. It is also a communication issue, because institutional

responses are continuously interpreted, contested, and evaluated by students, staff, media actors, and broader publics.

Within this broader landscape, communication becomes central to how universities define the problem, coordinate internal action, engage affected stakeholders, and sustain public confidence. Institutions that fail to communicate with clarity, responsiveness, and accountability often face intensified distrust, public criticism, and reputational damage, even when formal mechanisms for prevention and case handling are in place. By contrast, communication practices that enable transparency, recognition, and meaningful engagement may support institutional credibility and improve the conditions under which trust can be restored. This makes sexual violence a particularly important site for examining the relationship between institutional communication and public trust in higher education governance.

The Indonesian context provides a significant setting for such analysis. Public discussions of sexual violence on university campuses in Indonesia have become increasingly visible, particularly following several high profile cases that circulated widely through digital media, student activism, and journalistic reporting. These cases have generated strong public concern not only because of the violence itself, but also because they exposed institutional hesitation, weak responsiveness, and uneven commitment to victim protection. Universities in Indonesia occupy a distinctive position as educational institutions, bureaucratic organizations, and moral actors that are expected to maintain safety, fairness, and accountability. When sexual violence cases emerge, these expectations converge, making the institutional response subject to close scrutiny from both internal and external audiences. As a result, the question of whether trust can be restored is inseparable from the communicative processes through which the institution responds.

This issue has become more pressing since the strengthening of national policy frameworks concerning the prevention and handling of sexual violence in higher education. Indonesian universities have been encouraged, and in many cases required, to establish formal mechanisms such as Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Forces. These structures are intended to institutionalize reporting procedures, victim protection, preventive education, and administrative follow up. Yet the existence of formal mechanisms does not automatically produce trust. Institutional credibility depends on whether these mechanisms are perceived as functioning fairly, visibly, and responsively. In practice, the effectiveness of such arrangements is shaped by how universities communicate across organizational levels and public arenas, how they acknowledge stakeholder concerns, and how they respond when cases escalate into broader controversies. In this sense, communication is not supplementary to policy implementation. It is constitutive of how institutional commitment is understood and judged.

Existing scholarship on sexual violence in higher education has made important contributions by documenting prevalence, policy gaps, and institutional failures, as well as by foregrounding the experiences of victims and survivors (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Other studies have shown how media attention and public events, including movements such as #MeToo, intensify institutional pressure and shape public expectations regarding accountability (Ghosh et al., 2020). At the same time, crisis communication scholarship has demonstrated that institutions facing morally charged crises are evaluated not only by what they do, but by how they communicate responsibility, empathy, and responsiveness under conditions of uncertainty and contestation (Butler, 2021; Coombs, 2007). In higher education settings, this is especially important because universities depend heavily on trust based relationships with students, families, faculty, state institutions, and the public.

Despite these advances, research has paid more limited attention to institutional communication as an organizing process in sexual violence cases. Much of the existing literature treats communication as a managerial instrument for disseminating information, preserving reputation, or responding to public criticism. Such an approach is useful, but insufficient. It risks overlooking how communication actively shapes organizational realities, including who gets heard, how responsibility is negotiated, and how institutional legitimacy is constructed in moments of crisis. In sexual violence cases, communication affects not only external image but also internal coordination, recognition of victim and student voices, and the perceived integrity of institutional action. This indicates the need for a more communication centered analysis of trust restoration in university responses to sexual violence.

This study addresses that need by examining institutional communication in Indonesian higher education through the lens of public trust. Trust is understood here not as a fixed asset that institutions either possess or lose, but as a relational and communicatively mediated condition shaped through interaction, interpretation, and judgment. Public trust in universities is closely tied to expectations of safety, fairness, transparency, and moral accountability. When these expectations are disrupted by sexual violence cases, institutions are required not only to act, but also to communicate in ways that demonstrate recognition of harm and responsibility toward affected communities. The restoration of trust, therefore, depends on whether communication enables stakeholders to see the institution as credible, responsive, and ethically engaged.

To support this argument, the study draws conceptually on perspectives from organizational communication and crisis communication. The Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective is particularly relevant because it emphasizes that organizations are not merely containers within which communication occurs, but are themselves produced and sustained through communication (Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011). From this perspective, institutional responses to sexual violence are not simply implemented by pre existing structures. Rather, they are constituted through communicative practices such as coordination, reporting, consultation, policy articulation, and public positioning. This perspective allows the study to move beyond a narrow focus on official messages and instead examine how organizational action, authority, and accountability are communicatively enacted.

This approach is complemented by insights from crisis communication scholarship, especially work that highlights the multivocal nature of contemporary crises. Crises no longer unfold only within institutional boundaries. They develop across broader arenas involving journalists, students, advocacy groups, online publics, and other actors who interpret and contest institutional responses in real time (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). In university sexual violence cases, these arenas are especially intense because they involve moral judgment, emotional testimony, and power asymmetries. Public trust is therefore shaped not only by what the university says through official channels, but also by how its communication interacts with competing voices in broader public discourse. Institutions that remain absent, defensive, or overly procedural in these arenas risk deepening distrust. Institutions that engage more openly and responsively may be better positioned to sustain or rebuild trust, even amid crisis.

The notion of voice is also central to this study. Trust restoration cannot be adequately understood without asking whose voices are recognized, whose concerns are legitimized, and whose experiences are marginalized within institutional communication. In the context of sexual violence, voice includes not only official spokespersons and administrators, but also victims, students, faculty members, task force personnel, activists, and digital publics. Organizational voice scholarship has shown that voice is not merely a matter of expression, but is shaped by structures of power, access, and recognition (Morrison, 2014). In university sexual violence cases, the inclusion or exclusion of stakeholder voices has direct implications for institutional legitimacy and trust. Communication that treats voice as procedural input alone may appear formally adequate while still failing to build confidence. By contrast, communication that enables dialogue, acknowledgment, and visible responsiveness may contribute more meaningfully to trust restoration.

Reputation is also implicated in this process, but this study does not treat reputation as the primary goal of institutional communication. Rather, reputation is understood as one consequence of how communication shapes trust and legitimacy over time. Research on crisis response has shown that reputational resilience depends less on image management alone than on the quality of institutional engagement with stakeholders, especially during morally charged controversies (Coombs, 2007; Huang & Ki, 2023). In the context of sexual violence, attempts to protect institutional image through silence, delay, or narrowly procedural messaging may produce the opposite effect, reinforcing perceptions of indifference or avoidance. This suggests that public trust and reputation are linked through deeper communicative processes of recognition, accountability, and responsiveness.

Against this background, the Indonesian higher education context remains underexamined in international scholarship, particularly from an institutional communication perspective. Although universities in Indonesia operate under increasingly formalized regulatory expectations, their communicative capacities, organizational cultures, and patterns of stakeholder engagement vary

considerably. Similar policy frameworks may therefore produce different trust outcomes depending on how communication is structured and enacted within each institution. A comparative analysis is needed to understand how universities facing similar pressures may differ in their capacity to coordinate responses, engage voices, and address public scrutiny.

Accordingly, this study examines how institutional communication operates in addressing sexual violence within Indonesian higher education institutions and how it relates to the restoration of public trust. Using a qualitative multiple case study of three Indonesian public universities, the study analyzes how communication practices shape institutional coordination, stakeholder engagement, and public evaluation during sexual violence cases. By doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on institutional accountability, crisis communication, and trust in higher education governance.

This study makes three contributions. First, it extends existing work on sexual violence in higher education by centering institutional communication as a constitutive dimension of organizational response rather than as a secondary instrument of information delivery. Second, it connects the question of trust restoration to organizational and public communication processes, showing how trust is shaped through interaction across internal and external arenas. Third, it offers an empirically grounded contribution from the Indonesian context, where universities confront sexual violence within a complex intersection of bureaucratic regulation, moral expectation, and digitally mediated public scrutiny. Through this focus, the study seeks to answer a central question: under what communicative conditions can trust be restored when universities face sexual violence cases that challenge their legitimacy, credibility, and public responsibility?

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to examine how institutional communication operated in addressing sexual violence in Indonesian higher education and how such communication related to the restoration of public trust. A multiple case study approach was appropriate because it enabled comparative analysis across organizational settings while preserving the contextual depth needed to examine communication as a socially and institutionally embedded process (Eisenhardt et al., 1989; Yin, 2018). The study was conducted in three Indonesian public universities: Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Riau, and Universitas Andalas. These universities were selected purposively based on the public exposure of sexual violence cases, the formal establishment of Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Forces, and the intensity of media and public discourse surrounding the cases (Patton, 2014; Yin, 2018). Together, the three cases represented different institutional communication dynamics, allowing comparison of how similar regulatory expectations produced different response patterns and trust related consequences.

Data were collected from multiple qualitative sources to capture the communicative dynamics of sexual violence cases across organizational and public arenas. The study combined in depth semi structured interviews, document analysis, media discourse analysis, and social network analysis, thereby strengthening triangulation across sources and methods (Denzin, 2012). Interviews were conducted with key institutional actors, including task force members, university leaders, public relations personnel, faculty members, administrative staff, and student representatives. These participants were selected because of their involvement in prevention efforts, case handling, communication processes, and stakeholder engagement related to sexual violence on campus. Key informant interviewing was used to access insider perspectives on institutional coordination, crisis response, and trust restoration (Marshall, 1996; Pahwa et al., 2023). Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached.

Document analysis covered university regulations, standard operating procedures, internal guidelines, official statements, press releases, and institutional social media content related to sexual violence issues. These materials were treated as communicative artifacts through which institutions defined problems, assigned responsibility, and positioned themselves publicly (Bowen, 2009). To capture the broader communicative environment, the study also examined media discourse and digitally mediated public responses from news outlets, university websites, and social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter or X. These data allowed analysis of how institutional communication interacted with wider rhetorical contestation over time (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Social network analysis was used as a complementary technique to map

communication relationships among task force members, university leaders, administrative units, and communication offices. Rather than functioning as a standalone quantitative method, it supported interpretation of how communication structures enabled or constrained coordination and institutional responsiveness (Eriyanto, 2014; Scott, 2012).

Data analysis followed an iterative and interpretive process. Interview transcripts, organizational documents, and digital materials were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to institutional communication, coordination, stakeholder engagement, crisis escalation, and trust restoration. Pattern matching was used to connect empirical findings with the study's conceptual concerns and to compare patterns across cases (Yin, 2018). The analysis was informed by the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective, particularly its emphasis on how organizations are constituted through communicative processes such as membership negotiation, self structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning (Boivin et al., 2017; Brummans et al., 2014). In addition, Rhetorical Arena Theory was used to examine how institutional narratives interacted with stakeholder voices, media framing, and public discourse in multivocal crisis environments (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013).

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across data sources, methods, and participant groups, as well as member checking and reflexive memoing throughout the analytic process (Denzin, 2012; Tracy, 2010). Given the sensitivity of sexual violence cases, informed consent procedures were followed and potentially identifying information was anonymized. Particular care was taken in handling interview material, institutional documents, and public discourse that could expose victims or other vulnerable actors.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Institutional Communication and Crisis Response

The findings show that institutional communication played a central role in shaping how universities responded to sexual violence cases and how public trust was affected. Across the three universities, communication did not merely function as a mechanism for delivering information after a case emerged. Rather, it constituted the organizational conditions through which responsibility was coordinated, internal action was organized, and public accountability was demonstrated. Although all three universities operated under a similar national regulatory framework and had established formal mechanisms for the prevention and handling of sexual violence, their communication practices differed substantially. These differences generated contrasting patterns of responsiveness, coherence, and trust related consequences.

At Universitas Indonesia, institutional communication was more integrated and routinized. Communication among the Sexual Violence Prevention and Handling Task Force, academic units, student affairs, and related offices was embedded within broader organizational routines. Informants described regular cross unit interaction, a shared understanding of reporting procedures, and more established internal channels for consultation and response. This communicative integration enabled information to circulate more consistently across organizational boundaries, making institutional action appear more coherent and credible in the face of public concern.

By contrast, Universitas Riau displayed a more reactive communicative pattern. Institutional communication intensified primarily after sexual violence cases became publicly visible through student mobilization and media exposure. Before that stage, communication related to prevention and case handling was described as less coordinated and more fragmented. Once the issue escalated, communication increased rapidly, largely in response to reputational pressure and public scrutiny. This suggests that responsiveness was activated more by crisis visibility than by sustained institutional readiness.

Universitas Andalas reflected a more centralized and formalized communication structure. Communication related to sexual violence cases was channeled mainly through official procedures and hierarchical lines of authority. Opportunities for horizontal coordination and dialogic engagement were more limited, and feedback from students or other stakeholders was largely filtered through formal reporting channels. Although this structure created procedural order, it also reduced

flexibility and slowed institutional responsiveness, particularly when cases attracted wider public attention.

These findings reinforce the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective, which views organizations as constituted through communication rather than as stable entities that simply deploy communication strategically (Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011). Across the three cases, communication structured how authority, coordination, and responsibility were enacted during crisis situations. In this sense, communication was not secondary to institutional response. It was the process through which response itself became possible and publicly meaningful.

3.2 Stakeholder Voice, Recognition, and Trust Restoration

The data further indicate that trust restoration was closely linked to how stakeholder voices were recognized, mediated, and incorporated into institutional response. Voice in these cases extended beyond formal spokespersons and included victims, students, faculty members, task force actors, and digitally connected publics. The findings suggest that trust was more likely to be sustained or gradually restored when communication created space for recognition, acknowledgment, and meaningful engagement rather than merely procedural intake.

At Universitas Indonesia, multiple communicative spaces enabled students and organizational members to articulate concerns beyond formal complaint mechanisms. These included task force facilitated discussions, interactions with student organizations, and more informal consultation across institutional units. In this context, voice functioned not only as input but as part of an ongoing communicative process through which institutional response was shaped. Even when outcomes remained contested, the recognition of voice appeared to strengthen perceptions that the institution was listening and taking concerns seriously.

At Universitas Riau, stakeholder voice became more visible mainly during moments of public escalation. Student concerns gained prominence when they were amplified through social media, journalistic reporting, and public debate. In this sense, voice was not deeply embedded in institutional communication but emerged more forcefully when external attention redistributed communicative power. Although institutional actors did respond during these moments, opportunities for sustained engagement remained limited outside crisis periods. As a result, trust was not built through continuous dialogue but depended more heavily on whether public pressure could compel institutional attention.

At Universitas Andalas, voice was more constrained by procedural communication. Students and victims had fewer opportunities to shape institutional response beyond submitting reports or complaints. Voice was treated primarily as administrative information rather than as a basis for dialogue or collective reflection. Victims' perspectives were often filtered through procedural interpretation, reducing their visibility within broader institutional communication. This finding suggests that the existence of formal mechanisms alone was insufficient to restore trust when those mechanisms did not enable meaningful recognition of lived experience.

This pattern aligns with scholarship on organizational voice, which emphasizes that voice is shaped by power, access, and recognition rather than simply by the opportunity to speak (Morrison, 2014). In the context of sexual violence, the inclusion or exclusion of voice directly shaped perceptions of legitimacy and institutional sincerity. Communication that allowed voice to influence understanding and response contributed more meaningfully to trust restoration than communication that treated voice as procedural data alone.

3.3 Public Arenas, Reputation, and the Limits of Institutional Control

The findings also reveal that sexual violence cases quickly moved beyond internal organizational boundaries into broader public arenas involving media discourse, student activism, and digitally networked publics. However, the dynamics of escalation varied across the three universities. At Universitas Riau, crisis escalation was rapid and highly visible. Social media discourse and journalistic framing amplified the issue, producing competing narratives that questioned institutional intent, responsiveness, and moral credibility. Because early institutional communication was delayed

or limited, alternative interpretations gained traction before the university could establish a clear public position.

At Universitas Andalas, rhetorical contestation developed in a more prolonged manner. Official communication emphasized procedural compliance and formal statements, but limited engagement with external voices created discursive gaps. These gaps were then filled by criticism, speculation, and activist narratives in online spaces. The result was a sustained questioning of institutional transparency and commitment. Universitas Indonesia, in contrast, showed a greater capacity to engage with public discourse more continuously. Institutional actors monitored emerging discussion, issued clarifications, and communicated through multiple channels. Although they did not fully control the narrative, their communicative presence helped reduce polarization and moderate escalation.

These findings support Rhetorical Arena Theory, which conceptualizes crisis as a multivocal communicative process in which organizations must respond to intersecting voices rather than assume control over a single narrative (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). In sexual violence cases, these arenas were not only sites of message competition but also spaces of moral judgment. Emotional testimony, victim narratives, and student advocacy carried strong rhetorical force, often shaping public evaluation more powerfully than official institutional messaging. This is consistent with research showing that emotional stakeholders can become influential crisis communicators in mediated environments (Johansen et al., 2016).

The implications for reputation and trust were substantial. Reputation across the three cases was shaped less by the severity of the incident alone than by how communication structured interaction, responsiveness, and accountability over time. At Universitas Indonesia, dialogic communication functioned as a buffering mechanism that supported more stable trust trajectories. At Universitas Riau, trust recovery remained partial because communication strengthened only after public pressure had already intensified. At Universitas Andalas, persistent proceduralism and limited engagement contributed to more prolonged reputational vulnerability. These patterns align with research showing that organizational reputation is socially constructed through ongoing communication and that transparency, responsiveness, and acknowledgment of uncertainty are central in morally charged crises (Coombs, 2007; Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Butler, 2021; Huang & Ki, 2023).

Taken together, these findings show that trust restoration in university sexual violence cases cannot be reduced to procedural compliance or symbolic image management. Trust is communicatively constituted through how institutions coordinate response, recognize stakeholder voice, and position themselves within broader public arenas. In the Indonesian higher education context, where universities are judged not only as bureaucratic institutions but also as moral actors, communication becomes central to whether institutional credibility can be sustained or rebuilt.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sexual violence in higher education is not only a legal, administrative, or disciplinary issue, but also a critical problem of institutional communication. Across the three Indonesian public universities examined, the findings show that public trust was shaped not simply by the existence of formal prevention and handling mechanisms, but by how institutional communication organized crisis response, recognized stakeholder voices, and engaged broader public scrutiny. In this sense, trust restoration was not procedurally guaranteed. It was communicatively constituted through the ways institutions enacted responsibility, transparency, and responsiveness in moments of moral and organizational crisis.

The study contributes to the literature by showing that institutional communication plays a constitutive role in addressing sexual violence in higher education. Communication did not merely transmit policy or protect image. Rather, it structured coordination, mediated voice, and influenced how institutional legitimacy was evaluated across organizational and public arenas. By bringing together insights from the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective and crisis communication scholarship, this study highlights that the restoration of trust depends on sustained

communicative practices that enable recognition, dialogue, and accountability, rather than on reactive or purely procedural responses.

The findings also offer an important contextual contribution from Indonesian higher education. Although the universities operated within similar regulatory frameworks, their communication practices and trust related outcomes differed substantially. This suggests that institutional policy alone is insufficient unless it is supported by communication arrangements that foster meaningful engagement across internal and external stakeholders. Universities are therefore encouraged to strengthen institutional communication not as a secondary support function, but as a core dimension of governance in preventing and responding to sexual violence.

Overall, this study argues that the question posed in the title, can trust be restored, cannot be answered in universal or procedural terms alone. Trust can be restored only to the extent that institutions communicate in ways that are credible, dialogic, and publicly accountable. In cases of sexual violence, where universities are judged not only as bureaucratic organizations but also as moral actors, institutional communication becomes central to whether legitimacy can be sustained or rebuilt.

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