



Crisis Communication at the Local Level: Trust, Inequality, and Developmental Implications from Makassar's COVID-19 Response

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of crisis communication in Makassar during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the interaction between leadership visibility, digital information flows, policy clarity, and participatory practices. The urgency of this research lies in addressing how local governments in decentralized contexts manage communication when institutional trust is fragile and citizens face unequal access to information. Using a qualitative case study approach with triangulated interviews, documents, and media analysis, four major themes emerged: the symbolic centrality of mayoral leadership, the uneven reach of digital platforms, fragmentation and ambiguity in policy-related communication, and the critical role of local actors in building trust. The findings reveal that while mayoral visibility generated short-term reassurance, its effectiveness was limited by weak coordination across administrative layers. Similarly, reliance on digital platforms amplified inequalities, excluding marginalized populations from vital information. By contrast, neighborhood leaders, religious figures, and NGOs functioned as trusted intermediaries, translating official messages into socially resonant forms. Theoretically, this study contributes to crisis communication scholarship by demonstrating that effective communication requires more than symbolic authority or technological innovation; it depends on relational trust, procedural fairness, and hybrid infrastructures that integrate both formal and community-based channels.

Key word: Crisis Communication; Local Governance; Public Trust; COVID-19.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly tested the resilience and responsiveness of governance structures worldwide, particularly in urban settings where population density and social complexity intensify crisis management challenges (Komarulzaman et al., 2023; Sarango-Lalangui et al., 2023). As one of Indonesia's major metropolitan areas, the city of Makassar in South Sulawesi faced considerable pressure to mitigate the public health emergency while simultaneously maintaining social stability. In such contexts, crisis communication becomes more than a channel for information dissemination; it serves as a critical tool for fostering trust, securing compliance, and strengthening collective resilience (Limphaibool et al., 2022; Mokline & Ben Abdallah, 2022; Schweitzer et al., 2024). Local governments, especially in decentralized political systems such as Indonesia, hold a central role in ensuring that both health protocols and social welfare policies are communicated effectively to diverse communities (Danugroho et al., 2020; Puspitarini, 2019).

Despite this pivotal role, the pandemic highlighted critical gaps in communication strategies employed by local governments, particularly their struggle to balance biomedical directives with the socio-cultural realities of heterogeneous populations (Nik & Moazami, 2021; Ratner et al., 2013). The case of Makassar thus provides a compelling site to analyze how crisis communication intersects with political leadership, policy implementation, and public accountability. While studies on crisis communication often focus on national or international institutions (Parahita, 2019; Wirba, 2024), the dynamics of subnational governance during global crises remain underexplored. Examining local responses offers an opportunity to understand how policy messages are reframed, contested, and negotiated in everyday life, thereby shaping compliance and resilience at the grassroots level.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how the Makassar City Government communicated uncertainty, framed risks, and implemented social policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis employs Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Procedural Justice Theory as the primary theoretical lenses. SCCT provides insights into how authorities framed crisis responsibility and crafted strategic messages, while Procedural Justice sheds light on perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accountability in policy execution. By applying these theories operationally, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts to critically examine how local authorities balanced informational transparency with the need to maintain social stability, offering an integrated framework that links communicative practices with governance outcomes.

The interplay between communication practices and policy execution in the urban local governance setting remains under-theorized, especially in Southeast Asia where political decentralization and bureaucratic fragmentation shape crisis responses (Armawi et al., 2022; Fowler, 2022; Ratang, 2016). This study therefore pays attention to the framing of messages, the strategic use of digital platforms, the involvement of neighborhood leaders, and the alignment of communication with tangible welfare interventions such as food aid, income subsidies, and health services (Danugroho, 2022b; Pinto, 2018). Through qualitative analysis of official documents, press releases, digital records, and interviews with stakeholders, this research provides a nuanced account of communicative governance mechanisms deployed during the pandemic's acute phase. Such an approach illuminates how local governments adapted to institutional constraints while engaging communities through dialogic and iterative forms of communication.

Furthermore, the study contributes to broader debates on how localized crisis communication strategies can support inclusive governance in societies marked by inequality, informality, and varied levels of trust in state institutions (Armawi, 2019; Danugroho, 2022a). The Makassar case illustrates not only the challenges of fragmented bureaucracies but also opportunities for participatory governance

and policy innovation when communication is treated as a two-way process (Hardi & Gohwong, 2020; Latanna et al., 2023). By synthesizing empirical findings with theoretical insights, the study advances a more contextually grounded understanding of crisis communication in the Global South. Accordingly, this paper seeks to answer three research questions: What role do local actors play in building communicative resilience?

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore how the local government of Makassar formulated and operationalized crisis communication and social policy interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for understanding the meanings and subjective interpretations embedded within communicative and policy practices during complex crises (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than seeking generalizability, the objective is to construct an in-depth, contextualized understanding of governance dynamics in a time of uncertainty, social disruption, and institutional strain. The city of Makassar was selected through purposive case selection, justified by its role as a regional urban hub in Eastern Indonesia with relatively high administrative autonomy and a complex socio-political ecology. A single-case study design enables a rich empirical investigation into the institutional, communicative, and socio-cultural configurations that informed the city's pandemic response (Danugroho & Sa'adah, 2021; T. Hidayatullah et al., 2023). In contrast to national-level policy discourses, which often rely on uniform narratives and top-down messaging, local responses are shaped by interactional processes, resource limitations, and adaptive governance mechanisms (Beck & Mahony, 2018).

Data collection was carried out through a combination of document analysis, digital archive review, and semi-structured interviews. Official documents included mayoral decrees, press releases, and communication guidelines issued between March 2020 and December 2021. Digital materials such as social media posts, government websites, and online press conferences were systematically archived to trace message dissemination across platforms. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen key informants representing government officials, healthcare workers, journalists, community leaders, and NGO activists. The purposive sampling strategy ensured diversity in perspectives while maintaining relevance to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The profile of informants is presented in Table 1, which outlines their institutional affiliations and roles in pandemic communication. These categories reflect the multilayered structure of crisis communication in Makassar, encompassing formal governance actors, intermediaries, and grassroots representatives. Such transparency in sampling enhances the credibility of the study and enables readers to understand how the different perspectives were integrated into the analysis.

Table 1. Profile of Key Informants

Category	Number	Examples of Informants
City Government Officials	3	Public Information Officer, Mayor's Spokesperson, Head of Health Office
Healthcare Workers	2	Hospital Physician, Community Health Center Staff
Journalists	3	Local Newspaper Reporter, Television Journalist, Online Media Contributor
Community Leaders or RT/RW (in Indonesia)	4	Neighborhood Head, Youth Organization Leader
NGO Activists	3	Health Advocacy Worker, Social Welfare NGO Staff
Total	15	

Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data, supported by NVIVO software to aid in coding and pattern recognition. The analytic process was recursive and abductive, moving iteratively between empirical data and theoretical frameworks (Byrne, 2022). Themes such as trust-building, transparency, responsiveness, and the political-symbolic role of communication emerged as central to the Makassar case. To enhance analytical rigor, strategies such as peer debriefing, member

checking, and audit trails were implemented. This research adheres to ethical principles in qualitative research. All participants were fully informed of the research aims, and anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms. The study obtained ethics clearance from the institutional review board of the author's university, ensuring conformity with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the empirical findings from the case study of Makassar's local government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is structured into four interrelated themes: (1) leadership and centralization of crisis messaging, (2) the digital turn and inequality in information access, (3) fragmentation in policy communication, and (4) trust-building through local participation. These themes emerged from triangulated data sources: interviews, documents, and media content and are discussed in dialogue with the theoretical framework of crisis communication, local governance, and institutional trust.

Leadership and the Centralization of Crisis Messaging

The mayor of Makassar emerged as the central figure in the city's crisis communication response. He regularly delivered public addresses via television and social media platforms, setting a tone of reassurance and decisiveness. These actions were consistent with the strategic positioning of political leadership in crisis settings as proposed by Zaitul et al., where legitimacy and authority are closely tied to visibility and rhetorical control (Zaitul et al., 2023). However, despite the strong performative presence of the mayor, there was limited coordination between the executive's central messaging and lower-tier bureaucratic units responsible for operationalizing responses at the *kelurahan* (sub-district) level. As a result, directives from the top were not always translated into coherent implementation on the ground. This disjunction reflects Thompson's observation that effective crisis communication requires not only message delivery but also internal alignment among actors responsible for execution (Thompson, 2012). The vertical concentration of authority, without adequate horizontal communication channels, limited the inclusivity and responsiveness of local messaging systems.

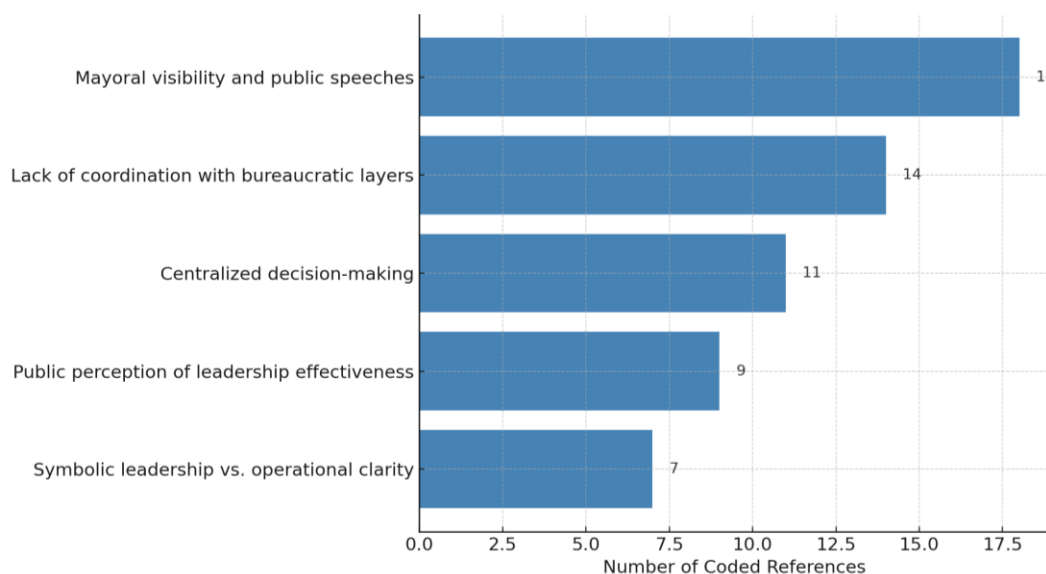


Figure 1. NVivo Coding Frequencies for Leadership and Crisis Messaging Themes

Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025

The NVIVO-coded data on the theme of Leadership and Crisis Messaging (Figure 1) reveals a pattern of crisis governance in Makassar that prioritizes symbolic leadership over systemic coordination. The most frequently coded node “Mayoral visibility and public speeches” indicates that the local government’s communication strategy was heavily centered around the performative role of the mayor. Public addresses, especially through broadcast and social media platforms, were used to signal control, empathy, and urgency during the pandemic’s critical phases. This finding resonates with Muchlis, who argue that during crises, political leaders often adopt a sense-making function, using visibility as a governance tool to reduce public anxiety and reaffirm state authority (Muchlis, 2018).

However, the prominence of this node also highlights a structural imbalance. As shown in the graph, “Lack of coordination with bureaucratic layers” and “Symbolic leadership vs. operational clarity” were also significant themes, albeit less dominant. These nodes indicate that while the top-level communication was active and visible, it was not consistently matched by effective operational translation at lower administrative levels. This aligns with the critique of centralized crisis communication models that rely too heavily on top-down directives without establishing robust horizontal linkages across implementing agencies (Alshoaibi, 2021; Fussell Sisco et al., 2010; Sijtsma & Junker, 2006). In Makassar’s case, several RT/RW-level actors reported receiving conflicting or delayed instructions, undermining the coherence of local pandemic responses.

Another notable pattern is the relatively high frequency of the theme “Public perception of leadership effectiveness”, which points to the importance of not just what is communicated, but how it is received and interpreted by the public. Although many residents viewed the mayor’s frequent media appearances positively as a sign of active leadership some informants noted growing skepticism due to the gap between public messaging and the reality of policy execution. This reflects theory of procedural justice, wherein legitimacy is tied not only to communicative performance but also to the perceived fairness and consistency of administrative action.

The node “Centralized decision-making” further reinforces the idea that local governance during the pandemic was characterized by a concentration of authority. While this approach enabled rapid decisions during early uncertainty, it also reduced the potential for participatory communication and decentralized responsiveness. As Coombs warns, centralized decision-making in crisis contexts may offer short-term clarity but can become counterproductive if not supported by feedback loops and cross-sector collaboration (Coombs, 2022). Taken together, the graph underscores a communicative paradox: while leadership visibility can generate short-term confidence, it may also mask institutional fragmentation unless complemented by clear, coordinated, and inclusive policy implementation. The Makassar case illustrates how symbolic governance can become disconnected from functional governance if crisis communication is reduced to media performance rather than embedded within systemic practices of accountability, adaptability, and relational trust.

The dominance of symbolic communication in Makassar also reflects deeper structural features of Indonesian local governance. Mayors often act as the political face of urban administration, cultivating personal legitimacy through high visibility and charismatic rhetoric. However, without institutionalized feedback loops and decentralized coordination, this model of “performative governance” risks producing policy opacity and administrative bottlenecks (Ding, 2020). Figure 1 highlights the communicative paradox: visibility is high, but alignment is weak. Citizens’ initial confidence in leadership was undermined by inconsistent bureaucratic actions, revealing the limits of centralization in crisis settings. In line with SCCT, effective crisis management requires not only rapid top-down messaging but also mechanisms of shared accountability, transparency, and cross-sector collaboration.

The Makassar case thus underscores that symbolic leadership, when detached from procedural fairness and operational clarity, can erode trust and fragment local crisis governance.

Digital Platforms and the Uneven Access to Information

The Makassar city government embraced digital technologies as primary tools for public communication. Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp were used to distribute infographics, videos, and real-time updates on case numbers, lockdown zones, vaccination schedules, and social assistance distribution. These strategies mirrored global trends where governments increasingly turned to digital media as “governance platforms” during health emergencies (Latanna et al., 2023; Peters, 2023). Nevertheless, the reach and impact of these platforms were uneven. While they served the urban middle class relatively well, large segments of marginalized populations particularly the urban poor and elderly remained excluded due to limited access to smartphones, mobile data, and digital literacy. This finding highlights the risk of over-reliance on techno-solutionism in crisis contexts and affirms Limphaibool et al., argument that digital governance must be complemented by analog infrastructures to ensure equity and inclusion (Limphaibool et al., 2022). Moreover, field interviews revealed that many residents preferred face-to-face explanations from local RT/RW (neighborhood) leaders or community volunteers, suggesting that trust is not only about access to information but also the relational modes through which it is conveyed. Thus, digital innovation in crisis communication is only effective when embedded in culturally appropriate and socially trusted delivery mechanisms. This dynamic illustrates a limitation of Makassar’s strategy when viewed through SCCT: while speed and visibility through digital platforms aimed to project control, the failure to address structural inequalities in access fragmented the audience and reduced the overall effectiveness of crisis communication.

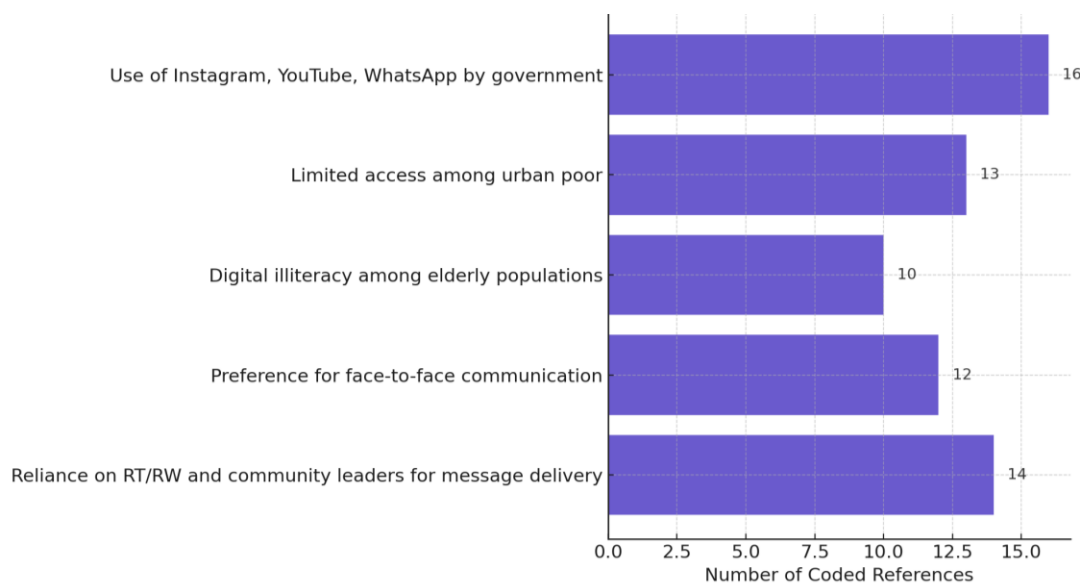


Figure 2. NVIVO Coding for Digital Platforms and the Uneven Access to Information

Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025

The NVIVO-coded data (figure 2) on the theme Digital Platforms and the Uneven Access to Information reveals a tension between digital innovation and structural exclusion in Makassar’s local government communication strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest frequency node “Use of Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp by government” suggests that the municipality adopted a technologically forward-facing approach, leveraging social media platforms for rapid dissemination of health advisories, lockdown orders, vaccination schedules, and aid distribution updates. This finding

aligns with global observations that digital technologies have become central instruments in the governance of public crises, particularly in urban contexts (M. F. Hidayatullah, 2020).

However, the digital enthusiasm evident in communication planning was met with significant barriers on the ground. Notably, the nodes "Limited access among urban poor" and "Digital illiteracy among elderly populations" rank highly, underscoring the persistent digital divide that constrains the reach and inclusivity of technologically mediated communication. From a procedural justice perspective, this exclusion undermined perceptions of fairness and equal treatment, as citizens without digital access were effectively denied timely information that others received, deepening mistrust toward local authorities. Respondents from low-income neighborhoods and elderly residents frequently reported either an inability to access smartphones or confusion in navigating government-issued messages, even when platforms were visually engaging and linguistically localized. This reflects a broader concern in crisis communication literature: while digital channels offer scalability and immediacy, they risk reinforcing existing social inequalities if not matched with analog or human-centered interventions (Et.al, 2021; Ganter, 2018; Tu et al., 2023). The Makassar case exemplifies the pitfalls of techno-solutionism, where digital media is presumed to be inherently democratizing, despite evidence to the contrary in contexts marked by infrastructural disparity.

Additionally, the node "Preference for face-to-face communication" reveals that many citizens continued to rely on informal, interpersonal methods of information sharing. Community leaders, RT/RW heads, and religious figures often acted as trusted intermediaries, translating official directives into socially resonant language. This finding supports Alshoaibi, who argues that communication in times of crisis must be relational and dialogical, not merely transmissional (Alshoaibi, 2021). Trust and comprehension are co-constructed through interaction, not merely enhanced through digital reach (Burhannuddin & Danugroho, 2021). The significance of "Reliance on RT/RW and community leaders for message delivery" further highlights the embeddedness of communication practices in local social networks. Despite government efforts to "go digital", residents often valued the credibility, proximity, and responsiveness of traditional actors over impersonal digital interfaces. This suggests that effective crisis communication in decentralized governance settings such as Makassar requires hybrid strategies that combine formal and informal infrastructures. Consequently, Makassar's experience underscores the need for hybrid communication infrastructures that combine digital tools with community-based channels. Investments in digital literacy and equitable access are essential if digital governance is to enhance rather than exacerbate social inequality in future crises.

Fragmentation and Ambiguity in Policy Messaging

Another critical issue that emerged from the data was the lack of consistency and clarity in policy-related communication, particularly regarding the distribution of social assistance. Policy announcements often used broad and normative terms such as "*kelompok rentan*" (vulnerable groups) without offering operational definitions or transparent selection criteria. As a result, citizens were often uncertain about their eligibility, and front-line workers struggled with unclear implementation protocols. This fragmentation illustrates the disconnection between policy formulation and communication clarity, a pattern also observed in other decentralized governance settings during the pandemic (Danugroho, 2022a; Danugroho & Yusfira, 2023). The ambiguity in eligibility communication exacerbated public confusion, reduced program legitimacy, and in some instances, triggered localized conflict over aid distribution. Theoretically, this issue ties into the concept of procedural fairness and the importance of transparent rule-making in maintaining public trust (Mosley, 2012; Zhang et al., 2024). When communication is ambiguous or contradictory, citizens are more likely to perceive policy

as arbitrary or biased, reducing their willingness to comply with public health measures or accept the legitimacy of the state's actions.

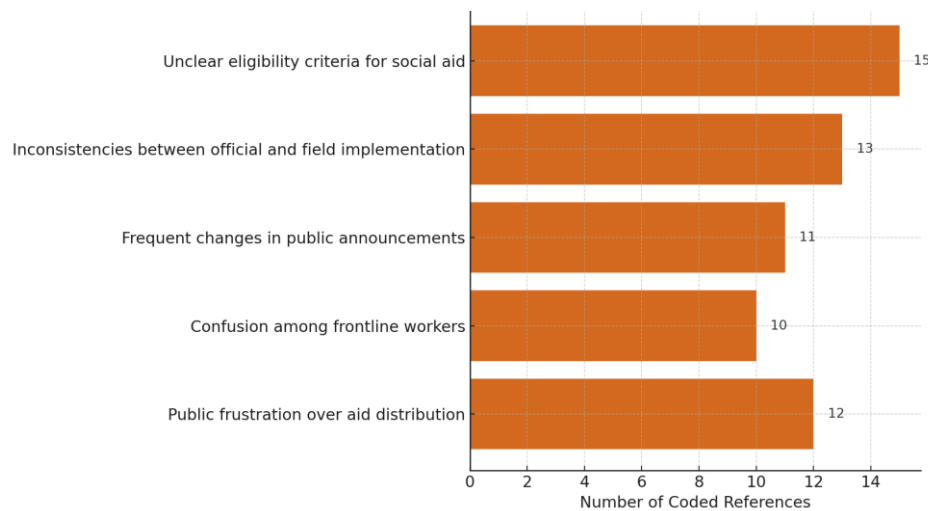


Figure 3. NVivo Coding for Fragmentation and Policy Messaging

Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025

The NVivo coding frequencies for the theme Fragmentation and Ambiguity in Policy Messaging underscore the institutional and communicative inconsistencies that characterized Makassar's local policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in the graph, the highest frequency node "Unclear eligibility criteria for social aid" illustrates a pervasive concern among citizens and frontline implementers regarding the lack of clarity and transparency in how social protection policies were designed and communicated. This ambiguity significantly undermined the effectiveness of aid distribution, particularly in a context where timeliness and equity were critical to alleviating pandemic-induced hardship. This finding aligns with the literature on policy legitimacy and governance under crisis conditions, particularly in decentralized systems. Keping argues that perceptions of procedural fairness are a critical determinant of public compliance and trust (Keping, 2018). When eligibility requirements are vaguely articulated or inconsistently interpreted, as observed in Makassar, the result is a decline in citizen confidence and increased perceptions of arbitrariness. Moreover, as Petrisyan and Situmorang note, fragmented communication can exacerbate coordination failures in multilevel governance, particularly when crisis responses involve both political signaling and administrative execution (Petrosyan, 2019; Situmorang et al., 2021).

The theme "Inconsistencies between official and field implementation" reinforces this concern. Several interviewees, including local administrators and NGO workers, highlighted discrepancies between what was officially announced and how those policies were interpreted and applied on the ground. These gaps often arose from the absence of written guidelines, delays in internal communication, and inconsistent interpretation by mid-level bureaucrats. In practical terms, these inconsistencies translated into citizens being told different things by different actors, eroding trust and compliance. This reflects the insight of Jackson & Pye, who assert that bureaucratic discretion in crisis contexts must be accompanied by clear protocols to prevent interpretive divergence (Jackson & Pye, 2023). The NVivo graph also reveals a relatively high frequency of the theme "Public frustration over aid distribution", signaling the social consequences of communicative fragmentation. Citizen interviews reveal narratives of disappointment, confusion, and suspicion particularly when promised assistance did not materialize or seemed to benefit the same households repeatedly. These perceptions were not simply rooted in material scarcity but in communicative opacity. When government messaging lacks

coherence, the social contract is strained, and crisis governance loses its moral authority (Krajnović, 2018).

Another relevant pattern is found in the node “Confusion among frontline workers”. These actors often tasked with implementing complex and shifting directives expressed uncertainty and emotional exhaustion due to frequent changes in instruction and the absence of clear operational procedures. This underscores Coombs situational crisis communication theory, which posits that internal alignment within institutions is as crucial as external messaging (Coombs, 2022). A lack of internal clarity compromises both employee efficacy and the credibility of the policy itself. Finally, “Frequent changes in public announcements” emerged as a distinct yet interlinked theme. While policy adaptation is inevitable during a prolonged crisis, Makassar’s communication approach lacked mechanisms to explain why changes occurred, how new policies would be implemented, and how affected populations could respond. Such gaps hinder adaptive governance and fuel misinformation, especially in politically polarized or resource-limited environments.

Participatory Communication and the Role of Local Actors

Despite these challenges, several community-led initiatives in Makassar illustrated the value of participatory and decentralized communication practices. Local leaders (RT/RW), religious figures, and NGO volunteers were often more trusted than formal government channels in disseminating accurate information, delivering aid, and explaining public health protocols. These actors functioned as “intermediaries of trust”, bridging the gap between the state and citizens during a period of high uncertainty. Such findings resonate with the literature on communicative governance, where horizontal engagement and co-production of public messages are more effective than top-down communication in culturally diverse settings (Kutlu-Abu & Arslan, 2023). In this regard, crisis communication is not simply an administrative task, but a relational process that involves listening, mutual adaptation, and iterative feedback loops. Local actors also adapted messages to suit neighborhood-specific conditions translating technical jargon, negotiating with informal workers, and using religious idioms to explain lockdown ethics. These micro-practices offer an alternative model of crisis communication that is dialogical, embedded, and socially legitimate (Macnamara, 2021; Marsen, 2020).

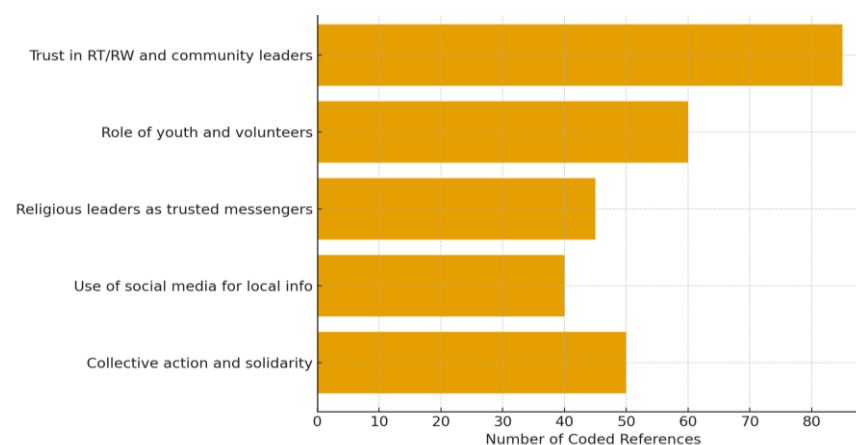


Figure 4. Participatory Communication and Local Actor Involvement

Source: Researcher Analysis, 2025

The NVIVO-generated thematic coding presented in Figure 4 illustrates the centrality of hyper-local actors in shaping the effectiveness of crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in Makassar. The dominant theme, “Trust in RT/RW and community leaders,” which received the highest frequency of coded references, underscores the persistence of neighborhood-based governance

structures as critical intermediaries in contexts where institutional trust remains fragile. While digital platforms and official press releases provided broad coverage, their influence was perceived as less persuasive compared to the authority vested in local leaders and community-based networks. The prominence of themes such as the role of youth volunteers, religious figures as moral communicators, and collective solidarity further reflects how community resilience was mobilized through culturally embedded and trust-based mechanisms. This finding aligns with Walters & Bolger theory of procedural legitimacy, which argues that compliance is enhanced when citizens perceive communicators as familiar, accessible, and embedded in their daily social world (Walters & Bolger, 2019). In Indonesia's urban kampung context, RT/RW leaders function not merely as bureaucratic agents, but as cultural brokers bridging formal policy and everyday citizen concerns.

The table also reveals a significant number of references to "Citizen preference for dialogical communication", suggesting that effective crisis messaging is not simply about clarity or frequency, but about relational engagement. Unlike one-way digital announcements, dialogical forms such as door-to-door clarification, informal gatherings, and religious events allowed for questioning, adaptation, and mutual understanding. This supports Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, who highlights the importance of co-produced communication in crisis contexts, where legitimacy is built not through volume but through interaction (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022). The prominent role of religious figures reflected in the third-highest node also deserves attention. In a context like Makassar where religious authority remains strong, clerics were instrumental in translating public health messages into moral and spiritual imperatives. This is consistent with work by Rosyid, which shows how local religious leaders often act as effective communicators in times of uncertainty by aligning scientific recommendations with culturally resonant narratives (Rosyid, 2023). The use of religious language not only increased message absorption but also transformed behavioral compliance (e.g., wearing masks, social distancing) into ethical obligations grounded in communal and theological values.

NGOs also played a bridging role, particularly in aid distribution and information dissemination. As Figure 4 shows, respondents credited these organizations with filling implementation gaps left by overstretched or bureaucratically rigid government channels. NGOs' capacity to mobilize quickly, communicate empathetically, and navigate marginalized communities illustrates their function as "relational infrastructure", which becomes particularly vital during prolonged or multi-layered crises. Lastly, the theme of "Localization of public health messaging" points to the critical role of translation not only linguistic, but socio-cultural. Several respondents described how RT and NGO workers translated technical health information into vernacular idioms, metaphors, and moral appeals. This echoes Parkhurst argument on the importance of local knowledge systems in shaping the meaning and reception of development and health interventions (Parkhurst, 2018). Without such localization, crisis communication remains performative and alienating, particularly for vulnerable groups. Taken together, Figure 4 supports the argument that crisis communication in decentralized and culturally diverse settings must be participatory, embedded, and trust based. Rather than merely relying on digital tools or formal government announcements, Makassar's most effective messaging occurred through the activation of social capital, everyday leadership, and community infrastructures of trust. These findings not only extend the literature on local governance and crisis responsiveness, but also offer normative implications for designing resilient, inclusive communication systems in future emergencies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study of Makassar's COVID-19 crisis communication underscores the interplay between symbolic leadership, digital governance, policy ambiguity, and participatory local practices. While mayoral visibility projected authority and reassurance, the findings demonstrate that centralized and

performative communication cannot compensate for fragmented coordination and weak horizontal alignment. The reliance on digital platforms, though signaling modern governance, simultaneously exposed structural inequalities by excluding marginalized groups from vital information flows. Similarly, the ambiguity in policy messaging particularly concerning social aid distribution eroded public trust, illustrating the risks of opacity and inconsistency in decentralized governance contexts.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to crisis communication scholarship by highlighting the limits of both symbolic centralization and techno-solutionism. Crisis legitimacy, as the Makassar case shows, is not generated merely by the volume or speed of messages but by their relational credibility and procedural fairness. The study advances the argument that situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) must be complemented by perspectives on procedural justice and communicative governance to adequately capture the dynamics of trust in fragile institutional settings. By foregrounding the role of RT/RW leaders, religious figures, and NGOs as trusted intermediaries, this research extends the literature on local governance by showing how communicative infrastructures embedded in social capital provide resilience where formal institutions falter. Normatively, the Makassar experience illustrates that effective crisis communication requires hybrid infrastructures blending digital technologies with analog, participatory, and culturally embedded practices. Future crisis governance should therefore institutionalize feedback loops, strengthen cross-sectoral coordination, and invest in equitable communication access. Beyond immediate pandemic management, these insights point to the necessity of designing crisis communication systems that are not only technologically adaptive but also socially legitimate, ensuring that visibility, trust, and accountability converge in ways that reinforce rather than fragment democratic governance.

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