

The Role of Crisis Communication Channels on Student Engagement During Lecturers' Industrial Strikes: Evidence from the University of Nairobi

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ABSTRACT: Effective crisis communication is essential for sustaining stakeholder engagement during periods of institutional disruption such as lecturers' industrial strikes. However, despite the recurring nature of industrial strikes in Kenyan public universities and the associated crisis communication shortcomings, limited empirical research has examined how crisis communication channels influence student engagement during such crises. This study sought to establish the influence of crisis communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes at the University of Nairobi. The study was guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and adopted an explanatory mixed-methods research design. Quantitative data were collected from 391 undergraduate students using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews with 12 key informants comprising student leaders, academic staff, and non-academic staff. Quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings established that crisis communication channels have a positive and statistically significant influence on student engagement. Communication channels emerged as a key determinant of students' willingness to remain informed, participate in university processes, and maintain confidence in the institution during industrial strikes. The study concludes that effective crisis communication depends not merely on disseminating information but on providing communication channels that are timely, accessible, interactive, transparent, and responsive to students' informational needs during industrial disputes. The study recommends that public universities strengthen student-centred communication by institutionalising interactive, two-way communication channels that keep students informed through the crisis cycle, maintain trust, and allow them to seek clarifications and relay feedback.

KEYWORDS: crisis communication channels, lecturers' industrial strikes, student engagement, stakeholder engagement

INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication refers to the deliberate and strategic use of communication to prevent, manage, and respond to unexpected events that threaten an organization's operations, reputation, stakeholders, or survival (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). Clear, timely, and transparent external crisis communication enables external stakeholders to understand the crisis, appreciate organizational actions, and remain engaged even under challenging conditions (Gasana, 2024; Matías & Cardoso, 2023). Significantly, communication channels determine the effectiveness of crisis communication as they shape stakeholders' perceptions of leadership credibility, organizational intent, involvement, and fairness during periods of uncertainty. Research grounded in crisis communication theory, specifically Situational Crisis Communication Theory, indicates that preventable or organizationally induced crises such as industrial strikes generate higher stakeholder scrutiny and demand more participatory, transparent communication channels (Coombs, 2020).

Lecturers' industrial strikes have become a persistent feature of public universities in African universities, particularly in Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya reflecting deeper challenges in governance, funding, and mainly crisis communication. The last university strike in Kenya was in 2025, from 17th September to 5th November and lasted for 49 days, disrupting the 2025-2026 academic calendar for public universities in Kenya. The end results are dire including declining mental health for students, delayed academic calendars, low-quality education due to rushed learning after strikes, missed graduation opportunities, reduced job projections, and



dropouts (Ndichu, 2026). Despite the strong evidence showing the major impacts of industrial strikes on students and lack of student engagement, most studies focus on policy implications and union dynamics, (Addo, Segbenya, and Ampofon, 2025). Limited attention has been paid to the crisis communication channels employed by universities during strikes, particularly how management used the channels to engage with students as external stakeholders during periods of heightened uncertainty (Issak, 2021).

In the Kenyan context, lecturers' industrial strikes in public universities illustrate how communication channel misalignment undermines engagement: communication is frequently centralized, channel-limited, and insensitive to university students feedback, leading to mistrust and complicated working dynamics during industrial crisis (Ndone, 2025; Issak 2021). These findings reveal a gap in channel-sensitive research on how face-to-face meetings, use of digital channels, presence of two-way communication, and reliability of channels jointly influence student engagement during industrial crises in Kenyan universities, a gap this study seeks to address at University of Nairobi. This study therefore examined the impact of crisis communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strike at the University of Nairobi.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the rising awareness of crisis communication channels as a critical organizational communication function, their impact on specific stakeholders such as students in higher learning institutions remains highly under-researched, particularly in the Kenyan context. Kenyan public universities continue to experience recurrent lecturers' industrial strikes that significantly disrupt academic programmes, elicit uncertainty for key stakeholders, and undermine institutional stability (Oresi, 2025). Students are among the most directly affected, experiencing delayed academic calendars, interrupted learning, financial strain, declining mental health, and dropouts (Ndichu, 2026). These strikes are often characterized by ineffective communication strategies, limited stakeholder involvement, delayed information dissemination, and strained institutional relationships; pointing to deeper communication channels and engagement challenges within university systems (Issak, 2022). Existing studies focus on remuneration disputes, and governance challenges, limited attention has been given to how communication channels influence student engagement during such crises (Makau, 2022; Luke, 2024).

At the University of Nairobi, there is limited empirical evidence explaining how crisis communication channels influence student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes. Consequently, the absence of institution-specific, student-focused research limits the development of effective crisis communication channels that could enhance stakeholder engagement, reduce uncertainty, and promote organizational stability. This study therefore examined the impact of crisis communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes at the University of Nairobi.

OBJECTIVE

- To establish the influence of crisis communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strike at the University of Nairobi

RESEARCH QUESTION

- What is the influence of crisis communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strike at the University of Nairobi?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), proposed by Timothy Coombs in 2006, provides a systematic model for explaining how organizations should communicate during crises based on stakeholders' attributions of responsibility (Van, Conradie, & Dondolo, 2017; Coombs, 2020). In analyzing SCCT and crisis communication Hamid et al., (2024) explains that stakeholders, evaluate whether management could have prevented the crisis, whether leadership acted responsibly, and whether communication demonstrates honesty, empathy, and accountability.

SCCT further emphasizes that crisis creates a need for information, thus, organizations structuring crisis communication channels should prioritize instructing information and adjusting information before reputational repair (Zhang & Zhou, 2020). For students, this includes channels that provides clarity on academic calendars, semester adjustments, institutional decisions, and reassurance



regarding their welfare. Studies applying SCCT in organizational contexts show that neglecting to supply sufficient instructing and adjusting information during crises such as protests and strikes exacerbates stakeholder anxiety, uncertainty, and disengagement (Zhang & Zhou, 2020).

In the context of lecturers' industrial strikes and SCCT classification of crises, industrial action strikes crises fall within the preventable crisis cluster, which carries high attributions of organizational responsibility (Ndone, 2025). Thus Ndone (2025) argues that as a result, organizations are expected to adopt accommodative communication strategies of SCCT, including acknowledgement of concerns, openness, corrective action, and, where necessary, apology and dialogue.

The theory explains how communication strategies adopted by university management influence students' perceptions of organizational credibility, engagement, and responsiveness. By applying SCCT to the case of the University of Nairobi, this study extends the theory's application beyond reputational management to focus on stakeholder engagement and crisis communication channels during institutional crises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of Face-to-Face meetings, use of digital channels, presence of two-way communication channels, transparency, and reliability of channels influence how an organization conducts its crisis communication and thus how it impacts stakeholder engagement. Motwani et al., (2020) provide empirical insights from Xi'an University of Architecture & Technology in China, into how communication channels shape crisis communication in higher education institutions during crisis such as riots and strikes. Motwani et al., (2020) highlights that during crises, university leadership often prioritizes external media communication, resulting in specific stakeholders such as staff and students learning about crises through social media or news outlets rather than official internal channels such as face-to-face meetings, which undermines trust and engagement among students and staff. This is in congruence with research by Liu-Lastres et al., (2023) and Kim et al., (2029) who argue that during crisis, organizations tend to focus on external media attention, while forgetting that certain stakeholder groups are also key stakeholders and require attention and communication. These findings highlight how communication channels facets impact crisis communication and student engagement during disruptive events in university settings.

In Kenya's context Kingori (2024) provides insights relevant to understanding communication channels' facets that shape crisis communication practices in Kenya, particularly with respect to channel used and reliability. The study discusses crisis communication as a process that is influenced by the communication setting, including the availability and use of communication channels, the timing of information dissemination, and the need to coordinate messages among stakeholders during unfolding situations (Kingori, 2024). This aligns with research by Hamid et al., (2024) who affirms that effectiveness of crisis communication hinges on the relationship between crisis situation, communication channels, and stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis. Although the study does not focus on higher education institutions specifically, it provides contextual insights into how crisis communication practices in Kenya are shaped by situational factors such as communication channels and channel reliability.

Reports and sector analyses in public universities in Western Kenya further indicate that lecturers' strikes are frequently accompanied by delayed, inconsistent, and non-empathetic communication from management, contributing to mistrust and prolonged industrial action (Issak, 2021). However, these observations are rarely examined empirically through the lens of student engagement. This lack of systematic research underscores the need for the present study at University of Nairobi to empirically examine how crisis communication channels influence student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed methods research design, specifically an explanatory sequential design, to examine the influence of crisis communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes at the University of Nairobi. The mixed methods approach combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem than either approach could achieve independently (Gamage, 2025a). The quantitative phase employed a descriptive survey design to collect numerical data communication channels and their influence on student engagement. The qualitative phase followed the quantitative analysis to deepen understanding of the statistical findings (Gamage, 2025a).



Population

The study was conducted at the University of Nairobi, a public university located in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Specifically, at the University of Nairobi Main Campus due to its central role in academic and administrative operations in the university and its experience with the 2025 lecturers' industrial strike. The target population consisted of 18,007 undergraduate students drawn from the Faculty of Built Environment and Design, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Science and Technology, and five departments under the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Sampling Technique

The study employed a combination of stratified random sampling and purposive sampling. For the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling was used to ensure adequate representation of students across faculties and departments. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select participants expected to be knowledgeable about or directly affected by the lecturers' industrial strike and crisis communication processes.

Sample Size

The study adopted Yamane's formula for finite populations at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error to determine the sample size (Adam, 2020). Based on this calculation, the study targeted a sample of 391 undergraduate students for the quantitative phase. In addition, 12 key informants comprising lecturers, student leaders, members of the communication office, student affairs personnel, and heads of departments were purposively selected to provide in-depth explanations of the quantitative findings in line with the explanatory mixed methods design.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in line with the explanatory mixed methods research design. In the quantitative and qualitative phase, data was collected using a structured online questionnaire administered to the selected undergraduate students at University of Nairobi main campus. In the qualitative phase, data was collected through semi-structured online interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process to protect the rights and well-being of participants. Before data collection, the researcher sought approval from the relevant university authorities at Multimedia University and University of Nairobi. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to gathering data. Respondents received details regarding the study's objectives, the steps involved, and their expected role before taking part in the research. Participant anonymity was maintained in the final report, with all collected data securely stored and restricted entirely to academic use. Equally, the researcher got approval from the agency that oversees research in Kenya, the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). NACOSTI research license approved the involvement of human subjects in this research. This study ensured that all information sources used were cited in line with APA style of referencing.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Response Rate

The study targeted a sample of 391 undergraduate students for the quantitative phase, determined using the sample size formula specified in Chapter Three. During data preparation, the dataset was screened for response quality using two pre-defined, content-neutral criteria applied uniformly to the collected records: Identical responses selected across all forty scale items (indicative of inattentive, straight-lined responding), or missing responses on more than 20% of scale items. Twenty-one questionnaires (5.4%) met one or both criteria and were excluded prior to analysis. The final analytic sample therefore comprised 370 questionnaires, translating to 94.6% response rate, exceeding the threshold conventionally regarded as excellent for analysis and generalization in social science research. All twelve key informants targeted for the qualitative phase were successfully interviewed, giving a 100% response rate for the qualitative component, and all twelve transcripts were compiled for thematic analysis.

Distribution of Respondents by Gender

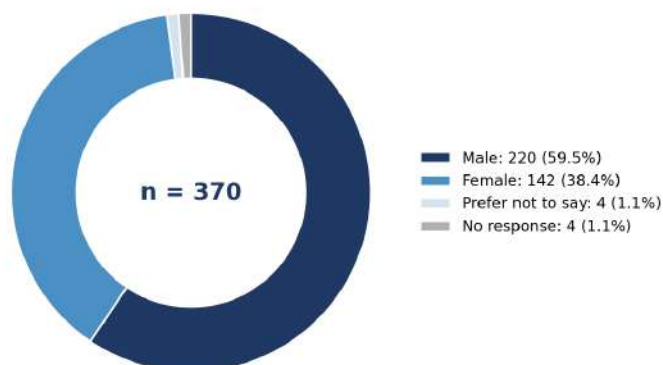


Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender (n = 370)

Distribution of Respondents by Age Group

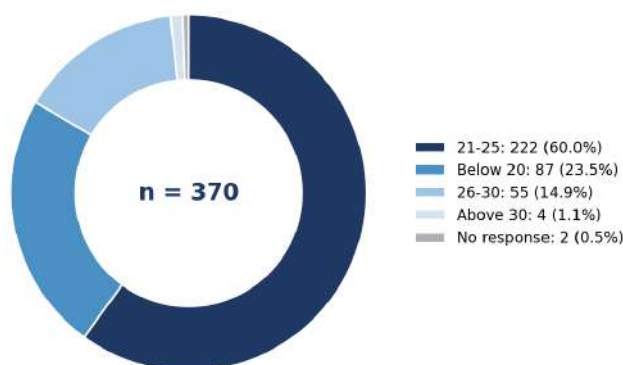


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group (n = 370)

ANALYSES OF STUDY VARIABLE

Communication Channels and Student Engagement

The objective sought to establish the influence of crisis communication channels on student engagement. Respondents rated seven statements relating to the reliability, timeliness, accessibility, and usefulness of the channels used by the university during strikes. The descriptive results are presented in Table 1 and Figure 3.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Communication Channels (n = 370)

Statement	Mean	% Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree
The university uses reliable communication channels	3.12	35.8	18.6	45.6
The university provides timely updates during the strike	3.15	33.2	22.3	44.5
Students receive information through multiple platforms	3.26	29.4	21.6	48.9
Face-to-face or interactive communication is used	2.51	57.9	20.5	21.7
Information provided was useful in making decisions	3.10	33.6	20.6	45.8
Communication addressed my concerns as a student	2.95	38.5	21.6	39.8
Communication helped me understand the situation	3.11	31.9	24.6	43.5

Source: Survey Data (2026)

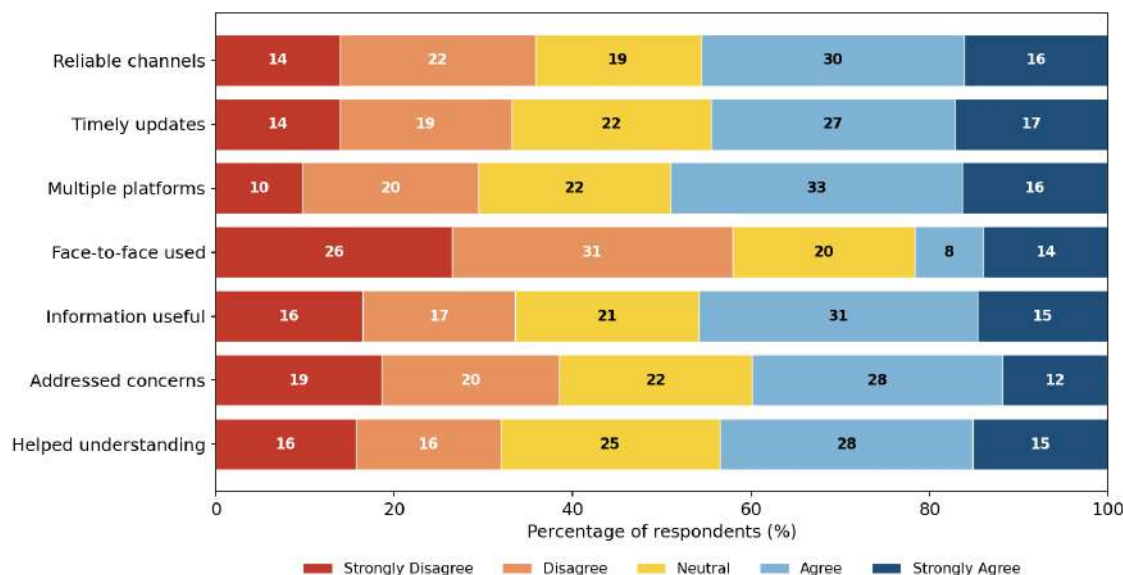


Figure 3: Respondents' Perceptions of Communication Channels

The communication channels construct returned a composite mean of 3.03 ($SD = 0.67$), placing the overall assessment almost exactly at the neutral point. That average, however, conceals a clear split between reach and interaction. Close to half of the respondents agreed that information reached them through multiple platforms (48.9%) and 45.6% agreed that the university uses reliable channels. By contrast, 57.9% disagreed that face-to-face or interactive communication is used, making this the weakest item in the construct. Responses were also less positive when the question shifted from simply receiving information to whether communication addressed students' concerns. The problem, therefore, appears to be less about the total absence of channels than about the kind of communication those channels permit.

This pattern, in which broadcast channels reach students reasonably well while interactive, two-way communication is largely absent, is illuminated vividly by the qualitative data. Key informants repeatedly identified email as the dominant, and often sole, official channel, and just as repeatedly noted its limits. One interviewee pointed out that students in rural areas often cannot access their email at all, so the official message never reaches them in time:

"It doesn't get to every student because some are not online... Some are in the rural places." (Interviewee 4)

One respondent explained, the emails simply do not land with everyone, and information ends up trickling down informally:

"They students always say emails don't get to everyone; they always trickle down... via WhatsApp, that is the student leaders share them with students through WhatsApp." (Interviewee 2)

Another respondent

"If they see... a very big document... too wordy... they will not read." (Interviewee 3)

Particularly, the most significant aspect is that the strongest predictor is not merely message frequency. The descriptive pattern suggests that accessibility, timeliness, usefulness and opportunities for interaction are doing much of the work. Students continue to follow official communication, but they are less convinced that it responds to their concerns or gives them a meaningful voice. The statistical strength of the channel variable therefore supports a more relational understanding of crisis communication: engagement improves when communication is not only sent, but received in a form students can access, interpret and act upon.

These findings strongly support the SCCT emphasis on instructing and adjusting information and the proposition that preventable crises require participatory, transparent, and dialogic communication rather than top-down, legalistic messaging (Page, 2020; Zhang & Zhou, 2020). They corroborate Motwani et al. (2020), who found that universities often prioritize external media communication, leaving internal stakeholders such as students to learn of crises through informal channels, and Issak (2021), who reported that communication in Western Kenyan public universities during strikes is untimely, unreliable, and non-reciprocal.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Research Question : What is the influence of communication channels on student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes?

The findings demonstrated that communication channels have a strong relationship with student engagement. Linear regression analyses ($\beta = 0.471$, $R^2 = 0.235$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed a statistically significant positive influence between communication channels and student engagement, thus the study found communication channels as a strong predictor of student engagement.

Close to half of the respondents agreed that information reached them through multiple platforms (48.9%) and 45.6% agreed that the university uses reliable channels. By contrast, 57.9% disagreed that face-to-face or interactive communication is used, making this the weakest item in the construct. Responses were also less positive when the question shifted from simply receiving information to whether communication addressed students' concerns. The problem, therefore, appears to be less about the total absence of channels than about the kind of communication those channels permit.

Although students acknowledged receiving communication through institutional emails, notices, and official platforms, the descriptive and qualitative findings revealed several weaknesses in the communication process. Communication was frequently perceived as delayed, one-directional, administrative in nature, and lacking opportunities for interaction and feedback. Students consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the timeliness, accessibility, responsiveness, and emotional support provided through existing communication channels. The interviews similarly revealed a disconnect between university management's perception that communication was adequate and students' actual experiences during industrial strikes. Consequently, the study established that communication channels play a critical role in maintaining student engagement during crises, particularly when communication is timely, accessible, transparent, and interactive.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the study concludes that crisis communication channels are a significant determinant of student engagement during lecturers' industrial strikes at the University of Nairobi. The findings established that communication channels exert a positive and statistically significant influence on student engagement. Thus, they influence students' willingness to remain informed, participate in institutional processes, and maintain confidence in the university during periods of industrial unrest.

The evidence therefore suggests that the principal communication challenge is not whether information is communicated, but whether communication is timely, accessible, responsive, transparent, and capable of sustaining meaningful engagement with students throughout the entire crisis cycle. The study therefore concludes that effective crisis communication extends beyond the dissemination of institutional information and requires a strategic communication approach that prioritises two-way engagement, transparency, responsiveness, and continuous interaction with students before, during, and after industrial action. Strengthening these dimensions will enhance student engagement and strengthen the resilience of public universities in managing future industrial disputes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

1. Strengthen institutional crisis communication by developing and operationalizing a comprehensive crisis communication channels specifically tailored for industrial disputes. The framework should clearly define communication responsibilities, timelines, approval procedures, communication channels, and contingency measures. This will ensure that students receive timely, accurate, and consistent information before, during, and after industrial action.
2. Establish several student-centred crisis communication channels that promotes continuous engagement through regular, transparent, timely, and interactive communication. Two-way communication mechanisms should be incorporated to allow students to seek clarification and receive prompt responses regarding academic programmes, examinations, graduation timelines, and institutional decisions. Communication should also be disseminated across multiple platforms commonly used by students to ensure that critical information is accessible, understandable, and actionable.
3. Customize crisis communication channels to match students' information needs and communication preferences by using concise, visually engaging, and easy-to-understand communication formats.
4. Institutionalize continuous monitoring and evaluation of crisis communication strategies through student satisfaction surveys, communication audits, stakeholder consultations, and periodic reviews. This would ensure communication channels continually address students' evolving needs and expectations.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Replicate the study across multiple public and private universities in Kenya to establish whether the relationships observed are consistent across different institutional contexts.
2. Examine other psychological and behavioural factors, such as institutional trust, perceived organizational support, communication credibility, resilience, and students' previous experiences with institutional crises, that may influence the effectiveness of crisis communication during industrial disputes.
3. Employ longitudinal research designs to examine how students' perceptions, attitudes, and levels of engagement evolve before, during, and after industrial strikes.
4. Examine crisis communication from the perspectives of other stakeholders, including lecturers, university management, non-academic staff, parents, university councils, and government agencies.

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