Crisis Simulation and Skills Development: Preparing Future-Ready Public Relations Graduates

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Abstract

Crisis communication education in Malaysia is still mostly taught through lectures. While lectures provide important knowledge, they often lack opportunities for students to practise and experience what it feels like to work as real professionals. As a result, many students graduate with strong theoretical knowledge but limited practical confidence. This study looks at how simulation-based learning can help public relations (PR) students develop their professional identity, meaning how they see themselves as future PR practitioners, in a Malaysian university setting. Using a qualitative approach, 37 final year PR students participated in an immersive crisis simulation activity. In this exercise, they were assigned professional roles such as PR manager, spokesperson, or media relations officer. They worked together to manage a fast-moving, high-pressure crisis scenario, making quick decisions and adapting to unexpected developments. Data were collected in three ways: through the students' written reflections after the activity, through follow-up interviews where they shared their thoughts and feelings, and through the observations of the facilitators who guided the simulation. Thematic analysis of the data showed several key outcomes. Students improved their technical crisis communication skills, such as crafting messages, handling press conferences, and responding under pressure, and also began to imagine themselves working in the PR field. Many reported feelings more confident in their abilities, more capable of making decisions during stressful situations, and more aware of the emotions involved in professional work. This study shows that simulation-based learning can be a powerful way to close the gap between theory and practice in Malaysian higher education. By giving students, a safe but realistic space to practise professional roles, simulations prepare them for workplace challenges.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Crisis Communication, Crisis Simulation, Communication, Public Relations

Introduction

Today, public relations (PR) professionals need to be able to handle crises quickly and adequately. This could involve a company scandal, adverse reactions on social media, or a product problem. PR teams must act fast, communicate clearly, and protect the company's image in these situations. Because of this, learning crisis communication is essential for public relations students. In Malaysia, many universities still use traditional ways of teaching, like giving lectures and asking students to read textbooks. These methods help students understand basic ideas but do not fully prepare them for real-life crisis situations. Many students may understand what a crisis communicator does, but find it hard to imagine themselves doing the job. They might feel nervous, unsure of themselves, or lack the confidence to work in a real crisis.

Crisis communication requires quick thinking, teamwork, emotional control, and calm under pressure. These skills cannot be learned just by reading or listening. This shows a problem in how the subject is taught, as there is a clear gap between knowing what to do and feeling ready to do it. Traditional teaching methods also create a passive learning environment (Diepreye & Odukoya, 2019). Students are often expected to memorise facts rather than apply knowledge. This makes it difficult for them to connect what they learn in class with what is expected in the workplace. In crisis communication, where every second matters, students need to learn how to make decisions under pressure, speak confidently, and handle unpredictable situations that are hard to teach using only slides and lectures.

Another issue is that students cannot practise their communication skills in a realistic setting. Role-play or group discussions are sometimes used, but these are often too controlled or predictable. They lack the urgency and complexity of a real crisis, making the learning feel less meaningful. As a result, students may feel disconnected from the actual role of a public relations professional during a crisis. Finally, without experiencing real-time feedback or consequences, students may not fully understand the impact of their actions during a crisis. They miss the opportunity to reflect deeply on their responses and grow from their mistakes. This limits their confidence and slows down their professional development.

One way to solve this problem is by using simulation-based learning. A simulation is an activity where students are placed in a role and must respond to a pretend but realistic situation, just like they would in the real world (Lateef, 2010). It gives students a safe space to practise decision-making, teamwork, and communication under pressure. In other fields like medicine or law, simulations are already used to help students become more confident and skilled. However, in PR education in Malaysia, this method is still new and not often used. This study looks at how simulation-based learning can help PR students in Malaysia see themselves as future professionals. It focuses on how students learn what to do during a crisis and how they start to feel, think, and act like authentic crisis communicators.

This study is critical because the PR industry is changing rapidly, and to face that, a university setting should be the enabler for graduates to handle real-world challenges when they enter the workforce. Traditional classroom learning alone is no longer enough to develop the practical skills needed in high-pressure crises. Crisis simulations offer students hands-on experience to practise quick decision-making, teamwork, and communication in a realistic setting. It helps students practise fundamental skills like decision-making, teamwork, and

communication under pressure, which are hard to learn through lectures alone. The study also highlights how students start to see themselves as future professionals, gaining confidence and a clearer sense of their role in public relations. These insights can guide educators and universities to improve their teaching methods and prepare students for real workplace challenges. Hence, this study examines how crisis communication simulations help public relations students develop communication readiness and prepare for future workplace challenges.

Literature Review
The Evolving Role of Crisis Communication Education in PR Curriculum
As the public relations profession continues to evolve in response to the growing complexity of digital media, increased stakeholder engagement, and demands for greater organizational transparency, crisis communication has become an essential part of modern public relations education (Bachemin, 2023, Manias-Muñoz, Jin, & Reber, 2019), Yue & Thelen, 2023, Bond, Marín & Bedenlier, 2021). Today's public relations practitioners face an environment where information spreads rapidly, public scrutiny is intense, and crises can escalate quickly. This makes it critical for educational institutions to prepare students not only with foundational technical knowledge but also with practical skills necessary to navigate unpredictable, high pressure situations. Traditional classroom teaching methods, which often focus on theory and controlled exercises, have proven effective in conveying conceptual frameworks but tend to fall short in developing quick decision making, emotional intelligence, and media handling agility that real world crisis communication demands (Wang, 2017, Kwok, Yan, Chan & Lau, 2019, Friedman, 2013).

In response to this gap, simulation-based learning has emerged as a vital pedagogical innovation. It offers students immersive, hands on experiences that mimic the pressures and uncertainties of actual crisis environments. By engaging in these simulations, students are better prepared to face the fast paced challenges of the public relations profession, aligning educational outcomes with the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia's (MOHE) goal of producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also job ready and adaptable to evolving industry needs (Menon, 2022). This shift highlights a broader trend in higher education toward experiential learning models that balance theory with practice and foster transferable skills beyond the classroom.

Simulation Based Learning as a Tool for Developing Communication Readiness
Simulation based learning is widely recognized for its capacity to immerse students in authentic, consequence driven experiences that closely resemble real life crisis scenarios. Within these simulations, students assume roles such as spokespersons, media liaisons, and crisis managers, requiring them to deploy strategic messaging quickly and clearly while managing the dynamics of evolving situations. Unlike scripted or highly controlled exercises, simulations encourage spontaneous thinking, adaptability, and the development of both verbal and non-verbal communication skills in response to unforeseen challenges (Veil, 2010).

Scholars such as Feldman et al, (2022), Colley (2022) and O'Donnell (2020) highlight those simulations do more than just teach technical skills; they also build confidence and help students form their professional identities as communicators. These learning environments foster higher order competencies essential for future ready public relations graduates,

including persuasive speaking, real time situation analysis, media framing, and stakeholder engagement. The emphasis on task realism and decision making under pressure complements the more traditional cognitive and theoretical training found in public relations curricula, thereby bridging the gap between academic learning and professional application.

Simulations also replicate the uncertainty and stress characteristic of actual crises, providing a safe but challenging space for students to practice and refine their communication strategies. This experiential approach helps students develop situational awareness and ethical judgment, critical elements that influence successful crisis outcomes and enhance public trust in organizations.

Personal Skill Formation and the Affective Dimension of Learning
While technical competence in producing outputs such as press releases or media briefings remains important, the personal skills developed through crisis communication simulations are equally crucial. These skills, which often fall within the affective domain of learning, include emotional resilience, adaptability, teamwork, and reflective capacity. Bloom's taxonomy (1964) identifies the affective domain as encompassing attitudes, motivation, and values, all of which profoundly influence students' ability to apply knowledge effectively in stressful contexts.

During simulation exercises, students are not only challenged intellectually but also emotionally. They confront their own anxieties, navigate interpersonal dynamics, negotiate roles within teams, and manage the pressures of time sensitive decision making. This holistic engagement promotes the development of soft skills that are fundamental to professional success yet difficult to teach through lectures alone (Sun, Shute, Stewart & D'Mello, 2025, Brassier, Favre-Bonté & Ralet, 2025). For instance, students learn to regulate emotions, exercise empathy, communicate under pressure, and maintain composure, traits that foster trust and credibility in crisis situations.

Instructors observe that these affective learning outcomes often become visible through student reflections, debriefing sessions, and peer assessments conducted after simulations. These activities encourage students to internalize their experiences, reflect on their personal and group performance, and make meaning of both successes and setbacks. Through reflection, students begin to see themselves not just as learners but as capable communicators who can navigate high stakes environments with confidence and integrity.

By integrating affective learning opportunities into the curriculum, simulations provide a more holistic educational experience. This approach prepares students to respond to crises with intellectual understanding and tests students' emotional intelligence and behavioural adaptability. Such comprehensive readiness is critical given the complex nature of modern work, where communicators must balance competing stakeholder interests while managing their own and others' emotional responses.

Methodology
Research Design
This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how simulation-based learning supports professional identity formation among public relations students and to

understand their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses during the learning process. A constructivist paradigm was adopted, which assumes that knowledge and meaning are constructed through individual experiences and social interactions. This design is appropriate for exploring deep, subjective experiences and uncovering the meanings students assign to their learning journeys.

Participants
The participants were 37 undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor Public Relations with Contemporary Media programme at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia. These students were taking a Crisis Communication course in the third year of the program.

Data Collection
To gain a rich and holistic understanding of the students' experiences and identity development, the study used three qualitative data sources. First, students were asked to submit individual reflective journals after completing the simulation. These reflections captured their thoughts, emotions, decision making processes, challenges faced, and personal takeaways from the experience. Second, semi structured group interviews were conducted within one week of the simulation, involving five to six students per group. These interviews aimed to explore deeper insights into the students' learning experiences, emotional responses, and perceived professional growth. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Third, through the facilitator observations throughout the simulation, taking detailed field notes on student behaviours, communication patterns, leadership roles, stress responses, and team dynamics. These observational insights added depth and context to the reflective and interview data, and were used to support triangulation and interpretation.

A five series crisis simulation was implemented throughout the semester to achieve the research objectives, beginning in week five. Before the exercise, students had a solid theoretical foundation to prepare them for the practical challenges ahead. The simulation was crafted to replicate the dynamics of a real-life organisational crisis, offering students a high-intensity, fast-paced learning environment. Participants were divided into teams and assigned roles such as crisis managers, spokespersons, and social media coordinators. Each team directed a complex and evolving crisis scenario involving multiple stakeholders, heightened media interest, public pressure, and urgent decision-making.

The exercise was delivered in structured phases. It opened with pre-simulation briefings to outline responsibilities, clarify expectations, and explain the simulation process. This was followed by the live crisis scenario, which included unexpected developments and time-critical tasks to heighten realism. Throughout the simulation, students engaged in various communication activities, including holding press conferences, monitoring digital platforms, and interacting with key stakeholders. The experience concluded with a comprehensive debrief and reflection session, where students evaluated their strategies and outcomes, gaining insights into their individual and team performance.

Data Analysis
Data from all three sources were analysed using thematic analysis. The process began with familiarisation, where the researcher repeatedly read and reviewed the data to gain a deep

understanding of the content. This was followed by generating initial codes to identify meaningful features across the dataset. The next steps involved searching for recurring themes, reviewing them for consistency, defining and naming each theme, and finally producing a detailed written report. Themes were allowed to emerge naturally from the data while also being guided by the study's research objectives. The final themes reflected several key areas, including shifts in students' self-perception and professional identity, emotional and behavioural responses under pressure, the application of communication strategies during the simulation, and the development of confidence and career clarity.

Findings And Discussions

This study explored how crisis communication simulations contribute to the development of communication readiness among public relations (PR) students. The thematic analysis revealed three major themes: (1) developing confidence in communication under pressure, (2) strengthening teamwork and role clarity, and (3) realising the value of preparation and strategic planning. Together, these themes offer insights into how experiential learning environments, such as simulations, play a significant role in preparing future-ready graduates for the demands of the PR profession.

Developing Confidence in Communication under Pressure

Students often shared how helpful it was to participate in real-time crisis simulations that felt like workplace situations. These experiences helped them feel more confident when speaking up, making decisions, and staying calm in stressful situations. Many said they were initially nervous, but the more they practised in these crisis settings, the more they believed in their ability to handle challenging communication tasks. This supports what Veil (2010) found: simulations are valuable training tools for people in public relations. They give students a safe space to practice key skills like sharing essential messages and managing emotions during a crisis. Because there are no real-world consequences, students can try different approaches, make mistakes, and learn from them without fear.

Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) also helps explain this result. His theory says that people learn best by doing tasks, thinking about what happened, learning from that experience, and then trying again. Through this cycle, students were able to improve their communication skills and feel more confident in their abilities. Each crisis activity helped them better understand how to respond clearly and calmly, which is very important in public relations.

Some students said the most challenging part was handling the emotional pressure, such as staying calm during fake media interviews or dealing with different opinions from other groups. But after a few experiences, they started to feel more in control and less afraid of speaking up. This matches what Sellnow and Seeger (2021) have said: crisis simulations help students become more assertive and confident, enabling them to communicate more effectively during challenging times. This finding also fits with a bigger trend in education. Schools and universities focus more on preparing students with knowledge and the ability to handle change and lead during uncertain times. Communicating clearly and confidently under pressure is a key skill for future careers in public relations and many other fields. Table 1 shows a few quotes from students explaining how these crisis exercises helped them grow more confident in their communication skills.

This learning experience also connects with the Course Learning Outcome of Personal Skills at Level Four. This outcome expects students to demonstrate responsibility, confidence, and adaptability. The feedback showed that students made progress in all these areas. Many said they felt more confident when expressing their ideas, especially during group discussions or media briefings. They also said they learned to manage their nerves and stay focused, even when the situation felt intense or uncertain. These results are similar to the findings of Veil, Sellnow and Heald (2011) and Madsgaard and Svellingen (2025), who found that students become more confident communicators after participating in real-time crisis training. The idea of "failing forward," discussed by Lee and Yang (2025), was also clear in the student reflections. Because the simulation was a safe space, students felt more comfortable trying new strategies and learning from their mistakes without fear of serious consequences.

Students showed clear improvement in their ability to think quickly and respond to changing situations. They learned to process information efficiently, assess risks, and make informed decisions under time pressure. These are essential skills in effective crisis management. Such abilities are also valuable in entrepreneurial settings, where flexibility, experimentation, and resilience are often needed for innovation. As the simulation progressed, students began viewing challenges as chances to learn and grow, rather than failures. This shift in mindset supports the broader goal of developing entrepreneurial thinking, which involves recognising opportunities, adjusting strategies when needed, and handling uncertainty confidently.

Strengthening Teamwork and Role Clarity
Another important finding from the crisis simulations was the intense focus on teamwork and clearly understanding each person's role. Students shared that the simulations taught them how essential collaboration is during a crisis. Working well as a team, listening to different ideas, and ensuring everyone knew their responsibilities were key factors that helped the group succeed. Many students said that at the start of the simulations, there was some confusion about who should do what. However, as the activity continued, they began to see the importance of clear roles and good communication between team members. When everyone understood their job and trusted others to do theirs, the team worked more smoothly and effectively.

This supports what Coombs (2024) explains about real-life crisis communication. It is about getting the message right and how well the team works together behind the scenes. Without strong teamwork and clear roles, even the best message can fail to reach the audience correctly. The simulation also helped students see how a Crisis Management Team (CMT) functions in real situations. They could apply what they had learned in class, including frameworks like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) from Coombs (2022). Students could understand how each role fits into the bigger picture during a crisis response by taking on specific roles such as spokesperson, media manager, or internal communications lead.

In addition to building practical skills, students also developed necessary personal and social skills. The simulations encouraged respectful communication, active listening, and shared decision-making. These soft skills are just as essential as technical knowledge in any workplace, especially in high-pressure situations like a crisis. As Seeger and Littlefield (2025)

point out, a sense of shared responsibility and strong team relationships are at the heart of successful crisis response. Through these experiences, students began to value their own performance and the group's performance as a whole. They learned that clear structure, mutual trust, and open communication are key to managing a crisis well. These lessons will help them in public relations roles and any job that requires working as part of a team.

Realising the Value of Preparation and Strategic Planning
One of the main findings from the student feedback was the clear understanding of how necessary preparation and strategic planning are in crisis communication. Many students said that having a plan before the simulation started greatly impacted how they responded to the crisis. They mentioned that clear roles, message templates, and established procedures helped their teams stay calm and organised. This allowed them to respond more effectively under pressure. This reflects best practices from crisis communication research. Scholars like Fearn-Banks and Kawamoto (2024) have shown that having a well-prepared crisis communication plan is essential for managing risks and protecting an organisation's reputation. The simulation allowed students to create these plans and see how they work in real situations. They learned that planning saves time and improves the quality and consistency of communication during a crisis.

The simulation also helped students think more strategically. They had to consider different stakeholders' needs and develop clear, accurate, and empathetic messages. This supports the principles of risk communication described by Covello (2006), which focus on building trust and providing helpful information during uncertain times. Through these exercises, students better understood how to communicate under pressure while maintaining professionalism and sensitivity. In addition, the experience supported the goal of preparing graduates for the real world. The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2015) highlights the importance of developing future-ready graduates who are adaptable, resilient, and skilled in problem-solving. The crisis simulation allowed students to practice these skills in a realistic but safe setting. They gained hands-on experience in making decisions, managing time, and thinking critically, all of which are valuable in the workplace.

Table 1
How Crisis Simulations Enhance Public Relations Students Readiness to the Future

Theme	Supporting Quotes
1. Developing Confidence in Communication under Pressure	- "I gained confidence and decision-making. When we are in a group, there is always someone who doesn't care about others' opinions. But in the simulation, I learned how to deal with this kind of person." - "Participating in the simulation taught me the importance of staying calm under pressure and the need for quick, clear, and strategic messaging." - "We can feel the real pressure about crisis even though it was just a simulation. From there, we learned how to communicate wisely under pressure." - "The simulation helped me speak out and give my own opinion. Even though I was shy, I felt more comfortable communicating with my team." - "I think crisis simulation taught me how to act in real-life situations and trained me to do critical thinking in any situation."

Theme	Supporting Quotes
2. Strengthening Teamwork and Role Clarity	- "Teamwork really important before and after simulation. Working in a group, communication is important—discussion helps find solutions from brainstorming." - "A team that is more open to ideas or gives full cooperation will make the simulation successful." - "The simulation helped me understand our roles in the Crisis Management Team and every step we took to manage the crisis." - "Teamwork ensures the roleplay moves smoothly and is well-structured. Planning is key, or else the process becomes messy." - "I've learned how to be a fast-response person as well as the importance of teamwork when facing any crisis."
3. Realising the Value of Preparation and Strategic Planning	- "Being proactive and having a crisis communication plan in place is essential. Simulations show how quickly situations can escalate." - "From the simulation, I learned that preparation is very important to avoid uncertainty and make a better response." - "Understand the crisis and be fast and give accurate information." - "Having a well-developed crisis communication plan helps us respond immediately when something happens." - "Communication is the key. The way you speak during a crisis can determine if it goes in a positive or negative direction."

The lecturer's reflections during the debriefing and student reflection sessions highlighted how deeply the simulation affected the students personally. A few students were moved to tears as they shared how much effort it took to mentally and physically prepare. Some admitted they were shy or introverted and did not think they could pull it off, but they surprised themselves. They managed to stay composed under pressure, proving they could do more than expected.

Key personal skills such as communication, teamwork, and especially listening are essential for handling real-world crises in public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2023). From the instructor's point of view, it was clear that some students had natural talents for specific roles, like being a spokesperson or a journalist. These skills surfaced during the simulation, showing how this experience helps students discover what they are good at. The combination of interviews, written reflections, and direct observation showed that this simulation worked well in developing the personal and emotional aspects of learning, something often complex to measure but vital in preparing students for real-life challenges (Kolb, 2015; Eyler, 2009). Despite some limitations such as space and equipment, the experience left a strong and lasting impact. It brought the course learning outcomes to life and gave students a safe but realistic space to grow in confidence, communication, and self-awareness (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2014).

Students often described how the simulation pushed them to act quickly and take responsibility, even when unsure. Some reported making early mistakes, such as delivering unclear messages, misjudging stakeholder reactions, or failing to delegate tasks effectively. However, rather than being discouraged, they could reflect on these moments, receive feedback, and apply those lessons later in the exercise. This cycle of action, reflection, and

adjustment aligns with Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), which emphasises the value of learning through direct experience and critical reflection.

Importantly, students noted that the feedback process contributed significantly to this learning. Constructive feedback from the lecturer and peers allowed them to understand what worked and could be improved. Knowing that they were not being judged harshly for their errors helped build their confidence and encouraged more active participation. They were not afraid to speak up, propose ideas, or step into challenging roles, even if they initially lacked complete confidence.

In addition to strengthening communication and crisis management skills, the simulation also supported the development of other valuable personal and professional abilities. For example, several students reported increased confidence in taking initiative and proposing bold ideas. This mindset is central to entrepreneurship, which requires individuals to think creatively, take calculated risks, and learn from failure. In many ways, a crisis simulation mirrors the entrepreneurial journey where students must respond to change, lead teams, manage uncertainty, and solve complex problems under time pressure.

The simulations also contributed to key 21st-century skills such as digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and decision-making. In many cases, students had to manage digital tools for internal communication, use media platforms to share their responses, or analyse public sentiment, further enhancing their readiness for real-world roles. They also had to manage their emotions and those of their teammates, building empathy and interpersonal awareness. Overall, the safe learning space provided by the simulation was not simply about avoiding stress or making things easier. Instead, it was about giving students the chance to grow through experience. They learned that mistakes are part of learning, and that reflection and feedback are powerful tools for personal and professional development. This approach not only strengthened their communication skills but also prepared them for real-world challenges where the ability to learn from failure is often key to long-term success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings highlight the potential of simulation-based learning to transform public relations education by fostering deeper engagement and self-awareness among students. Beyond skill development, the immersive experience encourages students to connect emotionally with their future professional roles, promoting a more holistic understanding of the demands and responsibilities in crisis communication. This approach enhances preparedness and nurtures essential qualities such as confidence, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, which are critical for success not just in the PR industry, but in all the careers students will venture into once they graduate.

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