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# From Strategy to Synergy: Evaluating the Evolution of Pertamina's Digital Crisis Communication in the Pertamina Adulteration Case

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## Abstract

This study explores the evolution of digital crisis communication strategies employed by Pertamina during the 2025 Pertamina adulteration crisis. Previous studies using Image Repair Theory (IRT) revealed Pertamina's heavy reliance on the *bolstering* strategy to defend its reputation. Further investigation using a hybrid strategy approach identified twelve patterns of strategy combination, with *bolstering + corrective action* as the most dominant. This article synthesizes findings from both studies, based on the same dataset of 474 Instagram posts across six official Pertamina accounts, to argue that Pertamina's communication approach reflects a strategic shift: from using singular, defensive tactics to adopting synergistic, multi-strategy responses. Using a conceptual comparative method, this paper demonstrates that in the digital media environment, organizations are more likely to blend IRT strategies with elements of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to build credibility, maintain public trust, and reduce reputational threats. The study contributes to the theoretical development of IRT by proposing a framework of synergistic image repair, and to practical crisis communication by highlighting the importance of adaptability and strategic integration in public sector digital communication.

**Keywords:** Image Repair Theory, Hybrid Strategy, Digital Crisis Communication, Pertamina, Bolstering, Crisis Synergy

## 1. Introduction

Crisis communication remains a pivotal area in public relations, focusing on how institutions manage public trust and organizational legitimacy during turbulent events (Coombs, 2023; Ham & Kim, 2019). Scholars have emphasized that crises are not merely disruptions but communicative events that shape meaning and reputation through media narratives and public discourse (Marsen, 2020; Rizza, 2023). Over the last decade, the increasing

mediatization of crises has created hybrid arenas where institutional and citizen-generated communication coexist (Burdsey et al., 2023; Dominic et al., 2023).

The Pertamina adulteration case in Indonesia, widely covered by Tempo.co (2025), CNN Indonesia (2025), Kompas.com (2025), and Reuters (2025), reflects how corporate communication operates under both digital and political pressure. As a state-owned enterprise, PT Pertamina not only had to address public safety concerns but also navigate institutional expectations of transparency (Kompas.id, 2025; Reuters, 2025). These conditions align with what Comyns and Franklin-Johnson (2018) describe as “collective crises,” where moral responsibility and institutional accountability are intertwined.

In such contexts, communication theories like Benoit’s (Benoit & Zhang, 2004) Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Coombs’ (2023) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) become crucial frameworks. While IRT categorizes message strategies such as denial, evasion of responsibility, corrective action, and mortification, SCCT links these strategies to audience perceptions and attributions of blame (Liu et al., 2025; Jiang et al., 2025). Studies have expanded these models to address digital environments, where crisis narratives unfold in real time and audience reactions influence message framing (Park & Choi, 2023; Kwok et al., 2022).

However, research increasingly shows that rigidly applying one strategy is less effective than combining multiple approaches for instance, blending corrective actions with empathetic messaging or moral appeals (Tu et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2021). Such integrated practices, described by Haupt (2021) and Oh et al. (2022), reveal that hybrid crisis responses sustain trust more effectively across multiple audience segments. Pertamina’s communication pattern during this case seems to follow a similar trajectory from initial corrective statements toward collaborative, emotionally grounded messages intended to rebuild trust (Kompas.com, 2025; Tempo.co, 2025).

Moreover, social media platforms redefine crisis temporality. As Kwok et al. (2022) and Liu-Lastres et al. (2024) noted, online crises evolve rapidly, requiring not only immediacy but also authenticity in message tone and interaction. Humor, empathy, and relational transparency have emerged as tools to manage digital outrage (Hämpke et al., 2022; Hirschfeld & Thielsch, 2022). Pertamina’s Instagram posts, for example, incorporated human-interest visuals and value-based language elements aligned with the relational trust frameworks proposed by Kamboh et al. (2024) and Elshaer & Saad (2022).

In addition, crisis communication increasingly draws upon Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) logic, emphasizing moral repair and resilience building rather than image defense (Chang et al., 2023; Ham & Kim, 2019). For instance, public sector organizations in Asia and Africa have shown that integrating CSR themes such as transparency and servant leadership into crisis communication improves long-term reputation recovery (Elshaer & Saad, 2022; Kamboh et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, cultural values emphasizing collectivism and communal responsibility influence how the public perceives apology, compensation, and accountability (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019; Andung et al., 2024). As Campbell (2019) observed in the Japanese post-disaster context, public trust in institutions often depends on whether official messaging resonates with moral expectations and local communication norms.

Against this background, the Pertamina adulteration case offers a rich empirical setting to explore how a national energy company negotiates public accountability in digital spaces. This study proposes a Synergistic Image Repair framework that integrates symbolic, moral, and behavioral communication strategies across online platforms. The next section reviews literature on crisis communication, organizational reputation, and image repair models to establish the theoretical foundations for this approach (Benoit & Zhang, 2004; Coombs, 2023; Marsen, 2020; Tu et al., 2023).

## 2. Method

Crisis communication scholarship has progressively evolved from defensive frameworks to integrative, relationship-centered approaches that highlight empathy, credibility, and social responsibility as the foundations

of reputation recovery. Classic models such as the Image Repair Theory (Benoit & Zhang, 2004) describe crisis communication as a strategic discourse of justification, through which organizations attempt to reduce offensiveness or assume responsibility in the aftermath of a reputational threat. This framework was expanded by Coombs (2023) through the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes how audiences' perceptions of responsibility and emotional attributions shape the effectiveness of an organization's response. Subsequent studies (Ham & Kim, 2019; Tu et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2021) argue that effective image restoration is not only about selecting the correct verbal strategy but also about aligning communication with moral behavior and visible corrective actions.

The rise of digital media has radically transformed this landscape. Social networks now serve as both the stage and the audience for organizational crises, creating real-time interactions that can amplify outrage or foster reconciliation (Kwok et al., 2022; Liu-Lastres et al., 2024). Park and Park (2020) demonstrated that emotional contagion through online comments affects how crisis messages are interpreted, while Gruda and Ojo (2022) revealed that inconsistency or delayed responses intensify public anxiety and distrust. These findings align with Wilk et al. (2024), who developed a social media crisis response framework emphasizing timeliness, empathy, and message coherence as determinants of digital credibility. MacKay et al. (2022) further found that influencer-driven crisis communication during COVID-19 encouraged empathy and legitimacy through perceived authenticity, whereas Salem et al. (2022) noted that synchronized messages between governments and hospitality sectors reinforced a sense of trust during national emergencies.

Parallel to digital adaptation, scholars have increasingly emphasized the moral dimension of crisis communication through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) integration. CSR-driven crisis messages focus not merely on damage control but on restoring social value and ethical legitimacy (Chang et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2022). Elshaer and Saad (2022) highlight that transparent communication under servant leadership builds organizational resilience, while Kamboh et al. (2024) and Liu et al. (2025) show how digital transparency in public institutions enhances moral credibility. In Asian contexts, Jiang et al. (2025) observed that universities responding to ethical misconduct managed to rebuild reputation through consistency and moral tone, echoing Tu et al.'s (2023) call for collective moral narratives in crisis settings. These insights suggest that modern crisis response should integrate moral accountability and humanistic engagement as much as factual correction.

Moreover, reputation and trust are not solely products of organizational effort but outcomes of mediated interpretation. Media institutions play a decisive role in framing crises, as demonstrated by Campbell (2019) in his study of Japanese disaster communication and by Burdsey et al. (2023), who examined how the Refugee Olympic Team was portrayed as a symbol of resilience rather than failure. In the political communication sphere, von Sikorski et al. (2018) discovered that scandal management requires adaptive responses combining empathy, humor, and strategic distancing to prevent associative damage principles that resonate in corporate communication contexts as well. Complementing these global perspectives, Andung et al. (2024) found that local and folk media in Indonesia remain powerful tools for disseminating corrective narratives and building community-level trust, especially in collectivist societies where relational closeness shapes perception (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019).

The current scholarship thus converges on a new paradigm: crisis communication is no longer a linear sequence of response stages but a synergistic process uniting organizational accountability, ethical responsibility, and digital participation. Haupt (2021) and Rizza (2023) emphasize cross-sector collaboration and citizen inclusion as keys to crisis resilience, while O'Shea et al. (2022) advocate for cultural adaptability in institutional responses. Integrating these ideas, Pertamina's recent approach combining corrective transparency, empathetic digital storytelling, and CSR-oriented actions reflects this global shift from strategy to synergy. This perspective forms the theoretical foundation of the present study, connecting the analytical precision of IRT and SCCT with the emerging ethos of synergistic, morally grounded crisis communication.

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to explore how PT Pertamina, Indonesia's state-owned oil and gas company, communicated its crisis response during the *Pertamax adulteration scandal* in early 2025. The focus was on identifying message strategies, thematic consistencies, and rhetorical framing within the

company's official Instagram posts during the crisis period. This approach aligns with the interpretive tradition of crisis communication research, which prioritizes meaning-making over numerical measurement (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019; Andung et al., 2024).

The selection of Instagram as the primary data source was justified by its central role in digital crisis management. Social media platforms like Instagram enable organizations to engage directly with publics in real time, merging visual narratives and corporate statements to construct an interactive form of image repair (Kwok et al., 2022; Wilk et al., 2024). Pertamina's verified Instagram account, which has millions of followers, served as a primary channel for official clarification, apologies, and updates related to the case.

Data were collected from posts published between **February 25 and April 30, 2025**, the period in which the crisis narrative peaked in mainstream and social media coverage (CNN Indonesia, 2025; Tempo.co, 2025; Kompas.com, 2025). The posts were archived, categorized by type (statement, infographic, corporate social responsibility update, or public reassurance), and then coded manually to identify recurring communicative themes.

The analysis followed the framework of *Image Repair Theory* (Benoit & Zhang, 2004) and *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (Coombs, 2023), examining strategies such as corrective action, bolstering, and mortification. However, unlike earlier studies that focus purely on textual defense (Ham & Kim, 2019; Tu et al., 2023), this research emphasized how digital storytelling, moral cues, and CSR integration created a synergistic communication pattern. Triangulation was achieved by comparing corporate posts with coverage from mainstream media outlets (Kompas.id, 2025; Reuters, 2025) to identify consistency and alignment in narrative framing.

Ethically, the study used publicly available data and did not involve direct interaction with participants. All interpretations were cross-checked against existing models of crisis communication to maintain analytical rigor (Marsen, 2020; Haupt, 2021).

### 3. Results

The comparative synthesis of two prior studies reveals a clear evolution in Pertamina's digital crisis communication strategies during the 2025 Pertamax adulteration crisis. In the first study, which applied Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), the dominant response identified was bolstering a strategy centered on highlighting the organization's positive past actions, national service, and corporate integrity (Benoit & Zhang, 2004). This approach served as a defensive mechanism to reaffirm Pertamina's identity as a trusted and responsible energy provider, aiming to stabilize public confidence amid growing skepticism and online criticism. Bolstering messages were prominently featured through visual storytelling and CSR-oriented narratives that emphasized Pertamina's contribution to national progress, social welfare, and environmental sustainability. Such communication, while defensive in tone, also reflected an attempt to align corporate identity with collective moral values, resonating with the cultural expectation of accountability within Indonesian society.

In contrast, the second study adopted a hybrid strategy framework, broadening the analytical scope beyond singular classifications to capture the coexistence and interaction of multiple repair strategies. This approach identified twelve distinct combinations, with three emerging as the most frequently employed:

1. Bolstering + Corrective Action, where the company reinforced its credibility while simultaneously demonstrating concrete efforts to resolve the issue, such as laboratory verification and transparent fuel distribution audits;
2. Bolstering + Transcendence, which reframed the crisis within a broader national energy resilience narrative;
3. Corrective Action + Mortification, signaling organizational accountability through explicit acknowledgment and solution-focused messaging.

These combinations reflect a layered and adaptive pattern of image repair, showing how Pertamina dynamically calibrated its communication based on shifts in public sentiment, digital engagement, and the crisis stage. This transition from defensive messaging to integrative, solution-oriented communication demonstrates increasing institutional maturity in navigating digital crises, where real-time responsiveness and public empathy are equally essential. The strategy also echoes insights from Andung, Messakh, and Doko (2024), who emphasize that

culturally grounded and community-based communication such as the use of folk narratives can enhance public understanding and rebuild trust during crises. Similarly, Pertamina's efforts to embed moral and social themes within its digital messaging mirror this approach, fostering collective identification and participatory interpretation among audiences.

Table 1: Comparison of Strategy Use

| Strategy Type                     | Description                            | Noted in Study |
|-----------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Bolstering                        | Emphasizing positive track record      | Study 1 & 2    |
| Corrective Action                 | Offering solutions, fixing the issue   | Study 2        |
| Mortification                     | Admitting fault and asking forgiveness | Study 2        |
| Transcendence                     | Reframing the issue in broader context | Study 2        |
| Bolstering + Corrective Action    | Highlighting values while acting       | Study 2        |
| Bolstering + Transcendence        | Mixing optimism with broader narrative | Study 2        |
| Corrective Action + Mortification | Admitting mistake and fixing it        | Study 2        |

Ultimately, the findings suggest that Pertamina's crisis communication evolved into a synergistic model, merging symbolic reassurance with behavioral accountability. This transformation underscores a shift from reactive image defense toward proactive trust restoration demonstrating how organizations in highly visible public sectors can sustain legitimacy and credibility within complex, hyper-mediated communication ecosystems (Benoit & Zhang, 2004; Andung et al., 2024). To better understand the specific image repair strategies employed during the crisis, this study categorizes Pertamina's responses based on both single and combined strategy types. These combinations are summarized in Table 1.

While Table 1 highlights the frequency and patterns of strategy combinations, Figure 1 visualizes Pertamina's overall shift from a single-strategy approach to a more complex, synergistic crisis communication model. This transformation signifies not only a quantitative change in the number of strategies used but also a qualitative evolution in the company's communicative logic. Initially, Pertamina's approach followed the conventional framework of **Image Repair Theory (IRT)**, where the focus rested on message-based defenses such as denial, corrective action, or bolstering (Benoit & Zhang, 2004). However, as the crisis unfolded within the dynamic environment of social media, Pertamina demonstrated increasing adaptability by merging symbolic and behavioral tactics, forming a multidimensional response that balanced reputation protection, moral accountability, and public empathy.

The visualization in Figure 1 reflects this layered evolution from isolated, reactive messaging to integrated, narrative-based communication. Each phase in Pertamina's strategy demonstrates a conscious effort to align its crisis discourse with broader public expectations of transparency and cultural values of collectivity. In this regard, Pertamina's communication practices resonate with **Andung, Messakh, and Doko (2024)**, who emphasize the importance of culturally rooted and participatory crisis communication models in Indonesia. Their study on disaster mitigation through folk media revealed that trust recovery often depends on the organization's ability to frame messages in familiar, community-centered narratives. Similarly, Pertamina's shift toward more empathetic and solution-driven storytelling mirrors this local communication pattern, using moral cues and shared national values to rebuild legitimacy.

Thus, Figure 1 does not merely represent a chronological change in strategy but illustrates the emergence of what can be termed a **synergistic image repair process**, where symbolic reassurance, factual correction, and cultural resonance operate concurrently. This synthesis reflects the theoretical integration of IRT principles (Benoit & Zhang, 2004) with Indonesia's socio-communicative traditions (Andung et al., 2024), forming a hybrid crisis communication framework that is both globally informed and locally grounded.

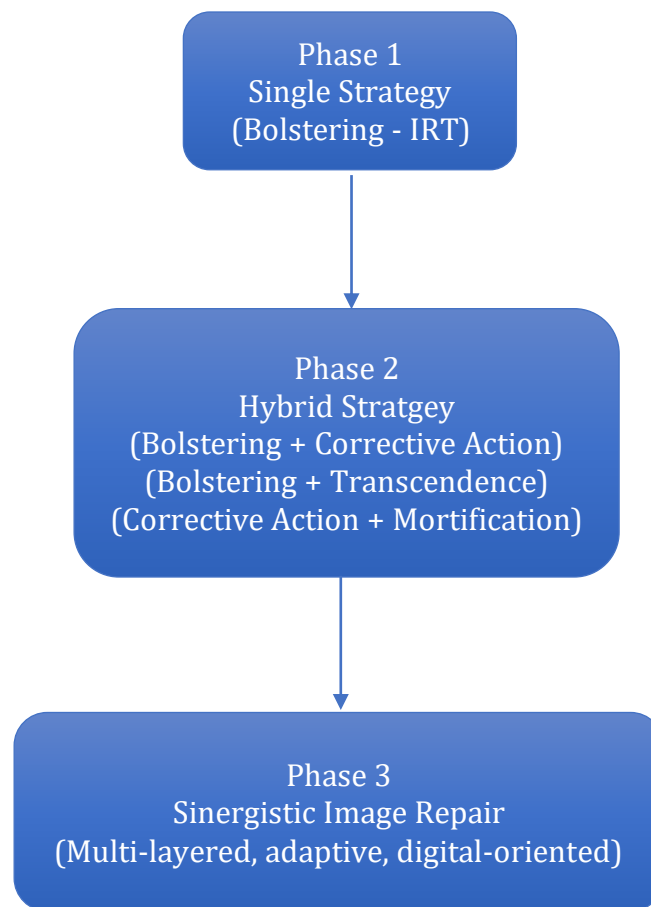


Figure 1: Strategic Transition from Single Strategy to Synergistic Image Repair in Pertamina's Crisis Communication

As shown in Table 1, Pertamina employed various combinations of image repair strategies during the Pertamax adulteration crisis, with bolstering + corrective action emerging as the most dominant pairing. This combination demonstrates the company's dual effort to reaffirm its institutional credibility while addressing public concerns through corrective and transparent measures. The strategic pattern marks a clear departure from Pertamina's earlier reliance on a singular, defensive response primarily bolstering as conceptualized in Image Repair Theory (IRT) (Benoit & Zhang, 2004). By integrating both symbolic and behavioral strategies, Pertamina's approach reflects a maturing crisis communication framework in which messages of accountability are no longer limited to rhetoric but are supported by tangible acts of restitution.

The transition from a single to a multi-strategy communication model, illustrated in Figure 1, captures this broader evolution from reactive defense to proactive engagement. Symbolic strategies such as bolstering and transcendence became intertwined with corrective actions, forming what can be described as a synergistic pattern of digital crisis response. This pattern aligns with contemporary research emphasizing that credibility in crisis communication depends on both message coherence and visible moral behavior (Chang, Weng, & Wu, 2023). The ability to combine empathy, ethical responsibility, and corrective transparency allows organizations to meet public expectations in the era of hyper-mediatized crises, where trust is shaped simultaneously by institutional narratives and digital audience reactions.

Furthermore, Pertamina's transformation echoes insights from Burdsey, Michelini, and Agergaard (2023), who argue that institutional communication during crises increasingly reflects processes of mediatization where organizations construct legitimacy through sustained visibility, narrative consistency, and moral symbolism. Similarly, Pertamina's use of Instagram as a dialogic platform demonstrates how digital media environments institutionalize crisis discourse, transforming short-term defense into long-term trust-building. Parallel to this, Campbell (2019) highlights that public trust in post-crisis communication is strongly influenced by the perceived

sincerity and cultural resonance of official messages an aspect that Pertamina embodied through emotionally grounded content aligned with collectivist values.

In the Indonesian context, these findings also resonate with Andung, Messakh, and Doko (2024), who emphasize the role of culturally embedded storytelling and participatory communication in restoring social cohesion during crises. To further conceptualize this development, the study proposes a model of Synergistic Image Repair (see Figure 2), illustrating how symbolic, behavioral, and cultural dimensions operate in concert to sustain organizational legitimacy across digital crisis contexts (Benoit & Zhang, 2004; Andung et al., 2024; Burdsey et al., 2023; Campbell, 2019; Chang et al., 2023).

|               |            | Message Orientation            |                                  |
|---------------|------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|               |            | Affirmative                    | Corrective                       |
| Strategy Type | Symbolic   | Bolstering (reaffirm identity) | Transcendence (reframe blame)    |
|               | Behavioral |                                | Corrective Action, Mortification |

Figure 2: Proposed Model of Synergistic Image Repair in Digital Crisis Communication

This study proposes a conceptual framework, Synergistic Image Repair, which blends symbolic and behavioral strategies to manage complex digital crises. As shown in Figure 2, these strategies operate in overlapping layers, enabling organizations to address reputational, emotional, and informational needs simultaneously. Unlike traditional image repair approaches that focus on linear or message-centered responses, this framework emphasizes integration and simultaneity, recognizing that contemporary crises unfold across dynamic, multi-platform environments where perception and action interact in real time.

The framework draws conceptual support from recent developments in digital crisis communication research. For instance, Kwok, Lee, and Han (2022) highlight that message typology and emotional tone significantly influence audience attention and engagement in social media crises, suggesting that message resonance is as critical as informational accuracy. Similarly, Liu, Gao, and Duan (2025) demonstrate that the strategic alignment between message type and response tone determines the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of institutional crisis responses, underscoring the need for flexible strategy selection. Meanwhile, Liu-Lastres, Guo, and Liu (2024) argue that appeals integrating emotional and rational elements such as empathy and evidence-based assurance can substantially enhance public acceptance during crises in the hospitality sector, reinforcing the importance of multidimensional message design.

Furthermore, MacKay et al. (2022) reveal that digital influencers' crisis messages on platforms like Instagram are most effective when they merge symbolic cues (such as authenticity and empathy) with behavioral indicators of responsibility (such as concrete actions or policy adjustments). This evidence supports the notion that symbolic and behavioral coherence is essential to sustain credibility in networked public spheres. Complementing these perspectives, Marsen (2020) conceptualizes crisis communication as an inherently navigational process one that requires continuous adaptation and strategic coordination between discourse and practice.



Together, these insights inform the Synergistic Image Repair model, which integrates message orientation, strategy type, and contextual responsiveness to offer a more adaptive and multi-dimensional framework than traditional image repair theory. This model forms the foundation for the following discussion, which examines its theoretical and practical implications within the evolving landscape of digital crisis communication (Kwok et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025; Liu-Lastres et al., 2024; MacKay et al., 2022; Marsen, 2020).

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest a strategic evolution in Pertamina's crisis communication approach during the 2025 Pertamina adulteration case, shifting from a reliance on singular image repair tactics particularly bolstering to the adoption of more dynamic, hybrid strategies. This transformation reflects not only a tactical response to a rapidly unfolding digital crisis but also a broader adaptation to the participatory nature of online public discourse, which demands speed, flexibility, and multi-layered messaging.

Drawing from Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), the initial use of bolstering aligns with the organization's effort to reaffirm its positive track record and deflect reputational damage through reinforcement of prior goodwill and national contribution (Benoit & Zhang, 2004). However, as the crisis escalated, the integration of corrective action, mortification, and transcendence indicates a shift toward more responsive and emotionally resonant strategies. These combinations particularly bolstering + corrective action demonstrate Pertamina's attempt to balance reputation defense with visible problem-solving, a hybrid approach that extends beyond the traditional categories defined in IRT. In this sense, Pertamina's evolving communication strategy illustrates the adaptability and situational awareness that Benoit and Zhang (2004) identify as crucial to effective image restoration.

When examined through the lens of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this convergence of strategies also suggests that Pertamina implicitly assessed stakeholder attributions of responsibility and adjusted its responses accordingly. The progression from symbolic affirmation to concrete action reflects a growing recognition that credibility in digital crisis contexts requires more than narrative defense; it demands visible accountability and emotional intelligence in messaging.

Theoretically, these findings challenge the sufficiency of singular-strategy models like IRT when applied to complex, real-time crises in the digital age. This paper therefore proposes the concept of "synergistic image repair," describing an integrative and layered strategy model that merges symbolic and behavioral responses to address multiple stakeholder concerns simultaneously. Unlike IRT's original framework, which categorizes responses discretely, the synergistic model recognizes overlap, adaptation, and interplay as defining features of modern crisis communication (Benoit & Zhang, 2004).

Practically, this study offers key implications for public-sector communicators. Organizations must move beyond pre-scripted responses and instead develop an agile framework that enables strategic combinations based on real-time public sentiment, platform dynamics, and crisis progression. In an era where public trust can shift within hours and where organizational silence is often interpreted as guilt layered messaging rooted in transparency, empathy, and corrective action is no longer optional; it is a strategic necessity (Benoit & Zhang, 2004).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to their inclusion in the research process.

**Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies:** This study utilized generative AI tools (OpenAI's ChatGPT) solely to assist in developing the research framework, exploring discussion directions, and translating text from Bahasa Indonesia to English. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented in this manuscript are the author's own and were not generated by AI.

**Author Contributions:** Each author has made a significant contribution to this writing. Sri Rizki conceptualized the research, conducted fieldwork, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Hastjarjo and Eka provided supervisory support through structural refinement, methodological guidance, and theoretical alignment, offering continuous feedback and critical insights throughout the research and writing process.

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