

Crisis Communication and Brand Reputation: The Case of Es Teh Indonesia

Wiwin Riski Windarsari

Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Introduction/Main Objectives: This study analyzes how Es Teh Indonesia managed a 2022 social media crisis using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT), focusing on the relationship among response strategies, public sentiment, and cultural interpretation. **Background Problems:** In Indonesia's collectivist society, brand crises on social media are often intensified by defensive or legalistic corporate responses that run counter to audience expectations for humility and empathy. However, limited research explores how these cultural values influence crisis outcomes in non-Western contexts. **Novelty:** This research integrates SCCT and IRT within an Indonesian cultural framework, emphasizing how moral tone and cultural alignment affect the effectiveness of crisis communication. It extends Western crisis theories by incorporating cultural sensitivity as a contextual factor. **Research Methods:** A qualitative descriptive case study was conducted through content and sentiment analysis of Es Teh Indonesia's official statements, 500 user comments on Twitter/X and Instagram, and 15 news reports, guided by SCCT and IRT categories. **Findings/Results:** The company's initial defensive response, implying legal action, intensified backlash, resulting in 70.4% negative sentiment. A later accommodative tone partially restored trust but did not fully repair it due to the absence of an apology. **Conclusion:** Empathetic, transparent, and culturally aligned communication is more effective than defensive strategies. Successful crisis management in collectivist contexts requires humility, responsiveness, and moral accountability.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
negative review_1,
social media_2, brand
reputation_3, situational
crisis communication
theory_4, image repair
theory_5

*Submitted: 8
September 2025
Reviewed: 15
September 2025
Accepted: 5
November 2025
Published: 18 Juni
2026*

* Wiwin Riski Windarsari at Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia
E-mail address: wiwin.riski.windarsari@unm.ac.id

1. Introduction

In today's hyperconnected digital ecosystem, consumer voices on social media have become powerful drivers of brand reputation. Negative reviews, once limited to one-to-one complaints, now rapidly evolve into viral conversations that can reshape public perception within hours. Studies indicate that more than 70% of consumers consult online reviews before making purchase decisions, and a single negative post can have a significant reputational impact across networks (Açikgöz et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021). This phenomenon has created a new form of participatory crisis in which ordinary users can challenge corporate credibility in public view. The 2022 case of Es Teh Indonesia exemplifies this trend—illustrating how a seemingly minor complaint about product sweetness transformed into a nationwide controversy that tested the brand's communication ethics and crisis management capacity.

The rapid advancement of digital communication has transformed how brands interact with consumers. Social media is no longer merely a promotional channel but a dynamic arena where consumers, influencers, and brands co-create reputations in real time (Weismueller et al., 2020). However, these same platforms expose companies to unprecedented reputational risks when negative information spreads virally (Wang et al., 2021).

In 2022, Es Teh Indonesia faced a social-media crisis that vividly demonstrated the risks of brand miscommunication in the digital age. A Twitter user with thousands of followers posted a complaint that the brand's milk-tea product contained excessive sugar. What began as a simple consumer review escalated into a reputational crisis after the company's official account responded with a statement implying potential legal action against the reviewer. The response triggered widespread criticism from netizens and news outlets, garnering over 20,000 retweets and 40,000 likes within 48 hours, and was reported by national media outlets such as Detik.com and Kompas.com. This incident illustrates how defensive corporate communication can amplify negativity when consumers expect transparency, humility, and empathy (Açikgöz et al., 2024; Hwang, 2024).

In this case study, the defensive, legally toned response provoked criticism that the company lacked humility and tolerance for consumer feedback. This reflects a broader pattern in digital communication, where sarcasm or legal threats are interpreted as arrogance rather than professionalism (Batista et al., 2022; Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Consequently, the incident underscores the importance of balancing assertiveness with empathy in digital crisis responses.

From a theoretical standpoint, SCCT (Coombs, 2007) and IRT (Benoit, 2013) provide robust frameworks for analyzing how organizations manage crises. SCCT categorizes crises into victim, accidental, and preventable types, prescribing response strategies that align with the degree of

perceived responsibility. IRT, meanwhile, focuses on rhetorical strategies such as denial, corrective action, and mortification, emphasizing how language shapes perceptions of sincerity and accountability (Benoit, 2013). Together, these frameworks enable a systematic evaluation of how corporate responses influence public perception and brand recovery. The integration of SCCT and IRT enables a more comprehensive understanding of both the situational appropriateness and linguistic framing of crisis responses, providing a dual perspective on strategy and message construction.

The central research problem of this study is to understand how crisis communication strategies on social media influence consumer sentiment and brand reputation during preventable, consumer-driven crises (Coombs, 2007; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). The problem stems from the growing vulnerability of brands to online controversies, in which networked publics rapidly shape collective attitudes and organizational legitimacy (Gvili & Levy, 2021). Specifically, the study explores how a brand's tone, framing, and response type determine public perception when reputational issues arise in digital spaces.

Most studies on crisis communication have been conducted in Western contexts, leaving limited empirical evidence from emerging markets such as Indonesia, where collectivist cultural values, particularly humility, empathy, and social harmony, shape public interpretation (Gwebu et al., 2018). This cultural dimension makes the Es Teh Indonesia case especially relevant for expanding crisis-communication theory to non-Western environments.

Accordingly, this research aims to:

1. To analyze Es Teh Indonesia's crisis-response strategies and evaluate their alignment with the principles of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT)
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of these responses in mitigating reputational damage and restoring consumer trust; and
3. To propose insights for designing culturally sensitive crisis-communication strategies within Indonesia's food and beverage (F&B) sector

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding digital-era reputation management within Indonesia's fast-growing F&B industry, which heavily depends on online consumer engagement (Açikgöz et al., 2024). As the Es Teh Indonesia case demonstrates, a single online complaint can escalate into a nationwide discussion affecting brand loyalty and sales. Thus, this study provides both theoretical enrichment and practical guidance for brands navigating reputational challenges in culturally sensitive contexts. Despite extensive literature on digital crisis communication, limited research has examined how local cultural norms shape public reactions to brands' responses

in Indonesian social media crises. This gap highlights the need for context-specific evidence to extend existing crisis-communication theories to non-Western environments.

The next section reviews the relevant literature on social media crises, brand reputation, and crisis communication theories, thereby identifying the research gap addressed in this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Crisis Communication and Brand Reputation

Crisis communication has long been a central focus in organizational and marketing research because crises threaten not only operational continuity but also legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and brand equity (Coombs, 2007; Hwang, 2024; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). In the digital age, social media amplifies the speed and visibility of crises, enabling individual complaints to evolve into viral controversies that shape organizational narratives in real time (Açikgöz et al., 2024).

Brand reputation, an intangible yet critical asset, reflects stakeholders' perceptions of reliability, ethical behavior, and transparent communication (Açikgöz et al., 2024). During crises, strong reputations act as reputational shields, while weak or inconsistent communication increases vulnerability (Gwebu et al., 2018). Transparent, empathetic, and accountable responses are consistently associated with faster trust recovery (Akcan & Merdin, 2025; Wang et al., 2021). These findings underscore that responsiveness and sincerity are decisive for reputation repair, particularly in high-contact service industries such as food and beverage (F&B), where consumer trust is highly sensitive to perceived authenticity.

Research consistently shows that brand authenticity, or the perception that a brand is genuine, honest, and true to its values, directly increases consumer trust, brand engagement, and positive behavioral intentions such as purchasing, loyalty, and advocacy in the F&B and restaurant context (Nunes et al., 2021). Authenticity is especially important in high-contact service industries like F&B, where consumer experiences are personal, and trust is easily eroded by perceived insincerity.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: SCCT and IRT

Two theoretical pillars dominate the field: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT). SCCT (Coombs, 2007) provides a situationally adaptive model that classifies crises into victim, accidental, and preventable types and prescribes specific response strategies for each. In preventable crises, accommodative responses such as apology and corrective action are vital for rebuilding credibility (Coombs, 2007; Dutta & Pullig, 2011). The theory has been further refined to accommodate digital interaction effects (Akcan & Merdin, 2025), emphasizing the importance of message tone and timing in online settings.

Complementing this, Image Repair Theory (IRT) (Benoit, 2013) outlines rhetorical strategies, such as denial, evasion, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, that shape public interpretation of corporate messages. Later scholars highlighted that rhetorical sincerity and moral responsibility remain essential in digital marketing communication. Combining SCCT and IRT enables organizations to both choose the right message (what) and deliver it in a way perceived as sincere and morally responsible (how), thereby maximizing acceptance and reputation repair (Ferguson et al., 2018).

2.3 Social Media and the Dynamics of Crisis

The emergence of social media has transformed how organizations communicate under pressure. Unlike traditional media, social networks enable interactive discourse between consumers and brands, allowing users to shape, challenge, or amplify corporate narratives (Cheng & Ho, 2015; Wu et al., 2016). Empirical meta-analyses confirm that two-way engagement increases perceived transparency and trust (Machmud et al., 2024).

However, these same dynamics also accelerate negativity bias, the tendency for negative content to spread faster and exert stronger influence than positive messages (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). When brands respond defensively, crises often intensify through public backlash, also known as the Streisand effect. In contrast, studies demonstrate that accommodative, empathetic, and corrective messaging can turn crises into opportunities to enhance credibility (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Hwang, 2024).

In addition, the increasing role of influencers and micro-celebrities adds a layer of complexity: their reviews and comments often outweigh corporate statements in shaping reputation (Weismueller et al., 2020). As such, crisis communication in digital ecosystems must integrate an understanding of social amplification and consumer co-creation of meaning.

2.4 Cultural Context in Crisis Communication

While SCCT and IRT have been extensively validated in Western contexts, their cultural transferability remains underexplored. Cross-cultural analysis confirms that the tone of communication and moral framing significantly influence perceptions of sincerity; a sincere apology and moral acknowledgment are crucial for restoring public trust (Schoofs et al., 2019). Collectivist societies, such as Indonesia, tend to prioritize humility, empathy, and moral accountability over assertive self-defense (Gvili & Levy, 2021).

This implies that the effectiveness of a crisis response depends not only on strategic alignment (as proposed by SCCT) but also on cultural alignment, the congruence between message tone and audience values. In Indonesia, values such as *hormat* (respect) and *empati* (empathy) shape how

stakeholders judge corporate actions. Highly defensive strategies (e.g., outright denial) have been shown to result in greater reputational damage compared to accommodative strategies (e.g., apology, compensation) across different cultural contexts (Claeys et al., 2010; De Blasio & Veale, 2009).

Within the F&B industry, reputational risks are particularly acute because the sector relies on digital consumer engagement. Despite frequent viral controversies, empirical studies on consumer-driven social-media crises in Indonesia remain scarce. Existing literature focuses largely on large-scale product failures rather than grassroots digital controversies, underscoring the need for contextual adaptation of crisis-communication models.

Despite the extensive application of crisis-communication frameworks such as SCCT and IRT, several key gaps remain unaddressed in existing literature. First, most prior studies have focused on Western corporate contexts, emphasizing individualistic values such as autonomy and assertiveness. This leaves limited empirical evidence from collectivist societies, where moral expectations, humility, and social harmony shape how audiences interpret crisis responses (Gvili & Levy, 2021). The lack of cultural adaptation within these models raises questions about their cross-cultural validity and contextual relevance in non-Western environments such as Indonesia.

Second, while previous research has analyzed organizational crises caused by product failures or internal misconduct (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Dutta & Pullig, 2011), less attention has been paid to consumer-driven crises arising from social media discourse, where a single viral post can evolve into a reputational disaster. This represents a new form of participatory crisis, in which public narratives are co-created and contested in real time (Wang et al., 2021; Weismueller et al., 2020).

Third, although existing studies demonstrate that accommodative strategies, such as apology and corrective action, are generally more effective than defensive responses (Claeys et al., 2010; Hwang, 2024), there remains a limited understanding of how these strategies operate within culturally specific moral frameworks. Particularly in Indonesia's F&B industry, where relational trust and community perception are crucial, the intersection between digital engagement, moral communication, and brand reputation remains empirically underexplored.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining Es Teh Indonesia's social-media crisis through a cultural and theoretical synthesis of SCCT and IRT, aiming to (1) assess the applicability of these Western-derived models in a collectivist context, (2) evaluate how tone and message framing affect consumer sentiment, and (3) contribute to the development of a culturally responsive framework for digital-era crisis communication.

3. Method, Data, and Analysis

Methodological rigor was further reinforced through triangulation, by cross-referencing social media data with news coverage, as well as reflexivity, where the researcher acknowledged potential biases in interpretation. This design provides both theoretical grounding and empirical depth, allowing the study to contribute to the literature on crisis management in digital contexts, particularly within emerging markets and the F&B industry.

This study employs a qualitative descriptive case study to examine how Es Teh Indonesia managed a social-media crisis triggered by a viral consumer review in 2022. The design enables in-depth exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life digital context, where organizational and public boundaries overlap (Tracy, 2020; Yin, 2018). Analysis is guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) and Image Repair Theory (IRT) (Benoit, 2013), which together illuminate both the strategic and rhetorical dimensions of crisis response (Hwang, 2024; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016).

The unit of analysis is the interactional discourse between Es Teh Indonesia and consumers on Twitter/X and Instagram, focusing on corporate statements and consumer-generated reactions (comments, quote tweets, reposts). Specifically, the analysis focuses on negative consumer reviews and related interactions posted on Twitter/X and Instagram. These reviews explicitly express dissatisfaction, criticism, or complaint toward Es Teh Indonesia's product or response during the crisis. Positive or neutral comments were coded for contextual comparison but were not the primary focus of analysis. This specification ensures that the study remains centered on the core phenomenon—how negative online sentiment and corporate response strategies interact to shape public perception and brand reputation. These platforms were chosen for their high relevance, open accessibility, and representativeness of public discourse (At & Al-Shannar, 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025, 2025)

Data collection focused on textual sources already recorded online, providing direct evidence of the crisis unfolding in real time.

1. Social Media: Social media content (Twitter/X, Instagram) from the peak period of the controversy (September–November 2022) was collected, including approximately 500 user comments, to gauge public sentiment and recurring themes (such as accusations of arrogance or demands for accountability). This content analysis was sufficient to assess whether the communication strategy (which is public data) mitigated or exacerbated reputational damage.
2. Official Documents: Three official communications from Es Teh Indonesia and 15 news articles were collected for triangulation and contextual analysis. These documents included brand responses and external coverage, which are key data for assessing crisis strategies.

The study applied qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2021) using a combined deductive–inductive approach (Bazeley, 2024).

1. Deductive coding drew from SCCT and IRT categories (denial, diminish, rebuild; denial, corrective action, mortification).
2. Inductive coding identified emergent audience themes such as arrogance, distrust, and perceived lack of empathy.

This hybrid process enabled theoretical categorization while allowing unexpected interpretations to surface from the data.

Credibility was ensured through:

1. Triangulation of corporate, media, and user-generated sources (Flick, 2018);
2. Intercoder reliability, confirmed through iterative coder consensus (Campbell et al., 2013)
3. Researcher reflexivity, maintaining awareness of tone, sarcasm, and cultural nuance (Tracy, 2020; Silverman, 2023)

The study's reliance on secondary data ensures real-time authenticity, though the absence of primary interviews limits insight into emotional interpretation.

Analysis proceeded through three stages:

1. Mapping responses against SCCT and IRT to identify strategy alignment;
2. Assessing consumer sentiment to gauge reputational impact;
3. Interpreting theoretical congruence between models and observed communication outcomes.

This multi-layered process integrates theoretical rigor and empirical depth in explaining how Es Teh Indonesia's digital crisis response shaped public perception.

4. Result and Discussion

This section presents the results of the qualitative content and sentiment analyses, integrating textual evidence, consumer discourse, and theoretical interpretations based on the SCCT and IRT frameworks.

4.1 Defensive Response and Crisis Escalation

The analysis revealed that Es Teh Indonesia initially adopted a defensive communication strategy, which failed to meet public expectations in the digital era. The crisis began when a Twitter/X user posted a negative review of the brand's milk tea, stating:

"The drink is way too sweet, I couldn't even finish it. Be careful, guys, your blood sugar might rise!"

The company responded through its official account:

“We reserve the right to take legal action against misinformation that harms our brand reputation.”

This reply, interpreted as a legal threat, rapidly escalated into widespread backlash. The post was reposted by influencers, covered by national media, and triggered thousands of critical comments. Screenshots circulated across Instagram, amplifying the narrative that the brand had threatened a customer for giving honest feedback. According to Coombs (2007), such crises fall under the preventable category, in which the organization bears full responsibility. The company’s initial denial and threat-oriented tone exemplify the “deny” and “diminish”.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) explicitly states that in preventable crises, or crises caused by organizational error or negligence, denial and diminishment strategies actually worsen reputations and reinforce negative public sentiment. When organizations deny or downplay responsibility in preventable crises, the public tends to become even angrier, and the company's reputation declines (Claeys et al., 2010; Akcan & Merdin, 2025). Experimental studies show that rebuilding strategies (e.g., apology, compensation) are far more effective at restoring reputation than denial or mitigation (Schoofs et al., 2019). Similar cases in digital environments show that defensive responses, such as self-defense or blame, often trigger further expressions of anger from other users, creating a feedback loop that reinforces polarization and hostility (Brady et al., 2021; Marwick, 2021; Munn, 2020; Walsh, 2020).

As the backlash intensified, Es Teh Indonesia deleted the post and issued a milder clarification, signaling a strategic shift toward accommodation. This transition from reactive defense to adaptive response illustrates how digital crises evolve through iterative engagement rather than one-way messaging.

4.2 The Mismatch: Initial Strategy vs. Theoretical Prescription

Mapping the company’s communication trajectory against SCCT reveals a clear mismatch between crisis type and strategy. Preventable crises require accommodative responses such as apology, empathy, and corrective action (Coombs, 2007; Hwang, 2024). However, the brand’s initial reaction contradicted these principles, amplifying reputational damage and public distrust. Only later did the company partially align with SCCT prescriptions by emphasizing customer satisfaction and promising to review product labeling strategies associated with the rebuilding and bolstering postures.

From the Image Repair Theory (IRT) perspective (Benoit, 2013), the company’s communication followed four discernible phases:

1. Denial: Rejecting the accusation as misinformation.
2. Evasion of responsibility: Suggesting the criticism was exaggerated or malicious.

3. Reducing offensiveness: Highlighting product quality and safety in subsequent posts.
4. Corrective action: Announcing internal review of sugar labeling and feedback mechanisms.

Yet, one key element, mortification, or direct apology, was absent. Research consistently shows that sincere, comprehensive apologies that explicitly acknowledge wrongdoing, express remorse, and take responsibility are most effective in restoring trust and facilitating forgiveness. Apologies that lack these elements, or that appear insincere or incomplete, are less likely to achieve full trust recovery or audience forgiveness (Witvliet et al., 2020). Moral acknowledgment (openly admitting fault and demonstrating understanding of the harm) caused is a decisive factor in public perception and trust repair (Gao & Yan, 2022; Yang et al., 2025).

The claim that empathy-based, dialogic strategies produce better trust restoration than rational or legalistic responses is echoed across applied and qualitative work. Still, direct experimental or meta-analytic head-to-head evidence is limited. Multiple studies report that affective/dialogic features (empathy, responsiveness, respect) are associated with increased trust and perceived effectiveness, while control-oriented responses often backfire in stakeholder evaluations (Hunter et al., 2008; Osemwegie, 2025; Yuncg et al., 2020). The case underscores that SCCT and IRT remain analytically robust but must be adapted to interactive, culturally diverse contexts.

4.3 *The Price of Defense: Dominant Negative Sentiment*

An analysis of 500 consumer comments revealed the following sentiment distribution:

Table 1. Sentiment Distribution

Sentiment Type	Number of Comments	Percentage
Negative	352	70.4%
Neutral	98	19.6%
Positive	50	10.0%

The dominant negative reactions characterized the brand as “arrogant,” “overreacting,” or “unprofessional.” Examples include:

“So instead of apologizing, they threaten the customer? That’s not how a good brand behaves.”

“This company doesn’t know how to take criticism.”

Positive comments were few and mainly defended the brand’s right to protect its reputation:

“People exaggerate online. Maybe the company just wants to protect its name.”

The overwhelming 70% negative sentiment confirms the negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), wherein negative information spreads faster and exerts a stronger influence on collective

perception. Once the initial statement was perceived as aggressive, Es Teh Indonesia lost narrative control, a pattern also observed in similar social-media crises (Batista et al., 2022). Attempts to clarify the message could not immediately reverse the negative framing, as audiences interpreted the event as an ethical failure rather than merely a communication lapse. The overwhelming negative sentiment (70.4%) in the audience discourse was not random; specific cultural expectations heavily mediated it.

4.4 Cultural Mediation of Crisis Perception

Cultural context played a pivotal role in shaping public interpretation of the company's response. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, values like humility, empathy, and social harmony are deeply embedded in moral judgment (Gvili & Levy, 2019). Audiences expected an acknowledgment of accountability, not an assertion of authority.

Research by (Gvili & Levy, 2021) demonstrates that in collectivist societies, audiences interpret crisis communication through moral and emotional frameworks that prioritize humility, empathy, and social harmony over assertiveness or self-defense. Similarly, Pérez-Cornejo et al. (2021) emphasize that corporate messages perceived as respectful and community-oriented tend to generate stronger moral legitimacy. This cultural orientation suggests that Western-derived models such as SCCT and IRT require contextual adaptation when applied in non-Western environments, where sincerity and accountability are judged through relational rather than purely rational criteria. The Es Teh Indonesia case reinforces this view, illustrating how the absence of humility and empathy in corporate responses can undermine credibility, even when responses are strategically aligned with established crisis-communication frameworks.

Recent literature explicitly calls for adapting crisis-communication theory and practice to cultural, institutional, and multilingual realities, especially outside Western settings. Reviews and empirical studies recommend expanding dominant models (e.g., SCCT) to include intercultural, technological, and language factors for non-Western markets (Cardwell et al., 2017). Specifically, incorporating cultural competence awareness of politeness norms, power distance, and collective identity improves audience acceptance and mitigates backlash.

4.5 Integrated Insights

Across RQ1–RQ3, three interrelated insights emerge:

1. Defensive communication intensifies reputational crises. In digital environments, where consumers value openness and dialogue, authority-driven responses are perceived as arrogance.
2. Strategic alignment with SCCT and IRT principles is necessary but not sufficient. Effectiveness depends on execution that demonstrates empathy and corrective intent.

3. Cultural adaptation is essential. Theories grounded in Western individualism must incorporate humility, respect, and moral sensitivity to resonate with collectivist audiences.

The Es Teh Indonesia case reinforces the idea that effective crisis communication requires a shift from message control to relationship repair, anchored in transparency, empathy, and continuous engagement. Scholars recommend a strategic shift from tight message control toward reparative relationship work during crises, emphasizing transparency, empathy, and continuous engagement to restore trust and legitimacy. Case analyses and theoretical work show that control-oriented efforts can erode credibility while reparative actions (apology, corrective action, dialogue) better protect or rebuild reputational assets (At & Al-Shannar, 2025; Hunter et al., 2008; Mwandembo, 2024).

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study addressed the research problem of how crisis-communication strategies on social media influence consumer sentiment and brand reputation during a preventable, consumer-driven crisis. Using the case of Es Teh Indonesia and guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT), the analysis revealed that defensive responses amplify public backlash. In contrast, culturally sensitive and empathetic strategies foster partial recovery of the reputation. The findings directly answer the central question posed in the study by demonstrating the causal relationship between communication tone, audience perception, and reputational outcome.

5.1 Conclusion

This study analyzed how Es Teh Indonesia managed its 2022 social-media crisis through the lenses of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT). The findings show that the company's initial defensive and legalistic response intensified negative sentiment, validating SCCT's view that deny-and-diminish strategies are ineffective in preventable crises where responsibility is high. Although Es Teh Indonesia later adopted a more accommodative tone, emphasizing transparency and willingness to listen, reputational recovery remained partial due to the absence of explicit mortification or apology. This aligns with IRT, which identifies corrective action and mortification as the most effective image-repair tactics.

Overall, the study confirms that empathetic, transparent, and culturally sensitive communication outperforms defensive responses in consumer-driven crises. In Indonesia's collectivist culture, where humility, politeness, and social harmony guide moral judgment, audiences interpret crisis messages through relational and emotional lenses. Hence, while SCCT and IRT remain theoretically robust, their application in Indonesia requires contextual adaptation to cultural values.

This study extends crisis-communication theory by integrating cultural sensitivity as a moderating factor in digital-era reputation management.

5.2 Suggestions

The findings reinforce the need to contextualize Western crisis theories within collectivist cultures. Future theoretical refinements should incorporate cultural variables such as humility, face-saving, and moral accountability, which shape stakeholder responses in non-Western contexts. Integrating these elements would enhance the cross-cultural validity of SCCT and IRT, ensuring their relevance in markets where empathy and community orientation take precedence over individual responsibility.

For practitioners, particularly within Indonesia's F&B sector, three key lessons emerge:

1. Monitor digital sentiment proactively to detect early signs of dissatisfaction before escalation.
2. Adopt empathetic and transparent communication, replacing defensive or legalistic tones with acknowledgment, apology, and corrective measures.
3. Ensure cultural alignment in tone and message. Relational cues such as humility, respect, and mutuality have proven effective in collectivist societies.

Implementing these principles can transform crises into opportunities for relationship repair and long-term trust building.

This study's reliance on secondary data provides real-time insight but limits understanding of deeper emotional motivations. Future research should employ primary qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, FGDs) to capture audience interpretations more holistically. Moreover, expanding analysis to multiple industries or cultural settings across Southeast Asia would strengthen generalizability. Mixed-methods approaches could further enhance triangulation and theoretical testing.

In today's participatory media landscape, reputation is co-created rather than controlled. Effective crisis management depends not only on the content of messages but on their tone, empathy, and cultural resonance. By adopting communication grounded in humility and accountability, brands can navigate crises more effectively and sustain enduring public trust.

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