

PT Pertamina's Crisis Management and Communication in Responding to a Public Trust Crisis: A Case Study of the Alleged Adulterated Pertamax

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Keywords

Crisis Management; Crisis Communication; Situational Crisis Communication Theory; Corporate Reputation; Qualitative Case Studies.

ABSTRACT

The public trust crisis faced by state-owned enterprises in the energy sector has become a strategic issue, particularly when information spreads rapidly through digital platforms. This research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of PT Pertamina's crisis management and communication strategies in restoring public trust following the alleged adulteration of Pertamax fuel, which emerged in February 2025. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a single-case study design. Secondary data were collected from national mass media reports, official company releases, official social media posts, and law enforcement documents. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory. The findings showed that Pertamina implemented a combination of crisis response strategies, including public apology, the establishment of a crisis response center, transparent product quality testing, and involvement of independent institutions as part of its rebuilding and bolstering strategies. Although these measures helped mitigate issue escalation in the short term, public trust had not been fully restored due to perceptions regarding the delayed appearance of top-level leaders in public communication and continued demands for greater transparency. This study recommends strengthening crisis preparedness, proactive transparency, and two-way communication as essential foundations for long-term reputation recovery.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, organizational crises no longer develop linearly through conventional mass media reporting but can expand rapidly through social media, online news portals, and public conversations that occur almost instantaneously. The characteristics of digital spaces, which are real-time, easily accessible, and difficult to fully control, mean that any issue involving public interests has the potential to develop into a reputation crisis within a short period. This condition requires organizations, particularly state-owned enterprises (SOEs) whose products and services are closely related to public needs, to establish crisis management preparedness and develop crisis communication strategies that are responsive, transparent, and oriented toward long-term trust recovery.

One relevant event to examine in this context is the public trust crisis experienced by PT Pertamina (Persero) following the disclosure of alleged corruption related to crude oil governance and refinery products by the Attorney General's Office of the Republic of Indonesia in late February 2025. The investigation identified indications that Pertamina's

subsidiary, PT Pertamina Patra Niaga, had blended fuel with a lower Research Octane Number (RON), namely RON 90 (equivalent to Peralite), and marketed it as RON 92 (Pertamax). The case was reported to have caused significant state financial losses and involved several company officials as suspects (Ariyanny et al., 2025; Elshaer et al., 2025; Kanu et al., 2023). The issue spread rapidly through platforms such as X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, triggering widespread public concern regarding the quality of fuel products that consumers had previously trusted and resulting in more than 500 consumer complaints submitted to the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute (LBH).

Crisis management is a systematic process undertaken by organizations to identify, prepare for, respond to, and recover from events that threaten operational continuity, financial stability, and organizational reputation (Ciekanowski et al., 2024; Dahmen, 2023; Deshmukh, 2026; Galaiti et al., 2023; Gurdatta et al., 2023; Mizrak, 2024; Steen et al., 2024). Conceptually, crisis management consists of three stages: pre-crisis (prevention and preparedness), crisis (response and containment), and post-crisis (recovery and organizational learning). The effectiveness of crisis management is largely determined by the clarity of response protocols, the readiness of decision-making teams, and the organization's ability to assess the characteristics of the crisis, including the level of responsibility attribution perceived by stakeholders.

Crisis communication refers to the process through which organizations provide information and responses to stakeholders when facing situations that threaten reputation, trust, or operational sustainability (Citrawijaya et al., 2024; Coombs & Holladay, 2022; Dominic et al., 2023; Jong, 2025; Nuortimo et al., 2026). One of the most widely applied theoretical frameworks for analyzing crisis communication is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs (2007). This theory emphasizes that appropriate crisis response strategies depend on the level of perceived crisis responsibility attributed to the organization. SCCT categorizes crisis response strategies into denial, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering strategies. The greater the perceived responsibility attributed to an organization, the stronger the need to apply rebuild strategies, such as apology and compensation, rather than relying solely on bolstering strategies (Coombs, 2007).

In addition to SCCT, this study also refers to Image Repair Theory developed by Benoit (1997), which explains that organizations facing threats to their reputation may employ several rhetorical strategies, including denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Corrective action and acknowledgment of wrongdoing are considered among the most credible strategies when evidence of misconduct becomes publicly available and difficult to refute because these approaches demonstrate organizational responsibility and commitment to correcting problematic systems (Benoit, 1997).

Corporate reputation, as explained by Fombrun (1996), represents the accumulation of stakeholder perceptions toward an organization that develops over time and differs from organizational image, which is more temporary. In digital environments, reputation becomes more vulnerable because information spreads rapidly, remains accessible, and creates a permanent digital footprint that can be revisited by the public. Online conversations, consumer reviews, and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) contribute to digital reputation formation alongside official organizational narratives. Therefore, reputation recovery cannot be measured

solely by the speed of clarification but also by an organization's ability to establish sustainable two-way communication with stakeholders (Fombrun, 1996).

This crisis is significant to study not only because of its potential economic impact but also because Pertamina's position as one of Indonesia's most strategic energy providers means that doubts regarding product quality may directly affect public confidence and daily activities. Shortly after the case became public, Pertamina's President Director, Simon Aloysius Mantiri, delivered an official apology through a press conference, followed by the establishment of crisis response centers, fuel quality testing in various regions, and the involvement of independent institutions such as Surveyor Indonesia and TÜV Rheinland Indonesia. However, several reports indicated that company leadership did not immediately appear publicly during the initial phase of the crisis. This decision was later explained by the President Director as an attempt to avoid escalating public tension, although it potentially slowed the organization's ability to control the crisis narrative during the critical early stage.

These dynamics make Pertamina's case a valuable crisis episode for analysis from the perspective of crisis management and crisis communication because it reflects the tension between response speed, information transparency, and the need for internal investigation, which are commonly encountered by large organizations when crises involve alleged internal misconduct. Previous studies have examined various Indonesian corporate crises, including Telkom's IndiHome service communication crisis, PT Antam's reputation crisis related to gold issues, PT Sritex's bankruptcy crisis, and digital crises experienced by retail and culinary brands on social media. However, research specifically examining Pertamina's crisis communication dynamics in the alleged Pertamax adulteration case through the perspective of SCCT and Image Repair Theory remains limited. This case requires further investigation because it involves interconnected legal, economic, and public trust dimensions.

Studies on crisis management and crisis communication have attracted attention from researchers across various contexts and perspectives. Azzahra and Hamandia (2025), in their study *Crisis Communication in the Digital Era: A Case Study of Handling the Issue of PT Antam's Misinformation by Public Relations on Social Media*, examined PT Antam's "fake gold" misinformation crisis through a qualitative descriptive case study approach. The findings showed that the public relations team monitored online discussions and conducted rapid clarification efforts; however, some members of the public remained skeptical of the company's narrative, indicating that response speed alone was insufficient to restore public trust (Azzahra & Hamandia, 2025).

Salimah et al. (2025), in their study *PT Sritex's Crisis Communication Strategy in Facing Bankruptcy Due to Debt Payment Negligence*, examined PT Sritex's bankruptcy crisis through a literature review approach. The study emphasized the importance of transparency, rapid response, and message consistency. However, the analysis was not supported by primary data or an explicit crisis communication framework, creating a methodological gap that this study seeks to address through empirical analysis and stronger theoretical grounding (Salimah et al., 2025).

Puspawardani and Budiman (2026), in their study *Communication Crisis Handling Strategies: A Case Study of Alleged Pertamax Fuel Adulteration by Pertamina in 2025*, examined Pertamina's digital reputation management during the 2025 fuel crisis using a qualitative descriptive approach. The study successfully mapped Pertamina's digital reputation

management efforts on social media; however, it primarily focused on digital content management and did not examine the alignment of crisis responses with SCCT or Image Repair Theory. This limitation represents a research gap that the present study aims to address (Puspawardani & Budiman, 2026).

Based on previous studies, response speed, information transparency, and involvement of independent parties have consistently been identified as important factors in mitigating crisis escalation, whereas defensive or delayed communication tends to worsen public perceptions. Previous research demonstrates the growing application of SCCT within Indonesian SOE crisis contexts, such as PT Antam, although some studies remain limited by reliance on literature reviews without primary data or by focusing narrowly on digital content management.

This study was formulated to answer three research questions: (1) What was the chronology and characteristics of the public trust crisis faced by PT Pertamina in the alleged Pertamina adulteration case? (2) What crisis management and crisis communication strategies did the company implement in responding to the crisis? and (3) To what extent were these strategies effective in mitigating issue escalation and restoring public trust? This research aimed to describe the crisis chronology, analyze Pertamina's crisis communication strategies using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory, and evaluate their effectiveness based on public responses in digital environments. The study is expected to contribute academically by enriching case studies on crisis communication in Indonesian energy-sector SOEs and practically by providing recommendations for public relations practitioners and corporate crisis management teams in addressing similar situations in the future.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a single-case study design. This design was selected because a case study approach is appropriate for examining contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are complex and the researcher has limited control over the events being studied (Yin, 2013). This approach was relevant to the research focus, which aimed to examine how crisis communication strategies were developed, implemented, and interpreted by stakeholders in a specific case, namely the public trust crisis experienced by PT Pertamina (Persero) following the alleged Pertamina adulteration case.

The object of this research was the crisis management and crisis communication strategies implemented by PT Pertamina (Persero) in responding to the public trust crisis related to the alleged Pertamina adulteration case. The analysis covered the period from the disclosure of the issue in February 2025 to the follow-up monitoring period in mid-2026. The research focused on three aspects: the company's official response patterns, the alignment of crisis communication strategies with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory, and the development of public sentiment within digital spaces during and after the crisis peak.

The research data were obtained from secondary sources, including credible national media reports, official releases and statements from PT Pertamina through its digital channels, press conference recordings published on the company's official YouTube channel, statements from the Attorney General's Office, and public posts and comments on social media platforms.

The use of documentary sources was appropriate because documents provide contextual, stable, and non-reactive data that can support the reconstruction of past events that cannot be directly observed (Bowen, 2009).

Data collection was conducted through documentation studies and qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis was applied to systematically examine textual data and generate meaningful interpretations by considering communication materials as socially constructed messages that are produced, distributed, and interpreted within specific contexts (Krippendorff, 2019).

Data analysis followed an interactive analysis model consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This model was selected because it enables systematic organization and interpretation of large, non-standardized qualitative data, allowing researchers to identify patterns and processes underlying the crisis communication phenomenon. In the final stage, the findings were interpreted using the SCCT framework and Image Repair Theory to evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of Pertamina's crisis management and communication strategies (Miles et al., 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The crisis began on February 26, 2025 when the Attorney General's Office of the Republic of Indonesia announced the results of an investigation into alleged corruption in the governance of crude oil and refinery products involving PT Pertamina Patra Niaga, a subsidiary of PT Pertamina. Investigators found indications that the company bought and imported fuel with an octane value of RON 90 or lower, then blended it (blended) in a storage facility to be equivalent to RON 92, to be subsequently marketed and sold to the public at the price of Pertamax products. The practice is suspected to have taken place in the period 2018-2023 and is estimated to have cost the state finances up to Rp193.7 trillion, with nine people named as suspects, including the President Director of Pertamina Patra Niaga.

This issue spread very quickly through various digital platforms, raising widespread concerns among motor vehicle users regarding the potential for engine damage due to fuel that is suspected to be not up to standard, and triggered more than 500 consumer complaint reports to LBH Jakarta which also opened up the option of class action lawsuits. In the initial phase after the case was solved, Pertamina's top leadership had not yet appeared in person in front of the public, a pause that was later acknowledged by President Director Simon Aloysius Mantiri as a deliberate decision taken so as not to muddy the atmosphere. It was only on March 3, 2025, seven days after the case was revealed, that Simon Aloysius Mantiri appeared in an official press conference at Graha Pertamina which was broadcast live through the company's YouTube channel to convey an open apology to the Indonesian people.

Pertamina's Crisis Management and Communication Strategy

Based on the search of documents and news reports, Pertamina's strategy can be mapped into several main steps. The first step is a public apology, in which the President Director conveys a public and personal apology, calling the case a major test for a company that has been operating for decades serving the community. Shortly after the apology, Pertamina established a crisis center, which is a special unit to manage and evaluate operational aspects during the crisis. Furthermore, the company also conducted open product quality testing on dozens of fuel samples with various RON levels at a number of terminals and filling stations,

with plans to expand testing to all regions of Indonesia. To ensure the credibility of the test results, Pertamina involves independent institutions, namely collaborating with independent surveyors and certification agencies to verify product quality so that test results are not solely sourced from within the company.

The company also opened a direct complaint channel, where the President Director shared personal contact numbers and strengthened official call center services so that the public can report alleged irregularities directly in the field. In addition, there is also cross-ministerial coordination, where the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources forms a special team to ensure the suitability of fuel specifications and prices, while the Ministry of SOEs opens the option of evaluating subsidiary governance, which shows that the crisis response is not only carried out by Pertamina internally, but also involves government stakeholders.

Viewed from the SCCT framework, the combination of strategies reflects the implementation of the rebuild strategy in the form of apologies and corrective actions, as well as a bolstering strategy in the form of affirmation of the company's track record and long-term commitment as a national energy provider. The selection of this rebuild strategy is in line with SCCT's prediction, because the level of attribution of crisis responsibility attached by the public to Pertamina is relatively high considering that the case stems from alleged violations of the law by the company's internal parties, not just external factors beyond the organization's control. From the perspective of image repair theory, the act of apology and open testing of products can be categorized as a combination of mortification and corrective action, two strategies that Benoit considers most credible when the evidence of the violation is already open and has been confirmed by legal authorities.

Public Response and Sentiment

Although Pertamina has taken various crisis communication steps, the public response in the digital space shows a mixed pattern of sentiment. Some netizens appreciated the company's openness in publishing test results and involving independent institutions, but most still voiced disappointment and suspicion, especially because the time lag between the revelation of the case and the appearance of the top leadership in front of the public was considered too long for the size of the crisis that concerns the basic needs of the community. Conversations on platforms such as TikTok and X show repeated demands for companies to provide concrete compensation, not just an apology, as reflected in LBH Jakarta's insistence that an apology alone is not enough to recover consumer losses.

Effectiveness and Limitations of Strategies

The effectiveness of Pertamina's crisis communication strategy can be assessed in layers. At the level of controlling the escalation of short-term issues, the measures taken are quite effective in reducing the potential for the crisis to expand into a deeper crisis of confidence, as reflected in the relatively controlled supply and distribution of fuel after the crisis and the absence of further major operational disruptions. However, at the level of long-term trust recovery, the effectiveness of the strategy is still limited. There are at least two factors that explain this limitation. First, the delay in the emergence of top leaders in the most critical phase creates a narrative vacuum that is filled by speculation and negative opinions from netizens before the company has time to deliver its official version. Second, because this crisis is rooted in alleged violations of the law involving internal officials over a period of years, the public

tends to demand continuous proof and not just a moment of clarification, so that the ongoing legal process also becomes a shadow that extends the period of distrust.

Implications for SOE Crisis Management

This case provides a number of important lessons for organizational crisis management, especially SOEs whose products directly touch public needs. First, the speed of the emergence of top leadership in the early phase of the crisis is a crucial element that cannot be replaced by other technical steps such as product testing, because the public tends to judge the seriousness of the organization from a person who is personally responsible. Second, the involvement of independent parties from the initial phase, not after public pressure peaks, will strengthen the credibility of the organization's clarification. Third, the apology needs to be accompanied by a clear compensation and recovery mechanism so that it is not perceived as a mere symbol, as the demands that emerged from consumer advocacy groups in this case. Fourth, organizations need to build an integrated crisis preparedness system across divisions and ministries for SOEs, so that crisis response does not depend on one communication channel alone, but is comprehensively coordinated from the first minutes of the crisis to the public.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the public trust crisis experienced by PT Pertamina due to the alleged Pertamax adulteration case in 2025 represented a complex reputation crisis that was not only triggered by alleged internal regulatory violations but was also amplified by the rapid spread of information through real-time digital platforms that were difficult to control. PT Pertamina implemented a combination of crisis response strategies, including a public apology, the establishment of a crisis response center, transparent product quality testing, and the involvement of independent institutions. These strategies were theoretically aligned with the rebuild and bolstering strategies in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), as well as the mortification and corrective action strategies in Image Repair Theory. Although these strategies were relatively effective in mitigating crisis escalation in the short term, they had not fully restored public trust, particularly due to public perceptions regarding the delayed appearance of top-level leadership during the initial critical phase and continued demands for transparency and compensation from consumer advocacy groups.

Based on these conclusions, this study suggests that organizations, particularly state-owned enterprises (SOEs) with broad consumer bases, should develop crisis preparedness protocols that ensure the timely involvement of top-level leadership from the earliest stages of a crisis. Organizations should also strengthen two-way communication mechanisms with the public through digital platforms and integrate concrete compensation measures as a complement to symbolic apology strategies. Academically, future research should expand the scope of analysis through computational-based sentiment analysis involving larger volumes of digital data and compare this case with other SOE trust crises to enhance understanding of reputation recovery patterns among public organizations in Indonesia. This study was limited by its reliance on secondary data from publicly available documentation and the absence of direct interviews with Pertamina's crisis communication management team and consumer representatives. Therefore, the interpretation of strategy effectiveness remained based on external observations and could be further enriched through future studies involving primary data collection.

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