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Reconceptualizing Integrity Crisis Management in State-Owned Enterprises: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective on the 2025 Fuel Adulteration Scandal

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the critical shift in crisis communication management within State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), focusing on PT Pertamina (Persero) during the 2025 fuel contamination crisis. The study aims to bridge the gap between Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the unique socio-political burdens faced by state entities by proposing a new framework, the "Radical Accountability" model. Utilizing a qualitative conceptual approach, the methodology employs integrative literature synthesis and narrative case deconstruction. Data from secondary sources, including official corporate reports, social media discourse on TikTok and X, and reputable academic journals, were triangulated to identify systemic patterns of communication failure and the "transparency paradox" inherent in highly regulated industries. Findings reveal that moral integrity crises in SOEs trigger extreme public anger and "ontological insecurity" that conventional technical accidental models cannot resolve. The analysis identifies a structural conflict where bureaucratic rigidity and state secrecy collide with the public's demand for instant digital accountability. To address this, the proposed "Integrity Recovery Model" offers a three-phase strategic response: immediate symbolic action, systematic legal accountability, and the restoration of public sovereignty. This article extends SCCT by integrating energy sovereignty and moral integrity as core reputational assets. It shifts the role of Public Relations from reactive image management to evidence-based trust facilitation, providing a strategic blueprint for SOEs to navigate digital firestorms in the post-truth era by

aligning communication narratives with tangible judicial interventions.

Keywords
Crisis Communication
Digital Firestorms
Moral Integrity
Radical Accountability
State-Owned Enterprises

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Introduction

Massive public dependence on energy supplies shifts fuel crises from conventional business disruptions to significant threats against national energy security stability. In the case of PT Pertamina (Persero), any fluctuations in fuel quality or quantity are inherently linked to the vulnerability of national economic sovereignty [1]. Product integrity failures, such as the fuel contamination scandals reported in early 2025, are perceived by the public as systemic collapses in protecting strategic vital assets. Consequently, Public Relations (PR) crisis management in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) must transcend mere image rhetoric, focusing instead on disseminating information capable of mitigating collective panic that could trigger social instability [2]. This systemic risk is further exacerbated by the potential paralysis of the transportation and logistics sectors, where the "acceptability" pillar of energy security relies heavily on communication transparency [3]. If integrity issues like fuel adulteration are not addressed decisively, the government's legitimacy in managing natural resources diminishes, ultimately deterring investor confidence in national regulatory certainty [4].

The acceleration of reputational crises at PT Pertamina is largely driven by the multiplication of negative narratives across social media platforms like TikTok and X. Amateur visual content regarding "adulterated Pertamax" often circulates globally before internal laboratory verifications are completed, creating an information asymmetry where public opinion outpaces bureaucratic clarification [5]. Due to algorithms prioritizing emotional content, public suspicion is artificially amplified within digital echo chambers, confirming perceptions of integrity failure [6]. This imbalance between rapid digital transmission and the rigidity of state-owned corporate Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) often renders conventional response strategies obsolete in an era demanding instant transparency [7]. This dilemma is further complicated by the friction between protecting national strategic information and the global demand for radical transparency [8]. While operational secrecy is often prioritized for security, it is frequently misinterpreted by the public as corporate opacity,

necessitating a renegotiation of the boundaries between state secrecy and the public's right to know [9], [10].

Current crisis communication literature exhibits a theoretical void, primarily focusing on technical or operational accidents rather than crises rooted in moral integrity and ethical violations. Conventional models, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), often homogenize response strategies without considering the unique socio-political burdens carried by SOEs in the extractive sector [11]. While technical crises can be mitigated through operational explanations, integrity scandals require a deeper restoration of the social contract between the state and its citizens [12]. Furthermore, standard PR strategies often prove counterproductive in the complex political landscape of SOEs [13]. To address this, this study proposes the "Radical Accountability" model, a transformative evolution from traditional apologetic rhetoric toward evidence-based transparency and active public accountability [14]. By synthesizing public accountability theory with digital reputation management, this research provides a strategic blueprint for PR practitioners in vital national industries to navigate the challenges of the post-truth era [15], [16].

Literature Review

A. Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The theoretical foundation for crisis communication management is established by Timothy Coombs through SCCT, which posits that response strategies must align with the level of crisis responsibility attributed by the public. Within the SCCT framework, crises are categorized into three primary clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable [2]. The heaviest attribution of responsibility is found in the preventable cluster, where an organization is perceived to have intentionally taken risks or committed systemic negligence. In the context of integrity-driven crises such as fuel adulteration, PT Pertamina (Persero) is automatically positioned within this cluster by public perception, rendering defensive response strategies largely ineffective when the organization's perceived fault is high [5].

Furthermore, an organization's past reputation serves as a significant moderating variable in determining the effectiveness of a response. The "halo effect" or its antithesis, the "velcro effect," influences how stakeholders receive official corporate statements; for large entities with a history of recurring incidents, each new crisis tends to stick and exacerbate pre-existing reputational damage [12]. Recent evaluations of SCCT suggest the necessity of integrating the emotional dimensions of audiences, which are often unpredictable through situational logic alone. Consequently, this study extends the application of SCCT by emphasizing that SOEs must entirely avoid "diminish" strategies (reducing responsibility) and instead adopt "deal" strategies combining full apologies and compensation with tangible corrective actions to dampen escalating public anger [11].

B. Corporate Integrity and Brand Trust

Corporate integrity in the oil and gas industry is defined as the absolute consistency between product quality promises and the operational reality experienced by consumers. In extractive sectors, integrity is not merely ethical but also technical and contractual, where brand trust for primary energy commodities like Pertamax is built upon the foundations of safety and stable engine performance [1]. Erosion of product integrity is identified as an existential threat because fuel is a "credence good," whose quality cannot be visually verified by the naked eye. Consumers are forced to rely entirely on the provider's credibility, making any suspicion of contamination or quality manipulation a perceived betrayal of the social contract [4].

In the landscape of global energy competition, brand trust functions as a shield against volatile market price fluctuations. However, this shield becomes fragile when systemic integrity issues emerge, as the public tends to generalize the faults of a single distribution point to the entire national network, requiring significantly more time to recover than pure technical failures [9]. The moral dimension of corporate integrity also encompasses the accountability of leadership in penalizing internal actors involved in corrupt or manipulative actions. Without transparently publicized legal sanctions, integrity claims by PR departments are often dismissed as ethical "greenwashing," necessitating integrity to be manifested through digital monitoring systems that allow for independent third-party or consumer verification [3].

C. SOE Communication Landscape

The communication landscape of SOEs is characterized by a structural tension between rigid bureaucratic demands and the need for rapid communication in the social media era. As an extension of the government, every SOE PR statement must navigate multi-layered approval processes that frequently delay crisis response times, causing these entities to lose control of the public narrative during the critical first hours of an incident [13]. Furthermore, the unique socio-political burden attached to SOE identities means that PR failures automatically reflect broader government performance. This creates additional pressure where crisis communication aims not only to preserve corporate value but also to maintain public stability and trust in national economic policies [8].

The gap between bureaucracy and the demand for instant responses creates an information vacuum often filled by external speculation. Traditional formal channels, such as press releases, are losing effectiveness among younger audiences who demand two-way, personal interaction, yet digital transformation within SOE PR is frequently hindered by an organizational culture that prioritizes secrecy over transparency [10]. Despite the advantages of market dominance, entities like Pertamina face higher moral expectations than private firms.

Therefore, SOE crisis management requires strategic autonomy for PR teams to operate with agility, unburdened by anachronistic administrative procedures [14].

D. Digital Firestorms

The theory of "digital firestorms" explains the phenomenon where individual complaints on social media exponentially evolve into national reputation crises. On platforms such as TikTok and X, content that triggers collective anger demonstrates significantly higher virality than purely informative posts, with scandals like "adulterated Pertamax" serving as clear manifestations of digital storms where algorithms aggressively amplify negative perceptions [6]. This degradation is fueled by active netizen participation through reposts and counter content, creating social pressure that forces organizations to respond before internal investigations are complete. If the response is deemed unsatisfactory or too normative, the storm intensifies, often leading to massive digital boycotts [7].

A primary characteristic of crises in the digital age is the erosion of professional journalists' roles as gatekeepers; information moves horizontally among consumers, shifting the authority of truth away from official institutions [15]. Consequently, conventional PR strategies relying on mainstream media are less relevant in mitigating negative sentiments at the digital grassroots level. Moreover, the long-term impact of digital firestorms resides in search engine "information residue," which haunts brand reputation long after the initial event. Recovering from a digital storm requires counter-narrative strategies that are not only massive in volume but also authentic and supported by irrefutable technical data [16].

Material and Methods

This research employs a qualitative conceptual approach, utilizing an integrative method to synthesize existing literature with the actual crisis phenomena observed in 2025. Unlike empirical studies that rely on primary data, this conceptual framework focuses on bridging the gap between SCCT and the unique socio-political dynamics of SOEs [17]. The methodology is centered on "theory synthesis," which reevaluates established public relations paradigms within the context of highly regulated energy industries facing systemic integrity failures [18]. By developing theoretical propositions, this study aims to offer a robust "Radical Accountability" model that accounts for the complexities of state-owned entity communication in the digital era.

To ensure the validity of the conceptual arguments, a narrative synthesis and systematic literature mapping were conducted. Data were gathered from diverse secondary sources, including official corporate reports from PT Pertamina (Persero), social media discourse on TikTok and X, and reputable international journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science [19]. The analysis involved deconstructing the "Adulterated Pertamax" crisis through data triangulation to minimize bias and identify systemic patterns of communication failure

[20]. This mapping process specifically targeted anomalies in traditional crisis models regarding "moral integrity" and "digital accountability," providing the necessary justification for a specialized management framework that navigates the paradox between state secrecy and public transparency [21].

Conceptual Framework

To visually articulate the theoretical underpinnings of this study, Fig. 1 presents the conceptual framework that maps the interrelationships among the key constructs: SCCT, Moral Integrity, Digital Firestorms (Badai Digital), and the proposed Radical Accountability Model. The framework is organized into four interconnected layers. The first layer identifies the primary crisis triggers, namely, the Digital Firestorm phenomenon driven by social media virality and algorithmic amplification, and the Moral Integrity Crisis within SOEs manifested by the 2025 fuel adulteration scandal. These triggers are theoretically positioned within the SCCT framework, which categorizes such crises in the “preventable” cluster, thereby imposing maximum public responsibility attribution on the organization [2].

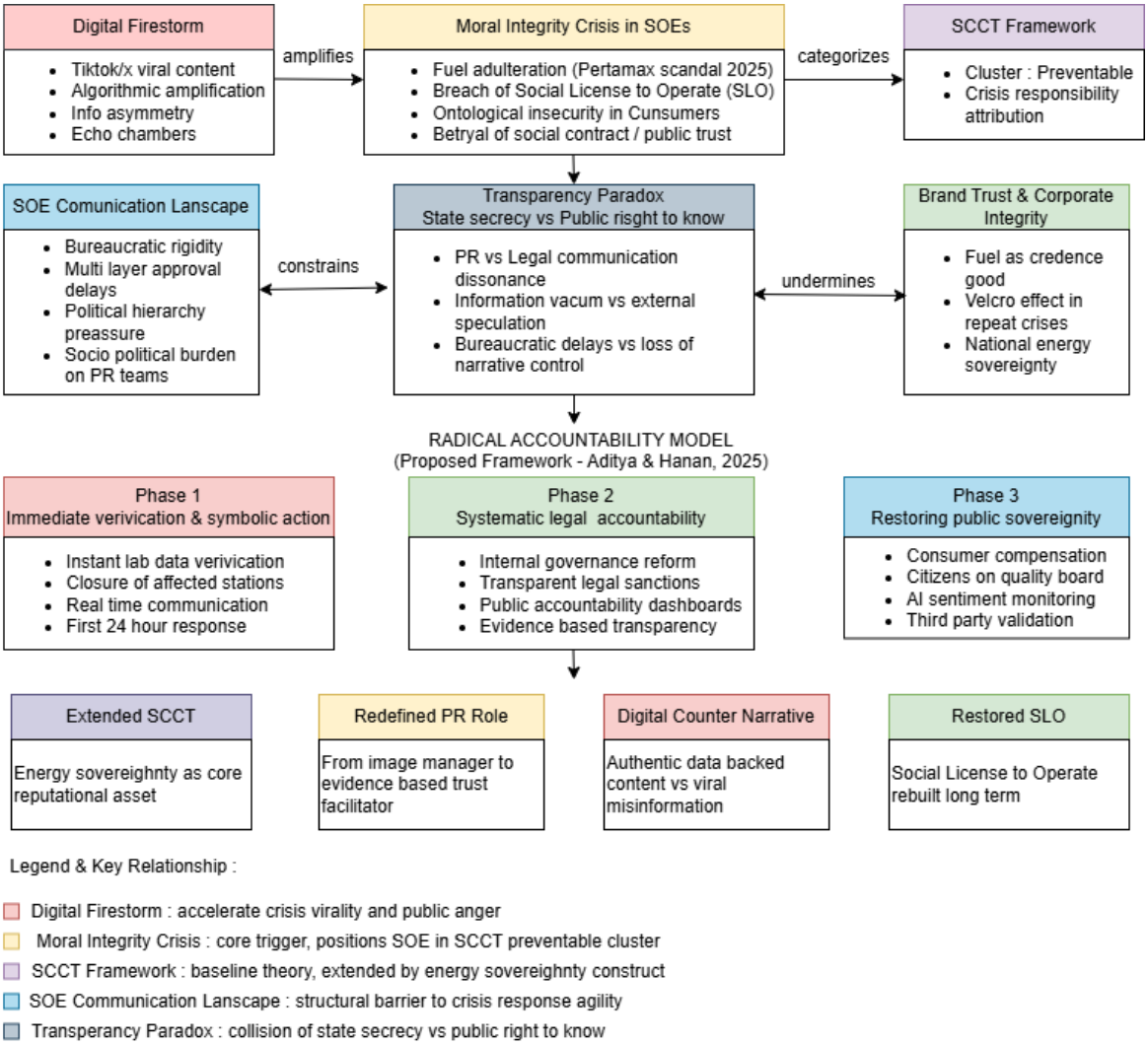
The second layer depicts the structural mediating conditions that shape the SOE crisis response environment: the SOE Communication Landscape (characterized by bureaucratic rigidity and political hierarchy), the Transparency Paradox (the collision between state secrecy and the public’s right to know), and Corporate Integrity and Brand Trust (where fuel is a credence good whose perceived quality directly anchors national energy sovereignty). The third layer presents the core contribution of this study, the Radical Accountability Model operationalized through three sequential strategic phases: (1) Immediate Verification and Symbolic Action, (2) Systematic Legal Accountability, and (3) Restoration of Public Sovereignty. This model bridges the gap between conventional SCCT response strategies and the unique socio-political demands placed on SOEs in the digital era [14], [21]. Finally, the fourth layer delineates the theoretical and managerial outcomes: an extended SCCT integrating energy sovereignty, a redefined PR role as evidence-based trust facilitator, digital counter-narrative strategies, and the restoration of the Social License to Operate (SLO).

Results and Discussions

A. Anatomy of the Integrity Crisis

The categorization of the "Adulterated Pertamax" scandal as a preventable crisis stems from the assumption that the organization maintains full control over its supply chain and product quality. Within the SCCT framework, failures arising from internal procedural lapses or deviant behavior by personnel trigger the most extreme levels of public anger [2]. The breach of Research Octane Number (RON) standards is perceived not merely as a technical error but as a profound betrayal of consumer trust, as customers pay premium prices for

guaranteed quality. This integrity crisis directly assaults the Social License to Operate (SLO) of PT Pertamina (Persero), as public acceptance is rooted more in the perceived morality of the business than in formal legal mandates [14].



Source: Synthesis of the theoretical framework based on [14] and the author's analysis.

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, such a crisis triggers "ontological insecurity" among consumers, where uncertainty regarding fuel quality disrupts daily economic mobility. Data from 2025 indicates that negative sentiment peaks when independent investigations, often viral on social media, reveal anomalies in fuel properties at crucial distribution points [6]. The inability to prevent downstream contamination exposes gaps in corporate governance, leading to systemic financial and reputational losses. Ultimately, recovery cannot be achieved through mere material compensation; it requires a radical reengineering of public perception regarding quality control. Failure to enhance operational transparency may lead to persistent questioning of the SOE's role as a guarantor of national energy security [1].

B. The Paradox of Transparency in SOEs

Structural barriers to implementing radical transparency in SOEs are rooted in an organizational culture heavily influenced by bureaucratic rigidity and political hierarchy. In the context of Pertamina, information disclosure often conflicts with the classification of data as "state secrets" or market-sensitive corporate information [8]. This creates a paradox where the public demands instant accountability for scandals, while PR teams are trapped in multi-layered approval processes, resulting in fatal information lags. Furthermore, the political dependency of SOEs means that every transparent step is carefully calculated to avoid becoming political ammunition for opposition parties, often leading to "calculated silence" that backfires in the digital age [10].

Legal constraints also hinder full disclosure, as admitting fault publicly is often avoided to prevent class action lawsuits or greater material liabilities. This creates communication dissonance where PR departments attempt to build empathy while legal departments enforce normative, closed language, stripping the recovery narrative of its authenticity [9]. To overcome these barriers, this study argues for a redefinition of "public information" within SOEs, focusing on providing real-time access to quality monitoring mechanisms rather than revealing technical secrets. Without deconstructing these structural hurdles, the crisis of trust in state institutions will persist, impeding the government's digital transformation efforts [3].

C. Digital Counter Narrative Strategies and Proposing the "Integrity Recovery Model"

Digital counter-narrative strategies employed to combat "Adulterated Pertamax" hoaxes focus on simplifying technical laboratory data for the general public. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are utilized not just for press releases, but to demonstrate live fuel quality testing, providing empirical evidence to counter baseless viral videos [5]. This approach is supplemented by collaborations with automotive influencers and energy experts, whose third-party validation carries more weight with netizens than official corporate statements [15]. However, the challenge of "algorithmic bias" necessitates the use of targeted advertisements on crisis-related keywords to ensure that official clarifications remain at the top of digital search results [6].

To formalize these efforts, this study proposes the Integrity Recovery Model, consisting of three strategic phases. Phase 1: Immediate Verification & Symbolic Action emphasizes instant data verification followed by decisive actions, such as the temporary closure of problematic stations to demonstrate an uncompromising commitment to quality [22]. Phase 2: Systematic Accountability focuses on internal governance reform and the transparent publication of legal sanctions against involved parties through public dashboards [12]. Finally, Phase 3: Restoring Public Sovereignty involves empowering consumers through restorative compensation and including consumer representatives in quality oversight boards [16]. This model synthesizes

traditional crisis communication with the demands for radical accountability in a post-truth era [21].

Table 1 presents the synthesis of theoretical insights and managerial implications related to crisis communication and public trust recovery in SOEs. The table highlights how integrity crises, transparency challenges, digital amplification, and energy sovereignty influence organizational reputation and crisis management strategies. Furthermore, the table introduces the proposed Integrity Recovery Model and emphasizes the evolving role of public relations as an evidence-based trust facilitator integrating communication, legal accountability, and quality control functions.

Table 1. Summary of Key Analytical Findings

Theme	Theoretical Insight	Managerial Implementation
Integrity Crisis as Preventable Cluster	Moral integrity crises in SOEs are classified under SCCT's "preventable" cluster, generating maximum public responsibility attribution and rendering diminishing strategies ineffective [2], [11].	SOE PR teams must immediately adopt "deal" strategies combining full apologies, compensation, and corrective action rather than deflective messaging.
Transparency Paradox in SOEs	Bureaucratic rigidity and state secrecy create a structural tension that delays crisis response, producing information vacuums exploited by negative viral narratives [8], [10].	Redefine "public information" within SOEs to enable real-time quality monitoring access without revealing sensitive operational data; grant PR teams strategic autonomy.
Digital Firestorms and Algorithmic Amplification	Social media algorithms amplify emotionally charged content, eroding institutional gatekeeping and leaving "information residue" that sustains reputational damage beyond the initial event [5], [6].	Deploy targeted digital counter-narratives via TikTok and Instagram, including live quality testing demonstrations; partner with independent automotive and energy influencers for third-party validation.
Energy Sovereignty as Reputational Asset	Fuel is a "credence good" whose perceived quality anchors national energy sovereignty; integrity failures breach the social contract between the state and citizens [1], [4].	Integrate SCCT with energy sovereignty metrics; position PR strategy as a pillar of national energy security governance rather than a marketing support function.
Integrity Recovery Model (Three-Phase Framework)	The proposed model extends SCCT by operationalizing crisis recovery through three sequential phases: Immediate Verification & Symbolic Action, Systematic Legal Accountability, and Restoration of Public Sovereignty [14], [21].	Phase 1: Close compromised stations immediately. Phase 2: Publish transparent legal sanctions via public dashboards. Phase 3: Establish consumer representatives in quality oversight boards and provide restorative compensation.
Redefined PR Role: Evidence-Based Trust Facilitator	PR in SOEs must evolve from reactive image management to evidence-based trust facilitation, integrating legal, quality control, and communication functions to ensure narrative action alignment [14], [13].	Establish cross-functional PR, Legal, and QC task forces; implement Early Warning Digital systems integrated with real-time supply chain data; invest in AI-based reputation management tools.

Source: Compiled from reviewed literature and secondary data (2021–2025)

D. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The theoretical contributions of this study extend SCCT by integrating it with the concept of energy sovereignty. It enriches PR literature by defining integrity crises as a category requiring a synthesis of communication, legal accountability, and social legitimacy [14]. The proposed "Radical Accountability" model shifts the role of PR from "image manager" to "facilitator of evidence-based trust" [21]. Furthermore, it addresses the "double burden" of SOEs in developing economies, where political intervention and bureaucratic rigidity are critical intervening variables often ignored in global PR theories [13]. The study reinforces the importance of moral legitimacy as a fragile asset in the extractive industry [11].

Managerially, SOE PR practitioners are advised to adopt Early Warning Digital systems integrated with real-time supply chain data to bypass slow bureaucratic approvals [5]. Functional integration between PR, legal, and quality control departments is essential to ensure that narratives align with field actions. Moving away from defensive rhetoric toward radical transparency, such as publishing internal audit results and legal enforcement actions, is identified as the most effective way to dampen digital speculation [15], [10]. Additionally, investing in AI-based reputation management and fostering networks with independent validators is crucial for maintaining authenticity and public trust as a pillar of national energy security [3], [1].

Conclusion

This article synthesizes a theoretical framework asserting that crisis management in strategic SOEs necessitates a paradigm shift from reactive response strategies toward a radical accountability model. The primary argument posits that moral integrity crises cannot be resolved through conventional image restoration rhetoric alone, as these situations require a robust integration of digital data transparency and tangible legal enforcement to restore systemically degraded public trust. Consequently, an SOE's reputational sovereignty depends on its ability to navigate the paradox between operational secrecy and the public's right to know, utilizing digital channels as instruments for evidence-based counter-narratives amidst the volatility of digital firestorms.

Furthermore, this study highlights that public sensitivity toward moral integrity far outweighs the tolerance for technical failures, given the SOE's role as a custodian of public resources and national energy sovereignty. Any perceived ethical malpractice is viewed as a breach of the social contract, necessitating that corporate integrity be prioritized to maintain the social license to operate in the long term. The proposed "Integrity Recovery Model" offers an adaptive blueprint for the post-truth era by emphasizing instant verification, systemic accountability, and the restoration of public sovereignty. Ultimately, this model positions

Public Relations as a strategic function essential for maintaining national socio-political stability rather than a mere administrative or marketing support role.

Limitation and Suggestions

A primary limitation of this study is its conceptual nature, meaning the proposed "Radical Accountability" model remains theoretical and has not yet been empirically validated through primary field data. While the analysis is grounded in observed crisis phenomena, the generalizability of this framework to non-energy sectors or private entities may require adjustments to account for different industry-specific variables. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data limits the study's ability to capture the real-time internal decision-making dynamics within the corporate bureaucracy during the height of a crisis. The research also focuses heavily on social media discourse, potentially overlooking the perspectives of other key stakeholders such as global investors or internal employees.

For future research, empirical testing is strongly recommended to validate the theoretical propositions formulated in this article. Quantitative methods, such as public perception surveys or experimental studies on the impact of legal sanction announcements on brand trust recovery, would provide more robust data. Future researchers are also encouraged to conduct comparative case studies across different regions to examine how varying political cultures influence the effectiveness of integrity-based crisis communication. Finally, the role of emerging technologies, such as AI-driven sentiment analysis, warrants further investigation to explore how automation can support corporate accountability and help organizations navigate increasingly complex digital information ecosystems.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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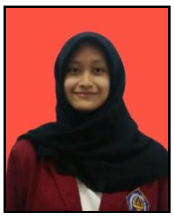
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