Journal of Social Research

P-ISSN:2827-9832
E-ISSN: 2828-335x
Vol. 5, No. 8, July 2026
http://ijsr.internationaljournallabs.com/index.php/ijsr

Analysis of PT Pertamina's (Persero) Communication Strategy in Facing the Oplosan Issue Crisis

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Keywords:
Crisis Communication Strategy, SCCT, Pertamina, Fuel Oplosan Issues, Company Reputation

Abstract
The fuel adulteration issue involving PT Pertamina (Persero) has become a significant crisis that threatens public trust and the company's reputation as a strategic state-owned enterprise in Indonesia. Crisis management is not only related to resolving operational problems but also requires effective communication strategies to maintain organizational legitimacy. This study aims to analyze Pertamina's communication strategy in addressing the fuel adulteration crisis through the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with internal company representatives, consumers, and crisis communication experts, supported by documentation and media analysis. Data validity was ensured through source, method, and investigator triangulation, while thematic analysis was applied based on SCCT dimensions, including crisis identification, intensifying factors, and response strategies. The findings indicate that the crisis was categorized as a preventable crisis due to public perceptions regarding weaknesses in organizational supervision. Pertamina implemented a combination of diminish, rebuild, and reinforcing strategies by providing clarification, supporting legal investigations, improving two-way communication, and strengthening corporate reputation through educational communication. However, the effectiveness of these strategies was still influenced by response speed, message consistency, and transparency. This study concludes that crisis communication strategies in state-owned enterprises require a balanced approach between reputation protection and public accountability to restore stakeholder trust.

INTRODUCTION

Crises are unexpected conditions that threaten the stability and sustainability of an organization, so they require a quick and appropriate response so that the impact does not spread (Akhyar & Pratiwi, 2019). Bundy et al. (2017) added that crises are not only sudden, but also a dynamic process that is influenced by internal and external organizational pressures. Crises can develop into reputational threats if not managed properly, especially when the response provided is not communicative, transparent, and strategic (Ruslan, 2017).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, emphasizes that crisis communication strategies must be tailored to the type of crisis faced and the level of responsibility inherent in the organization (Saha, 2014). The success of the communication strategy also depends on the organization's ability to identify and prioritize

affected stakeholders, considering that each group has different information needs (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Coombs (2015) explained that effective crisis messages include instructive information, emotional adjustments, and corrective actions.

A comparison of international cases provides an overview of the determining factors for the success and failure of handling the fuel adulteration crisis. In India, throughout 2014–2019, state oil and gas companies such as Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum (HPCL) faced the problem of fuel adulteration at a number of partner petrol stations. The Oil Marketing Companies (OMC) Authority responded through national random inspections, quality audits, and revocation of operational licenses. More than 5,600 public complaints were recorded during the period, with 72 petrol stations having their licences revoked, and a transparent and consistent response succeeded in gradually restoring public trust (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2018).

In contrast, the "huachicol" crisis in Mexico in 2019—triggered by a pipeline explosion in Tlahuelilpan that killed more than 130 people due to fuel theft—shows a different pattern. Although the government conducts large-scale operations involving the military (González-López & Giampietro, 2018), weak internal surveillance and strong illegal networks make this practice a repeat until 2024–2025, so public trust in PEMEX has never been fully restored. This comparison confirms that a consistent and transparent crisis communication strategy can strengthen a reputation, while a weak strategy exacerbates reputational losses.

In Indonesia, fuel needs are mostly met by PT Pertamina (Persero) as a strategic state-owned enterprise responsible for the exploration, production, distribution, and marketing of national energy (Roro et al., 2024). In February 2025, the issue of alleged fuel fraud emerged in the public sphere after the Attorney General's Office announced an investigation into alleged corruption in the governance of crude oil and refinery products for the 2018-2023 period, involving a number of Pertamina's subsidiaries and private partners. The mode is in the form of importing crude oil and low-quality refinery products (RON 90) which are reported and sold as premium products (RON 92), causing state losses of up to Rp193.7 trillion (Kompas.id, 2025; Tempo.co, 2025). CNBC Indonesia's coverage (2025) added that the allegation of "Pertamax oplosan" strengthened when Pertamina Patra Niaga continued to pay according to the price of RON 92 even though the quality of the product received was lower than the contract—an accusation that Pertamina denied by stating that the blending carried out was only in the form of adding additives and dyes, not illegal oplossenan practices.

Alvito and Gono's (2025) research noted that public perception of Pertamina tends to be negative, especially related to its credibility as a fuel provider. This public assessment is also reflected in the responses of various institutions: the Indonesian Consumer Institute Foundation (YLKI) demands that Pertamina prove product conformity with standards and involve independent third-party audits (Bloomberg Technoz, 2025); The Ministry of Trade summoned Pertamina Patra Niaga leaders to ensure clear and honest information to consumers; and Commission VI of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia highlighted the importance of restoring public trust (Kontan.co.id, 2025).

The issue of oplosan shows that the crisis is not only technical, but also reputational (Efendi et al., 2025). As a strategic SOE, Pertamina has a greater burden of responsibility than private companies, because weaknesses in managing issues also have an impact on the legitimacy of state institutions (Nöhammer, 2023). Based on this description, this study aims

to analyze PT Pertamina's (Persero) communication strategy in dealing with the fuel crisis issue through the SCCT framework, to understand the extent to which the strategies implemented are effective in maintaining the company's reputation as well as providing recommendations for managing similar crises in the future.

Several previous studies provided a conceptual basis for this research. Hapsari and Ananda (2024) through the study *Systemic Drivers of Effective Crisis Communication* using a narrative literature review approach and found that the effectiveness of crisis communication is determined by the appropriateness between response strategies and public perceptions of the level of organizational responsibility—crises with high attribution (preventable crises) demand accommodative strategies, while defensive strategies such as denial have the potential to worsen reputational damage.

Efendi et al. (2025) in *Pertamina's Reputation and Post-Fuel Smuggling Crisis Management in Indonesia* used a case study approach and found that this crisis is a preventable crisis with a high level of responsibility, so the ideal strategy is mortification and corrective action. Pertamina is considered to have tried both, but the implementation has not been fully successful because it is inconsistent and tends to be slow. This study highlights the importance of timeliness and consistency of messages—but unlike the study, it focuses specifically on the analysis of communication strategies through direct interviews with internal companies, consumers, and crisis communication experts, thus providing a more specific perspective on strategy implementation during the crisis.

Bender (2024) highlights the viral crisis related to alleged vehicle damage due to the use of Pertamax fuel, using social media content analysis to understand digital communication strategies in dealing with electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Pertamina used a denial strategy in the early stages, but switched to a bolstering strategy as public pressure increased—a strategy that is considered effective in reducing short-term panic but has not yet touched the root of reputational problems.

Mere (2025) in *Corporate Communication Crisis Management Strategies in the Era of Social Media Disinformation* argues that SCCT needs to be expanded to be able to answer the challenges of disinformation and social media virality, highlighting the importance of proactive strategies such as social listening, stealing thunder, and real-time response. Its main contribution lies in the expansion of the SCCT concept from initially reactive to more proactive—relevant for large organizations like Pertamina operating in a complex digital communication environment.

As a cross-sector comparison, Rahmawati et al. (2024) in *Navigating Turbulence: Analyzing the Crisis Response of Sriwijaya Air following the SJ182 Plane Crash using SCCT* found that the use of excuse, compensation, and bolstering strategies is insufficient when apologies are late and transparency is minimal, which actually worsens public perception. This lesson is relevant for SOEs like Pertamina because it emphasizes that speed, honesty, and empathy are important components in the effective implementation of SCCT.

Crisis communication is interpreted as the direct implementation of an organization's communication strategy—including the preparation of press releases, press conferences, media clarification, and digital communication—to respond to issues that arise in the public space. Crisis communication is not just a mitigation tool, but also a strategic instrument to maintain the legitimacy of the organization; Through a combination of empathy, speed, and consistency

of messages, organizations can turn crises into opportunities to strengthen public trust. Nuortimo et al. (2024) add that crisis communication must consider the social and cultural context of the audience—local norms, social values, and public perceptions—in order for the message to be effectively received.

The main theoretical foundation of this research is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which was developed extensively by Coombs (2015) and has become one of the dominant frameworks in the study of modern crisis communication. SCCT is audience-oriented and prescriptive—not only explaining the phenomenon, but also providing practical guidance for organizations on how to respond effectively to crises to protect their reputation.

At the heart of SCCT is the *matching principle*: there is no one-size-fits-all crisis communication strategy, and the effectiveness of the response depends on the compatibility between the chosen strategy and the characteristics of the crisis situation. Crisis situations are defined by the public's perception of the level of organizational responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2018)—the greater the perception of responsibility, the higher the reputational threat, and the more accommodating the strategy required. The implementation of SCCT is divided into three main steps:

The SCCT classifies crises into three clusters based on the level of public attribution (Coombs, 2015): (a) *Victim Cluster*—organizations are seen as victims, for example due to natural disasters or sabotage, with low attribution of responsibility; (b) *Accidental Cluster*—crises resulting from unintentional actions such as technical failures, with moderate attribution; and (c) *Preventable Cluster*—crises resulting from mismanagement, intentional negligence, or illegal actions, with the highest attribution and the greatest reputational threat.

Two factors reinforce reputational threats (Coombs, 2015): (a) *Crisis History*—similar crisis histories increase threats because they are seen as failure patterns; and (b) *Prior Reputation*—serve as a buffer or liability depending on the strength of the pre-crisis reputation.

Based on the type of crisis and intensity factor, SCCT groups response strategies into four categories (Coombs, 2015): *Deny Strategy* (denying responsibility through attacking the accuser, denial, or scapegoating), *Diminish Strategy* (acknowledging the crisis but reducing the level of error through excuse and justification), *Rebuild Strategy* (the most accommodating strategy—accepting responsibility and offering improvement through apology and corrective action), and *the Reinforcing Strategy (reinforcing the* positive image through bolstering, reminding the public of the organization's positive contributions).

The crisis over Pertamina's fuel missiles, which according to the results of the Attorney General's investigation involves long-term practices (2018–2023) and potential state losses of trillions of rupiah, theoretically puts Pertamina in *the Preventable Cluster*—the public tends to perceive it not as an accident, but as a systemic failure or deliberate action. This crisis threatens product integrity, corporate ethics, and organizational managerial competence (Nöhammer, 2023), so the relevant SCCT framework is used to analyze how Pertamina identifies crisis types, assesses threat intensity factors, and selects appropriate response strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design to understand in depth how PT Pertamina (Persero)'s communication strategy will be implemented in dealing with the fuel shortage crisis in 2025. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen because it

produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words, as well as emphasizing the understanding of social processes, interactions, and meanings constructed by the research subjects (Siyoto & Sodik, 2015; Scott, 2015).

Data collection techniques

It was conducted through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. The research resource persons are divided into three categories: (1) **Internal resource persons**—Bagja Mahendra (Senior Officer I Media Communication, Corporate Communication) and Cicilia E. L (Corporate Communication Staff) from the Corporate Communication Division of PT Pertamina (Persero); (2) **External resource persons**—three Purposively selected Pertamina fuel/petrol station consumers (Jason Benedict, Eliezer Agian, and Andi Jafar Wahyuhidayat); and (3) **Expert resource persons**—Sophia Bernadette, S.E., M.I.Kom., Public Relations and Digital Communication academic. Secondary data in the form of scientific journals, online news articles, and official company documentation are used to complete the primary data.

Data trust check techniques

Using source triangulation (comparing data from internal, external, and expert sources with organizational documents and media publications), method triangulation (a combination of interviews, observations, and documentation), and investigator triangulation (involving supervisors to review the data analysis process), to meet the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Abdalla et al., 2018).

Data analysis

It was carried out thematically, highlighting patterns that reflect the three stages of the SCCT framework: identification of crisis types, assessment of threat intensity factors, and selection of crisis response strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chronology of the Crisis

The issue of alleged fuel fraud began to emerge in the public sphere at the end of February 2025, starting when the Attorney General's Office announced an investigation into alleged corruption in the governance of crude oil and refinery products for the 2018-2023 period (CNN Indonesia, 2025a). The issue developed widely after various media outlets highlighted the alleged "Pertamax oplosan", with Liputan6 reporting indications of mixing low-octane fuel with high-octane fuel (Liputan6, 2025). On February 26, 2025, Pertamina responded by emphasizing that Pertamax products remain in accordance with RON 92 standards and denying illegal oplosan practices, explaining that the blending carried out is a legal procedure in the form of adding additives (CNN Indonesia, 2025b).

As the media spotlight increases, the National Consumer Protection Agency (BPKN) asks Pertamina to take responsibility and provide an open explanation (National Consumer Protection Agency, 2025), while the government through Antara News expressed support for the ongoing legal process (Antara News, 2025). The issue that began with the corporate governance investigation then expanded into a reputation crisis that raised public doubts about

the quality of fuel sold at petrol stations, putting Pertamina in a situation that requires a fast, transparent, and precise communication strategy.

Crisis Type Identification

Based on the results of interviews with internal sources, the fuel corruption crisis is seen as a crisis related to organizational governance, not just a technical error. Within the framework of SCCT, public perception of organizational responsibility is the main factor in the classification of crises (Coombs, 2015). The results of interviews with various sources show that this issue tends to be perceived as *a Preventable Cluster*—a crisis due to mismanagement or organizational negligence that can actually be prevented—because the practice is considered to last for a long period of time and involves a decision-making process at the organizational level.

This view is reinforced by external sources, who view crises as related to the organization's oversight system, not just individual actions. The expert also assessed that the practice of persistent oplosan shows an element of intentionality, so this crisis should be prevented if organizational supervision is running well—a characteristic that is in accordance with the category of preventable crisis within the framework of SCCT (Coombs, 2015).

Intensifying Factors

In terms of *crisis history,* the results of the interviews show that although Pertamina has faced other operational crises such as refinery fires or facility incidents, some of the interviewees assessed that the fuel fraud case had a greater impact on reputation because it was directly related to the quality of products used by the public every day.

On the prior *reputation* factor, several speakers assessed that before the crisis, Pertamina had a relatively positive image as a national energy provider. However, when the issue of fraud emerged, the reputation was in the spotlight because the public considered that companies with strategic roles should have a stronger supervisory system. One of the external speakers confirmed the impact of the crisis on trust:

> *"If people don't trust the company and its products, then what else do they want to sell?" (Eliezer Agian, personal communication, January 25, 2026)*

However, not all external sources have a completely negative view. One of the speakers assessed that this issue is more related to the actions of certain individuals:

> *"In my opinion, this case is more about individuals, so I can't immediately conclude that all Pertamina products have problems." (Andi Jafar Wahyuhidayat, personal communication, February 7, 2026)*

Expert speakers emphasized the role of speed of response and empathy in influencing the magnitude of reputational threats:

> *"In crisis communication, the most influential thing is empathy and speed of response. Quick response, quick solution, intensive communication, opening the call center shows concern. If the public feels heard, trust can recover faster." (Sophia Bernadette, S.E., M.I.Kom., personal communication, January 22, 2026)*

Based on these findings, the crisis history factor is not the dominant factor because no previous history of similar crises has been found, but the prior reputation factor plays an

important role in strengthening reputation threats because it triggers public doubts about product quality.

Crisis Response Strategies

The findings of the study show that Pertamina does not use a single strategy, but a combination of ***diminish, rebuild,*** **and** ***reinforcing****,* without implementing a ***denial*** *strategy.*

Diminish Strategy

In the early stages of the crisis, Pertamina emphasized its cooperative attitude towards the ongoing legal process:

> *"On the first day, we have issued a statement that we respect all legal processes, support the legal process, and Pertamina is open and transparent to help law enforcement officials thoroughly investigate the matter." (Bagja Mahendra, personal communication, January 20, 2026)*

In the perspective of SCCT, this approach includes a diminish strategy because the organization seeks to reduce the error rate associated with the institution through the context of ongoing legal proceedings (Coombs, 2015). However, organizations face the challenge of controlling the narrative when clarifications are distorted on social media:

> *"On the second day, the issue of oplosan began to circulate widely. Clarifications from the subsidiary regarding the issue of oplosan turned out to be twisted on social media." (Bagja Mahendra, personal communication, January 20, 2026)*

Rebuild Strategy

As the crisis develops, Pertamina has changed its communication pattern from one direction (mainstream media) to two-way and interactive:

> *"Previously, Pertamina used more one-way communication through mainstream media such as TV and radio. After that incident, we started shifting to two-way communication." (Bagja Mahendra, personal communication, January 20, 2026)*

The company also continues to open a dialogue space on social media despite facing sharp criticism, and evaluates the effectiveness of communication through external research involving around 1,400 national respondents—the results of which show a decline in the effectiveness of communication strategies by 2025. The preparation of *an internal FAQ guidebook* by the Corporate Communication Division is also carried out to maintain the consistency of the message to the public:

> *"At that time, Corporate Communication also made a kind of guidebook, a kind of FAQ for questions that are usually asked by outsiders to Pertamina people... The goal is for everyone to be united in providing answers to external questions." (Cicilia E. L, personal communication, January 29, 2026)*

However, from a public perspective, the strategy is considered not to have fully restored trust:

> *"It's standard. No one can really be sure to return to the customer to trust them again." (Jason Benedict, personal communication, January 25, 2026)*

The expert confirmed the combination of diminish and rebuild in Pertamina's response, while emphasizing the absence of the denial strategy:

> *"In SCCT, there is denial, diminish, rebuild, and reinforcing. Pertamina did not deny it. They do not deny that a crisis is occurring. They admitted that there was a problem. If I*

look at it, the strategy they are doing is diminish and rebuild. Diminish means that they do not accept 100% of the blame as the fault of the institution, but direct it to the individual." (Sophia Bernadette, S.E., M.I.Kom., personal communication, January 22, 2026)

***Reinforcing Strategy*.**

Pertamina seeks to strengthen a positive image through educational content regarding fuel quality and distribution, as well as publications of the company's contribution as a national energy provider. However, expert speakers assessed that this strategy was not optimal:

"But what is not optimal is reinforcing. Reinforcing means that they must continuously educate the public and show that the mistake will not be repeated. I haven't seen a strong sustained campaign regarding the quality of their products after the crisis." (Sophia Bernadette, S.E., M.I.Kom., personal communication, January 22, 2026)

CONCLUSION

This research shows that PT Pertamina (Persero)'s communication strategy in dealing with the fuel issue crisis is carried out through a combination of diminish, rebuild, and reinforcing strategies within the framework of SCCT. This crisis is categorized as a preventable crisis because it is perceived by the public as related to the failure of the organizational supervision system, thus causing great reputational pressure for SOEs with the responsibility of national energy distribution. The diminish strategy is implemented through the clarification of the blending process as a legitimate procedure, the rebuild strategy through a shift to two-way communication and internal evaluation, while the reinforcing strategy is through the affirmation of the company's contribution as a national energy provider. The effectiveness of such strategies, however, is determined not only by the choice of strategy, but also by the speed of response (timeliness), consistency of messages, and transparency of information—three aspects that still need to be strengthened, especially in the early stages of the crisis and ongoing post-crisis education campaigns.

This research makes an empirical contribution to the study of crisis communication in public organizations and SOEs, in particular by showing how an organization can pursue a strategy that acknowledges the existence of problems without fully accepting the attribution of institutional error—a strategic position among diminish and rebuild that is relevant studied further in the context of other strategic SOEs. Further research is recommended to examine crisis communication strategies in other strategic sectors (energy, transportation, public services) or use a quantitative/mixed methods approach to measure the impact of strategy on reputation perception in a more measurable way, as well as explore the role of social media and media framing in influencing an organization's reputation during the crisis.

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