

Analysis of Aqua's Crisis Communication in the “Drilled Wells” Issue: Framing, Expectation Gap, and Reputation Recovery Strategy from an Scct Perspective

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ABSTRACT

PT Tirta Investama's (AQUA) response when receiving a visit from West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi became a public conversation after the agenda was recorded and uploaded on social media. The company's answer when asked about the water source that had been used triggered a communication crisis, especially after the mention of “drilled wells.” This issue triggered a perception-based reputation crisis due to the expectation gap between the image of the AQUA brand as an AMDK sourced from “natural mountain water” and the public's understanding of the technical terms of water resource management. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, utilizing secondary data in the form of online media reports, official company statements, and social media content. The analysis was carried out within the framework of Navigating the Case Analysis Process and supported by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The results of the analysis show that the crisis experienced by AQUA falls into the category of accidental cluster, with a moderate level of attribution of responsibility. Although AQUA responded to the crisis relatively quickly and transparently, technical and defensive communication strategies have not been fully effective in closing the gap in public perception. This research emphasizes the importance of empathetic, educational, and dialogical crisis communication in the digital age, as well as the consistency of cross-channel framing to restore trust and organizational reputation.

Keywords: Crisis Communication; SCCT; Framing; Expectation Gap; Brand Reputation; AQUA

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INTRODUCTION

For an organization or company, reputation is a valuable intangible asset (Bagna et al., 2024; Lin, 2024). Although it is an intangible asset, reputation is structural and represents corporate identity as a whole, generates economic and symbolic value, and can be measured objectively (Cerdá Suárez, 2020). A good reputation is built through a long process based on organizational performance and internal and external interactions with stakeholders. Coombs (2023) states that reputation is formed through direct or indirect (mediated) interactions with an organization. Hands-on experience includes activities such as purchasing products, visiting stores, or using company services. Meanwhile, mediated contacts include messages delivered by the organization, word-of-mouth communication, online messages from organizations and other parties, and media reports about the organization.

Meanwhile, Cerdá Suárez (2020) defines a company's reputation as a collective representation of the company's past actions and performance results that describe the company's ability to deliver valuable outcomes for various stakeholders. Reputation also serves as a measure of a company's relative position, both internally in the eyes of employees and externally among its stakeholders, in the context of a competitive and institutional

environment. The concept of corporate reputation is viewed as the result of a process in which a company communicates its distinctive characteristics and values to various stakeholders with the aim of maximizing the value proposition offered. Strong reputational capital serves as social capital that can protect the organization when a crisis occurs (Coombs, 2023).

Even so, reputation is highly vulnerable to disruption. Coombs (2023) explains two main threats to a company's reputation. First, threats arise from stakeholder concerns, such as complaints submitted to organizations or companies. Second, threats arise from the expectation gap between stakeholders and organizations or companies. This expectation gap is particularly dangerous because it can pressure organizations or companies to immediately change behaviors in ways that risk triggering a crisis that leads to reputational damage.

The emergence of threats to a company's reputation can be categorized as a crisis. One of the companies that has recently faced a crisis threatening its reputation is the AQUA brand bottled drinking water (Air Minum Dalam Kemasan / AMDK) producer under the Danone Group's PT Tirta Investama. The crisis began with a video of West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi's sudden inspection of the AQUA factory in Subang, which was uploaded to the Kang Dedi Mulyadi Channel's YouTube channel in October 2025. The video went viral in cyberspace because West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi asked about the source of the water used in the production process of AQUA AMDK. AQUA employees who accompanied West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi during the inspection stated that the source of AQUA water at the factory came from a drilled well. The statement was then responded to by the Governor of West Java, Dedi Mulyadi, who said that as one of AQUA's consumers, he had assumed that the source of AQUA water came from natural surface springs, not from drilled wells.

The issue then became a trending topic after being uploaded to the YouTube channel owned by the Governor of West Java, Dedi Mulyadi, which has 8.66 million subscribers. The content published by the public figure who serves as the highest-ranking official in West Java immediately triggered public reactions in the YouTube comment section. The viral content was then replicated and amplified across various social media platforms until it was picked up as news by mainstream media outlets. The narrative that emerged tended to have a negative tone toward AQUA, suggesting that the bottled water company was dishonest about the water source used and deviated from the image of the AQUA brand as an AMDK product produced with natural mountain water sources, which has long been communicated through various marketing campaigns. This expectation gap triggered a crisis that could potentially undermine AQUA's reputation.

In response to the increasing public attention, AQUA issued official clarifications through various media channels, ranging from owned media (website, Instagram, and YouTube), to providing direct clarification by appearing as a source in the media, to holding several face-to-face meetings and discussions with the Governor of West Java, Dedi Mulyadi. In its statements, the company emphasized that AQUA water does originate from a protected underground aquifer layer that is safe and maintained in quality, rather than from the surface of rivers or lakes. On the Danone-AQUA website, it is stated that AQUA's water sources come from 19 protected mountains in Indonesia and undergo a filtration process without human contact, contain natural minerals, and feel naturally cool without refrigeration. AQUA's water sources are said to have passed nine criteria, five stages, and a minimum of one year of

research so that they are naturally protected from contaminants and pollution. Several environmental experts also provided similar explanations to correct public misunderstandings.

However, the difference in narrative between public figures and the company has given rise to trust bias, an expectation gap, and information uncertainty in society. This situation developed into a communication crisis because it risked affecting the brand reputation that had been attached to the image of AQUA with the slogan “natural mountain water.” In addition, this case also risks affecting the company’s credibility in maintaining transparency and integrity in its communications in the digital public sphere.

From the perspective of crisis communication management, this case is interesting and relevant to study given its scale, which involves high-ranking regional officials, a large-scale bottled water company with an extensive consumer base, and the rapid formation of public perception through social media content and its impact on organizational or corporate reputation. This case also illustrates the importance of issue management, narrative control, crisis communication strategies, and reputation restoration strategies after a crisis.

Based on the above background, the formulation of the problem in this study is how AQUA manages crisis communication related to the polemic of drilled-well water sources and restores the company’s reputation. To answer the formulation of the problem, the navigation of the case study analysis process is carried out with the guidance of a framework designed by Dr. Paul N. Friga (2005). The framework guides the case study analysis process to be carried out in stages starting from the framing, labeling, summarizing, synthesizing, and concluding stages. Furthermore, the formulation of the problem will be examined using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the primary analytical framework.

In a previous study, Sari (2025) analyzed Telkom’s internet disruption cases in Merauke based on crisis stages (pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis) and by referring to the SCCT framework. The study found that the crisis communication strategy implemented by Telkom not only included technical responses to service disruptions but also addressed relational and cultural aspects that are crucial for maintaining the company’s legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Sari (2025) stated that Telkom’s rapid and transparency-based response, its positioning as the responsible party for the crisis caused by internet network disruptions in Merauke, as well as the compensation measures provided in the post-crisis stage, not only helped Telkom manage the negative impact of the crisis but also strengthened long-term relationships with the public and stakeholders.

SCCT in crisis communication is also used in Syukron’s (2021) research, which discusses cases of negative reactions from netizens involving doxing in response to objection letters issued by Eiger regarding review content of Eiger Kerato glasses products uploaded on the Duniadian YouTuber channel. The communication crisis threatened Eiger’s reputation as a well-known outdoor equipment manufacturer in Indonesia. Syukron concluded that the crisis communication case experienced by Eiger can serve as a lesson for organizations or companies to be more wise, careful, and professional in conveying messages, communicating, and promoting in the digital era by paying close attention to the packaging and content uploaded across various social media platforms.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing frequency of digitally driven crises in which public figures and social media can rapidly shape negative narratives that challenge corporate reputations. Understanding how established brands such as AQUA navigate

perception-based crises is vital for developing effective communication strategies. The novelty of this research lies in its in-depth analysis of the expectation gap as a primary crisis trigger, integrating Friga’s case analysis framework with SCCT to provide a structured and theoretical examination of the “drilled wells” issue. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the crisis dynamics, from issue emergence to reputation recovery strategies. Therefore, this research aims to analyze AQUA’s crisis communication strategies and evaluate their effectiveness in addressing the public’s expectation gap and restoring brand trust. The primary contribution of this study is to provide theoretical and practical insights into managing reputation crises in the digital age, emphasizing the importance of empathetic, educational, and dialogical communication rather than purely technical and defensive responses. The objective is to formulate strategic recommendations for corporations facing similar challenges, thereby enhancing crisis communication practice and theory. The benefits of this research are twofold: academically, it enriches the literature on crisis communication, SCCT, and brand reputation in the Indonesian context; practically, it offers actionable insights for communication practitioners and corporate leaders on navigating complex, digitally fueled reputational threats.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study method to examine how PT Tirta Investama (AQUA) responded to the issue of drilled wells that developed in the public sphere. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focused on understanding the processes and meanings behind the company’s crisis communication practices rather than measuring cause-and-effect relationships or producing statistical generalizations (Neuman, 2014). The case study method was applied because the drilled-well issue involving AQUA represented a contemporary phenomenon that generated public debate, media attention, and potential reputational implications for the company. Through this approach, the study examined the crisis event holistically by considering the social context, communication dynamics, and organizational responses documented in various information sources (Neuman, 2014).

The data used in this study consisted of secondary data obtained from online news articles, official company statements, YouTube video content, and social media posts related to the AQUA drilled-well issue. These sources documented the communication surrounding the crisis in the public sphere and provided material that could be systematically traced and analyzed (Neuman, 2014).

Data collection was conducted through document analysis of digital content. News articles, YouTube content, and Instagram posts were analyzed to examine how the issue was constructed by the media, how the company communicated its response, and how these messages contributed to shaping public perception. This approach enabled the identification of message patterns and communication strategies used by the organization during the crisis (Neuman, 2014).

Data analysis followed the Navigating the Case Analysis Process framework developed by Dr. Paul N. Friga (2005), which structures case analysis into five stages: framing, identifying the key questions guiding the case analysis; labeling, categorizing relevant facts using analytical categories such as General (GEN), Industry (IND), Competition (COM), Strengths (STR), and Weaknesses (WEA); summarizing, identifying and organizing the key

information relevant to the case; synthesizing, answering the central questions and identifying possible alternatives using the Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive (MECE) approach; and concluding, formulating key conclusions based on the analysis.

In the analytical stage, this study also applied Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the main theoretical framework. SCCT explains that crisis communication strategies should be aligned with the level of responsibility attributed to the organization by the public. Within this framework, crises are generally categorized into three clusters: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster, each requiring different response strategies (Coombs, 2021). Using this framework, the study analyzed how AQUA positioned itself during the crisis, the communication strategies it employed, and the extent to which those strategies corresponded with the attribution of responsibility that developed in the public sphere.

The combined use of the Friga and SCCT frameworks enabled the study to structure the case analysis systematically while also interpreting the company's crisis response through established crisis communication theory. The analysis was conducted interpretively by connecting empirical findings with relevant theoretical concepts, consistent with the characteristics of qualitative research that emphasize in-depth understanding of social phenomena (Neuman, 2014).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Case Analysis Based on Friga's Stages (2005)

1. Framing

This stage begins by creating key questions in the case studies raised in this study. In the initial stage of framing, we formulated a key question, namely what is AQUA's strategy for handling crisis communication in the case of the polemic of the water source of drilled wells?

From those key questions, we compiled a number of derivative questions, namely:

- 1) Is AQUA already using the right message, timing, spokesperson, and channel in crisis communication?
- 2) Has AQUA's communication with stakeholders been carried out well in the midst of the crisis it is facing?
- 3) What is AQUA's strategy in drafting similar crisis prevention measures in the future and restoring the company's reputation?

As a context, this case has caused a polemic that tarnishes AQUA's reputation as a bottled water producer that has a position as one of the market leaders in the drinking water industry in Indonesia. The main point of this polemic is the expectation gap that occurred among the public after the narrative that AQUA's water source comes from drilled wells, not from surface springs.

Furthermore, flipping and skimming were carried out based on the data references found, including video content from Kang Dedi Mulyadi's Youtube account, clarification content from various AQUA own media, AQUA's official press release, netizens' comments on social media, to mass media news and content replication about the polemic of the water source of the AQUA drilled well on social

media. Based on the results of flipping and skimming, it was found that this case triggered public disappointment and decreased trust in AQUA. In fact, not a few netizens made statements that they would switch to other bottled water brands. This reaction was caused by the incompetence of AQUA management in the field in providing an explanation of the water source in a viral video uploaded on Kang Dedi Mulyadi's Youtube account. This condition creates a gap between the slogan carried by AQUA as natural mountain drinking water and the company's representative's statement about the source of water from the drilled well in the content of the video. The polemic spilled over into the damage to AQUA's image and reputation as a quality drinking water product. Meanwhile, AQUA's response tends to be defensive by conveying descriptive narratives with a relatively neutral tone that is expected to provide an accurate explanation of the water source used in the AQUA production process.

In the framing stage, case analysis is also carried out by identifying the beginning and end of the case. In more detail, the AQUA water source polemic case began with the West Java Governor Kang Dedi Mulyadi's (KDM) inspection of the PT Tirta Investama factory in Subang in October 2025. During the inspection, KDM raised a question about the source of AQUA water and was answered by one of the factory employees from a water drilled well, not a surface spring. The video content of the KDM inspection to the AQUA factory was published through the Dedi Mulyadi Channel's Youtube channel @Kang on October 21, 2025. The content went viral and has been aired 2.18 million views, and received 48 thousand *likes* and 12 thousand comments. The virality of the content was also raised into the news by the mainstream media on October 22-23, 2025. KDM's content has given rise to negative public and consumer perceptions of AQUA water sources which are not in accordance with the company's tagline so far of "Mountain Mineral Water". Negative comments expressed by netizens, for example, AQUA was accused of lying to the public because in the advertisement claiming that the water source came from mountain springs. Another netizen who is a consumer of AQUA stated that he felt aggrieved by the emergence of the narrative of the water source of the drilled well.

In the crisis stage, AQUA Management immediately provided clarification on the water source used in the production of bottled water. Clarifications were uploaded in various company-owned media ranging from sehatqua.co.id website, to Instagram and Youtube @SehatAQUA. In its statement, AQUA Management said that AQUA has and renews SIPA (Groundwater Exploitation Permit) for each water source and AQUA only uses water from deep aquifers (depth of 60-140 meters), not from surface water or shallow groundwater. AQUA also emphasized that the process of determining AQUA water sources is carried out by a team of experts from various disciplines such as geology, hydrogeology, geophysics, and microbiology. To alleviate negative perceptions related to the environmental impact of drilled wells, AQUA said that the company runs a water conservation program and returns water to nature and the community through the WASH (Water Access, Sanitation, and Hygiene) program and implements a Deep Groundwater Protection Policy and

watershed-based water resource conservation.

AQUA's clarification content is then reproduced by mainstream media and social media *content creators*. Danone Indonesia's management, which oversees AQUA products, met with KDM to provide an explanation of water sources, together with geological experts and the AQUA Sustainability Team. In addition, Corcomm AQUA appeared in the media as a resource person to clarify the water source polemic. However, this case widened in scale when institutions outside AQUA also issued a statement on the polemic. The Indonesian Consumer Institute Foundation (YLKI) highlighted the polemic of AQUA water sources from the perspective of the Consumer Protection Law, especially regarding the non-conformity of product labels and claims. In addition, the National Consumer Protection Agency (BPKN) summoned PT Tirta Investama as the producer of AQUA to provide clarification on the source of water for bottled water products. This polemic widened when Commission VII of the House of Representatives held a hearing with the Ministry of Industry (Kemenperin) and eight bottled water companies (AMDK) on Monday (10/11/2025) (Bisnis.com). In fact, the House of Representatives decided to form a committee on the bottled drinking water industry (AMDK).

The eight companies present in the RDP are PT Tirta Investama as the producer of AQUA, PT Sariguna Primatirta Tbk. or Tanobel (CLEO), PT Tirta Fresindo Jaya (Le Minerale), PT Super Wahana Tehno (Pristine), PT Panfila Indosari (RON 88), PT Amidis Tirta Mulia (Amidis), PT Muawanah Al Ma'soem (Al Ma'soem), and PT Jaya Lestari Sejahtera (Le Yasmin). Referring to the statements of each management of the bottled water producers, the same bottled water company as AQUA uses deep underground water sources, namely CLEO, Le Minerale, Amidis, Le Yasmin. Meanwhile, the company that uses surface spring water sources without groundwater drilling is Pristine & RON88. This case is still an open case and the final is not yet known. The reason is that no party has been found guilty or held accountable for the polemic that occurred. The results of AQUA's reputation restoration efforts have also not been identifiable qualitatively or quantitatively.

2. Labelling

At the labelling stage, the main facts in the case of AQUA are labeled and then grouped. The labeling aims to map the context of the crisis, determine who is involved, look at the company's strengths and weaknesses, and industry dynamics that can affect public perception.

1) General (GEN)

This case began with the YouTube content of the Governor of West Java, Dedi Mulyadi, which was uploaded on October 22. Reporting from the online news Tempo, Dedi asked a representative from the company about the water source used by AQUA, and it was found that the water came from underground, but not from a spring (Mardianti, 2025). This incident then quickly spread on social media and triggered questions in the wider community because AQUA was considered to have committed a public lie. Meanwhile, AQUA is also

considered to have exploited water resources that are detrimental to the community. Eventually, the issue developed and caused a reputational crisis.

2) Industry (IND)

Through the company's website, AQUA describes a number of facts about the water source used as a clarification step related to the issue that is circulating (AQUA Purity, 2025). First, AQUA claims that the water source used comes from 19 mountain waters in Indonesia through a strict selection by a team of experts. Then, AQUA also implements an automatic packaging system, without human intervention to maintain a hygienic and standardized production process. AQUA also stated that their party has a SIPA (Groundwater Business Permit), and routinely pays water taxes and levies in accordance with applicable regulations. Meanwhile, in terms of commitment to sustainability and community, AQUA runs a watershed-based water resource conservation program. This is done by planting trees, building infiltration wells, managing conservation in 17 biodiversity park areas, holding WASH (Water Access, Sanitation, and Hygiene) programs, and running regenerative agriculture. Lastly, AQUA denied that they used the water source from the drilled well and considered it not to disturb the community when taking the water source.

3) Competition (COM)

In this crisis situation, AQUA is often compared to other bottled water companies that are considered more environmentally friendly and on the side of the community. Public opinion began to question AQUA's existence as a market leader and compared it to other companies, such as Le Minerale. According to a survey by Marketeers, Le Minerale will be the first choice bottled water brand for Gen Z in 2025, while AQUA is in second place (Ridwan, 2025). On the other hand, the Food and Drug Supervisory Agency (BPOM) ensures that the "mountain water" label on Le Minerale products has been verified and officially allowed based on quality tests and distribution permit authorizations (Tempo, 2025). The fact that BPOM affirms the authenticity of the label for Le Minerale shows the existence of a competitive narrative in the bottled water industry.

4) Strength (STR)

AQUA's strength in handling this case can be judged from the company's response in providing clarification. On the date where the video content was uploaded on Dedi Mulyadi's YouTube channel, AQUA also immediately wrote an article about the facts about the water source on the company's website. Two days later on October 24, 2025, AQUA uploaded an educational video about water source retrieval that was stated directly by AQUA's Vice President of Quality and Food Safety, to deny the misinformation circulating. In addition, AQUA has often taken advantage of its reputation as a big brand and pioneer of bottled water in Indonesia since 1973.

5) Weakness (WEA)

AQUA's weakness in handling this case can be seen in the company's inability to manage the framing built by Dedi Mulyadi as a public figure. The response from AQUA is more focused on licensing and regulatory compliance, so it is

considered less effective in answering public concerns. In addition, the message conveyed by AQUA is considered to lack empathy. That way, the dissemination of the company's clarification is not as fast and viral as Dedi Mulyadi's narrative in the public digital space.

3. Summarizing

The summarizing stage is one of the stages to filter and summarize facts that seem relevant and important after the labelling stage is carried out. This stage aims to allow researchers to better understand the core of the problem and create an AQUA communication crisis. Technical, chronological, and reactive information is omitted so that the attention of the analysis is limited to those factors that greatly contribute to public perception and the dynamics of the crisis. With the guidelines of case analysis according to Friga (2005), the summarizing process is directed to answer the most important question, namely what is really important in this crisis problem?

Based on the results of the screening, it can be concluded that the AQUA reputation crisis is a product of a balance between external and internal factors that reinforce each other in determining public perception of the "borewell" issue.

1) External Factors

The aspect of the research findings from the perspective of the general environment is that the community has a fairly high level of awareness of environmental issues and the exploitation of water resources. The number of complaints due to the spread of this viral issue has increased along with the demand for information transparency in the corporation and the company's sustainability report. Public opinion is quickly formed through social media because posts appear first compared to official clarifications, thus reinforcing negative perceptions in the early stages of the crisis.

Meanwhile, from the industry level, the Bottled Water (AMDK) industry is perceived to have a great contribution to fulfilling the responsibility of natural resource management and contributing to environmental sustainability. This industry urgently needs a high reputation in order to create a level of public trust in the claims of safe, natural and licensed water sources. Therefore, any perception gap related to things like the water extraction process not only endangers the image of one company, but also unsettles the brand legitimacy in the entire industry.

Judging from the perspective of competition, this crisis discourse marks a shift in competition from just a fight for product quality to a struggle for market trust/trust capital. Some competitors are catching the tide of issues by trying to reposition their brand's "natural water" image through the launch of social media-based campaigns. As this crisis discourse progresses, the reality of competition in the bottled water industry is no longer just non-factual.

2) Internal Factors

In addition, from the internal side of the organization, AQUA has a number of capital strengths that it has as a mainstay material in times of crisis. The brand reputation that has been built so far, credibility as a pioneer in the bottled water industry and joint license ownership of a strict quality control

system are the main assets of the brand/company to be able to maintain public trust. The company's initial response through owned media channels also shows the organization's readiness to face the crisis, even partnerships with experts and regulators show the company's realness in responding to the issue.

From the results of the summation above, several weaknesses of internal communication were also identified by students. The brand's narrative's focus on "mountain water" consequentially without a simple technical explanation for the public has formed an expectation gap when the public is faced with the term "borewell". The clarification message from the company is technical and defensive so that it seems less empathetic to the public and not easy to understand by the general public. Narrative control in digital media is also considered not optimal because framing from external parties is faster to be trusted, noticed and widespread.

From this description, it can be concluded that the AQUA crisis is more included in the category of reputation crisis based on perception. This is due to the interaction and mutual influence between external and internal factors. External factors include high environmental perception in environmental sustainability issues, the dynamics of the bottled water industry, and confidence-based competition pressures. Internal factors are the communication style and narrative management in the digital world, thus increasing the pressure on the company's reputation.

Thus, discovery in a factual state through summarizing measures, helps to reinforce the important point that in the discourse of managing crises in the era of digital crisis communication, crises cannot be faced solely by relying on explanations based on clarification of facts or technical proof efforts. This certainly requires an understanding of the intertwined social context, a deep understanding of public expectations and the ability to respond to the challenges of trust dynamics that continue to flow in the flow of public digital space. The above aspects are an important foundation for the subsequent analysis at the synthesizing stage.

4. Synthesizing

This stage brings together all the data findings from the framing, labeling, and summarizing stages to see the complete picture of a crisis. The first step starts with defining key questions. Because there are so many issues that arise from a video of West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi's inspection of the AQUA factory, we condense it so that we can analyze it appropriately and come up with a solution, and be able to map the steps that should be taken. The two key questions:

- 1) What kind of crisis communication strategy should companies take to maintain public trust?

Based on the criteria for the speed of the company's response in handling the crisis in the era of social media, AQUA is quite quick to immediately issue a statement regarding water sources and drilling activities. The company runs a transparency option by opening up data on how much water is taken, using experts to help map out spring points that are safe and do

not harm the environment. Meanwhile, educational options are also carried out by providing understanding to the public regarding the production of bottled drinking water (AMDK) and the purpose of the drilling carried out. The company also explained that what it does is still in accordance with the hype that has been adorning the minds of consumers. They also asked for the help of the Governor of West Java to facilitate a clarification room so that consumer confidence could be restored. However, the optimization of this strategy to restore public trust is apparently not strong enough because negative sentiment is still present. This can be seen in the comment column on the company's social media and the governor's YouTube account, a number of questions and statements are still raised because consumer expectations are not met.

In this case, although AQUA's response was fairly quick in handling the crisis, what it did was not strong enough to restore public reputation and trust. From every decision taken by a company in a time of crisis, there will definitely be pros and cons, just like what AQUA does:

Pros:

- a. Quickly counter the issues that are present, especially in the digital era, so that the issue does not get wilder
- b. Provide a real picture to the public about the activities carried out on the basis of relevant experts
- c. Official releases and statements from related experts uploaded in the company's owned media are considered a form of openness to the public

Cons:

- a. It requires a complete emphasis or explanation from a third party related to drilling activities and is done not only in one statement
 - b. Openness raises the potential for strict supervision by the public, so companies must continue to maintain good values in production so that they are not just lip service
 - c. Creating a space for public debate regarding the activities carried out
- 2) What options can companies take in relation to the context of education and transparency of the water resources used?

Based on reputation criteria, what AQUA is doing is apparently not enough to immediately restore public understanding and confidence related to the company's guarantee of the safety of the production process. Moreover, then there was a statement from an institution directly related to consumer protection about the incompatibility of product labels and claims with the foundation of the Consumer Protection Law. The clarification that was quite quick and carried out on various mediums, including the governor's YouTube account to amplify the spread of messages, apparently did not hold the pace of conversation in the public and digital spaces. This incident continued with the summoning of Bottled Water (AMDK) producers by Commission VII of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia in a meeting with opinions whose process could be witnessed by the public through various

channels. From these results, it was revealed that several companies use underground water sources, the same as AQUA.

The educational process about why choosing an aquifer-protected groundwater source is not presented in simple language, so it raises various questions. AQUA is very possible to carry out the educational process by combining the use of local or community media with social media. The use of interesting animations or short videos can help the general audience understand. Especially if it is helped by an approach from the community who of course use everyday language and are close to the community. The option to marry local or community media users and social media certainly has its advantages and disadvantages.

Pros:

- a. Increasing public awareness, can be packaged more fun and lasts longer in the social media era, and low cost compared to physical CSR
- b. The public's understanding of the counter narrative provided by AQUA feels closer to the community's help, there is an empathetic side present from the communication process

Cons:

- a. It takes good storytelling skills to be able to convey a message more simply and warmly to consumers
- b. There is a risk of gimmicks being assumed by the public with the inclusion of community involvement
- c. Educational options are very difficult to measure in the short term because the changes are not instantaneous

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that PT Tirta Investama (AQUA) is facing a reputational crisis based on public perception. This crisis arises due to a gap between the communication narrative of the AQUA brand as "mountain water" and the public's understanding of the technical term "borewell" that is developing in news and conversations on social media. The issue is not from technical violations or operational errors of the company, but from differences in public interpretation of the brand message and technical terms of water resource management. Videos featuring the term "borewell" became the main trigger for the formation of negative framing, which was then amplified by public emotional reactions and rapid spread on social media. In this context, AQUA is not only faced with the problem of clarifying facts, but also with the challenge of maintaining public trust in the brand reputation that has been built for a long time.

The steps that have been taken by AQUA, such as public clarification through owned media and explanations of the water sources used, are strategically appropriate responses. However, the results of the analysis show that this step has not been fully effective in closing the gap in public perception. This is due to the language of communication that is still technical and formal, so that it is difficult to understand by the general public and does not touch the aspect of empathy for public unrest.

These conclusions are supported by several key findings. First, the public shows a high emotional reaction to the issue of water sources because they judge that there is a discrepancy between product claims and the reality they understand. Second, although AQUA responded to the issue relatively quickly through official clarification, the communication language used was still not simple and communicative enough, so the message was not fully absorbed by the wider public. Third, the initial framing that developed was triggered by public figures who had high credibility in the eyes of the public, so that the initial narrative was more trustworthy than formal corporate statements. Fourth, AQUA's reputation which has been very strong has actually magnified the impact of the crisis, because public expectations for the brand are at a high level.

Based on the results of the analysis, several implementing steps and strategic recommendations can be formulated. On the implementation side, AQUA needs to develop simpler and more visual educational content, such as infographics and short explainer videos on the differences between deep aquifers and shallow borewells, so that the message can be understood by the general public. In addition, companies are advised to involve external parties such as academics, regulators, and the environmental community in the verification process and public communication to increase the credibility of the message. AQUA also needs to set up crisis communication response protocols that ensure message consistency, empathy, and speed of response across communication channels, especially social media. Periodic evaluation of the use of words, slogans, and brand narratives is also important to avoid multiple interpretations that have the potential to trigger similar crises in the future.

Strategically, the recommendation that can be put forward is to shift the communication approach from just defensive clarification to educational and dialogical communication. Public communication should not only focus on defending facts, but also on building mutual understanding with the community. In addition, cross-stakeholder collaboration needs to be strengthened so that the company's reputation does not only depend on internal claims, but also on external legitimacy.

If such measures are not carried out consistently, there are some potential risks that arise. The gap in public perception can widen further and make the issue of "borewells" inherent as a long-term negative label against brands. Negative framing from external parties also has the potential to reappear and recur, especially on dynamic social media. In addition, public trust in AQUA can continue to decline slowly, while competitors take advantage of the situation to highlight their brand image as an alternative that is considered more transparent or more natural.

AQUA Crisis Communication Strategy

The issue of "borewells" in the case of AQUA is due to the emergence of a difference in understanding between the public and organizations regarding technical terms of water resource management. This clashes with the branding of AQUA as bottled drinking water (AMDK) that comes from mountain springs. The public felt that the product claims did not match reality and pressured the company to immediately explain. This pressure ultimately triggered a crisis that led to the company's reputation. This situation shows that a reputation

crisis can arise due to the expectation gap, not just due to the company's factual mistakes (Coombs, 2007).

The perception gap began to occur when the public heard the statement of "drilled well" in the video of the inspection of West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi. The term is understood by the public in a raw sense, so it is considered a potentially environmentally damaging groundwater extraction practice and contradicts AQUA's "mountain water" claims. On the other hand, the company that accompanied the inspection at that time did not have enough insight to explain what drilling and groundwater meant. They tend to reiterate that the process is by drilling to get water. Meanwhile, AQUA has been building an image for many years as a producer of mountain mineral water that has always been associated with the concept of purity and freshness. This narrative shapes the public's expectation that the source of AQUA water is from springs in the mountains, like those present in packaging visualizations and television advertisements with images of clean and fresh waterfalls. The public also ultimately has an understanding that water sources can be obtained without the drilling process which tends to be associated with environmental exploitation.

At this point, there is a gap between the statement from the AQUA representative, and the public perception. The essence of the expectation gap is triggered by misinformation (Coleman, 2023) from representatives of AQUA. The gap did not arise due to the company's operational errors or violations of the law, but due to the incompatibility of the brand narrative with the explanation of one of the representatives of AQUA. From this approach, it can be learned that the success of crisis management in the digital era is not only determined by how quickly an organization clarifies, but also by the organization's ability to understand public expectations. AQUA should be quicker to understand what the public needs related to the borewell chaos, clarification must come with a complete understanding and simple language right on target to meet the needs of meeting public expectations.

Meanwhile, based on the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the reputational crisis faced by AQUA can be categorized into Accidental Clusters, which are crises that arise not due to intentional or organizational violations, but due to gaps in public perception and external framing of organizational messages. Crises caused by perception often arise when the public assesses that there is a mismatch between brand narratives and information that develops in the public space, especially in digital media that are fast and emotional (Liu et. al, 2011). In this case, the level of organizational responsibility is at the level of moderate responsibility, so companies are still required to take active steps in restoring public trust even though they are not legally proven guilty (Coombs, 2021). In crises with moderate responsibility, organizations should not use a denial strategy, but combine strategies that are oriented towards reputation restoration and strengthening social legitimacy (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Therefore, the most relevant crisis communication strategies to be implemented by AQUA are Repair Strategy, Bolster Strategy, and Adjusting Information as supporting strategies.

The repair strategy aims to restore public trust through transparent and responsible communication. In the case of AQUA, this strategy was realized through open clarification regarding the water sources used by the company and an explanation of the difference between the technical term "deep aquifer" and the public understanding of "drilled well". However, AQUA is not enough to just clarify, it is necessary to take an empathic approach. Therefore,

communication needs to be delivered in a language that is easy for the general public to understand, as well as empathize with the community's confusion and anxiety over the issues that are developing. Transparency accompanied by empathy is more effective in restoring an organization's reputation than defensive technical clarifications (Liu et. al, 2011).

Adjusting information serves to calm the public and reduce emotional anxiety that arises due to a crisis. In the case of AQUA, this strategy is important given that water source issues are closely related to environmental and public health values, which are emotionally sensitive. AQUA needs to demonstrate that the company understands the public's concerns, as well as explain the real implications of water resource management on the environment and the surrounding community. Organizations that explicitly display empathy and social concern tend to be faster to restore public trust than organizations that emphasize only rationality and technical data. Crises are not only processed cognitively, but also emotionally. The public judges organizations based on the extent to which they feel understood and valued (Jin et. al, 2012).

In addition, AQUA also needs to implement a bolster strategy. This strategy aims to strengthen the positive image of the organization by displaying the values and positive track record that have been owned before. AQUA needs to highlight the company's long-term commitment to water conservation, social responsibility programs, and collaboration with communities and environmental stakeholders. Strengthening the social responsibility narrative can function as a reputation buffer in crisis situations (Avery et. al, 2010). Coombs (2023) emphasized that a bolster strategy is effective when the organization has a strong initial reputation, as this strategy helps balance public perception so that it is not fully focused on negative issues. This is in accordance with the context of AQUA which is a company that has a reputation as a bottled water company (AMDK) in Indonesia.

The effectiveness of crisis communication strategies is largely determined by the consistency of messages across communication channels. The SCCT emphasizes that inconsistent messaging can worsen public perception and prolong the duration of the crisis (Coombs, 2023). Therefore, AQUA needs to ensure that the rebuild, adjusting information, and bolster strategies are delivered in harmony through the official website, social media, mass media, and direct communication with stakeholders. In addition, AQUA needs to have an internal crisis communication protocol and a rapid response team to keep the message conveyed uniform, empathetic, and data-driven. The readiness of internal crisis communication systems contributes significantly to the success of post-crisis reputational recovery.

In implementing support strategies for repair strategies, bolster strategies, and adjusting information when a reputation crisis occurs, AQUA can use the concept of framing to reconstruct the narrative about the water sources used. The goal is to shift the frame of public issues and can shape the audience's knowledge or cognition towards the clarification of AQUA water sources. This is in line with the concept of framing termed by Entman (1993) as "selection and salience", part of a certain reality in a communication text to determine the way the audience defines a problem, assesses the causes, gives moral judgments, and sees solutions that are considered true or not.

In the digital era, AQUA can utilize social media in implementing framing strategies in crisis conditions to reshape the company's reputation. Given the extremely high complexity of social media, AQUA needs to be cautious as social media has been seen as a double-edged

sword in crisis situations. When used appropriately, social media can help organizations restore their reputation, as well as public trust. On the other hand, the abuse of social media in crisis situations can actually worsen the situation and tarnish the reputation of the organization (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2020). In carrying out a framing strategy to form a positive narrative on social media, AQUA can also collaborate with brand ambassadors, geology and hydrology experts, influencers or key opinion leaders (KOLs), and local communities as spokespersons in the creation of user-generated content. The strategy aims to restore the company's reputation due to the crisis that occurred in accordance with the repair strategy within the framework of SCCT. The form of action can also be varied, for example by creating short content in the form of animations to explain what groundwater (aquifer) is and the drilling process in question which is uploaded on social media channels. It can also be done through the cultural approach of the local community to reach the public who are outside of internet access, of course by collaborating with local communities that are also owned by AQUA, one of which is the plastic waste management community.

In addition to framing, social media can also be an effective platform to monitor audience reactions, communicate organizational responses, and respond to stakeholder questions related to crises (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2020). The interactive crisis communication (ICC) model, for example, can be seen on Instagram @SehatAQUA. In one of his uploads, the admin @SehatAQUA gave AQUA Salute feedback on netizens' comments, both positive and negative. The practice of two-way communication through social media opens up a dialogue space between the public and companies in a reputational crisis situation.

SCCT's analysis of the AQUA water resource crisis communication above is in line with the statement of Danone Indonesia's Corporate Communications Director Arif Mujahidin as reported by Rakyat Merdeka (2025). Arif said that AQUA emphasized the importance of information literacy and shared responsibility in dealing with the flow of information in cyberspace, which is often filled with noise to cover the voice. According to him, Danone Indonesia's communication team, including AQUA, maintains public trust through an educational and transparent approach. AQUA chooses a crisis communication strategy by conveying explanations of issues, both directly and indirectly to stakeholders and the public, through the media, digital channels, and academic forums. In addition, AQUA also invites stakeholders to visit the factory to see the water source and conservation efforts carried out by the company.

CONCLUSION

AQUA's crisis handling strategy in responding to the drilled-well polemic was swift and appropriate, although relatively conservative in style. The company adopted an educational and transparent crisis communication approach to address declining public trust by clarifying the water source issue through both direct and indirect channels, including mass media, digital platforms, and academic forums. In addition to providing clarification, AQUA reinforced its positive corporate image by highlighting its long-standing commitments to water conservation, social responsibility programs, and collaboration with communities and environmental stakeholders. An analysis of this case using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) demonstrates the importance of a comprehensive crisis management system that integrates the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages to guide communication strategies, spokesperson

selection, and media engagement. The AQUA case also shows that in the contemporary digital communication ecosystem, crises are shaped not only by operational facts and technical compliance but also by an organization’s ability to strategically, quickly, and ethically manage public meaning, expectations, and emotions amid viral narratives and dominant external framing. Future research could further examine how digital public discourse, influencer narratives, and algorithm-driven amplification affect corporate reputation recovery strategies in similar perception-driven crises.

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