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Crisis Communication and Political Trust: The Role of Public Relations in Restoring Political Legitimacy

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Abstract: Public trust is a fundamental basis for the continuity of political legitimacy. When such trust declines as a result of policy crises, scandals, or disinformation, governments need effective communication strategies to restore public confidence. This study analyzes the role of crisis communication strategies in rebuilding political trust and legitimacy, with particular attention to the strategic function of political public relations (PR). Using a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach, case study analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research examines government communication during political crises in Indonesia through the lens of Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The findings indicate that crisis communication strategies based on moral responsibility, empathy, and transparency are more effective in restoring public trust than defensive strategies such as denial or self-justification. Apology and corrective action strategies can enhance perceptions of governmental integrity, particularly when supported by concrete actions and public engagement through digital dialogue. Conversely, manipulative or opaque communication may deepen the crisis of trust and undermine political legitimacy. These findings demonstrate that political PR functions not only as a channel for message delivery but also as an ethical mediator and strategic architect of public trust. This study contributes to the literature by extending the application of SCCT to the context of political legitimacy and trust restoration in a non-Western democratic setting. It also offers a novel perspective by positioning political public relations as an ethical and



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strategic instrument of crisis governance rather than merely a technical communication tool. Furthermore, the study provides empirical insights into how crisis communication practices in the digital era shape public trust through the alignment of narratives, ethical responsibility, and tangible governmental action.

Keywords: Crisis communication; Political trust; Political legitimacy; Political public relations; Situational Crisis Communication Theory; Indonesia.

危机传播与政治信任：公共关系在政治合法性修复中的作用

摘要：公众信任是维系政治合法性的基本基础。当这种信任因政策危机、丑闻或虚假信息而下降时，政府需要有效的传播策略来恢复公众信心。本研究分析危机传播策略在重建政治信任和政治合法性中的作用，并特别关注政治公共关系（PR）的战略功能。研究采用定性描述—解释性方法、案例研究分析和批判性话语分析（CDA），并以 Coombs 的情境危机传播理论（SCCT）为分析框架，考察印度尼西亚政治危机中的政府传播实践。

研究结果表明，基于道德责任、共情和透明度的危机传播策略，比否认或自我辩解等防御性策略更能有效恢复公众信任。道歉和纠正行动策略能够提升公众对政府诚信的认知，尤其是在这些策略得到具体行动支持，并通过数字对话促进公众参与时更为有效。相反，操纵性或不透明的传播可能会加深信任危机，并削弱政治合法性。

这些研究结果表明，政治公共关系不仅是信息传递的渠道，也是公共信任的伦理协调者和战略建构者。本研究通过将情境危机传播理论（SCCT）扩展到非西方民主背景下的政治合法性与信任修复问题，丰富了现有文献。同时，本文提出一种新的视角，即将政治公共关系定位为危机治理中的伦理性 and 战略性工具，而不仅仅是技术性的传播手段。此外，本研究还提供了经验性见解，说明数字时代的危机传播实践如何通过叙事、伦理责任和具体政府行动之间的一致性来塑造公众信任。

关键词：危机传播；政治信任；政治合法性；政治公共关系；情境危机传播理论；印度尼西亚。

1. Introduction

Public trust serves as the main foundation for the continuity of modern political systems. When public trust collapses, the entire structure of power is shaken. A government that loses public trust will face great difficulties in enforcing policies, stabilizing the economy, and maintaining legitimacy [1], [2]. In many countries political trust depends not only on policy outcomes, but also on the ability of political elites to manage crises with open and convincing communication [3]. Economic crises, health crises, and political scandals can destroy the government's reputation if it is not accompanied by a planned and consistent communication strategy [4]. Conditions like this make crisis communication an element that determines the direction of political trust and the legitimacy of power. Crisis communication is not only determined by the speed of responding to events, but also by sensitivity to the emotional and moral dimensions of a society that is experiencing uncertainty. Political Public Relations plays a strategic role as a means of rebuilding the bridge of trust between the state and citizens through empathetic, transparent, and public responsibility-oriented

messages. Thus, lost political trust can not only be restored, but also strengthened through ethical and participatory communication.

The development of information technology and social media has radically changed the pattern of political communication. Every political message spreads in seconds, transcending the boundaries of space and time. The digital age has given birth to a public that is critical, connected, and responsive to various political events [5]. The government is no longer the only source of information. Narratives about policies, crises, and scandals can emerge from netizens, journalists, or opposition political actors [6]. In this context, political relations must be able to adapt to the dynamics of rapid and often unpredictable communication. The speed of response, the clarity of the message, and the honesty of information are the factors that distinguish between success and failure in maintaining public trust [7], [8].

Crisis communication is not just the delivery of information during an emergency, but the art of managing public perception in the midst of uncertainty. Any message, statement, or decision taken during a crisis has the potential to shape a grand narrative about

the government's credibility and competence [9], [10] When communication is defensive, closed, or self-blaming, the public will feel a loss of direction and trust [11] On the contrary, proactive, empathetic, and transparent communication can turn crises into opportunities to strengthen the relationship between government and society. It is at this point that the role of political public relations becomes important, as it not only conveys messages, but also shapes political image, reputation, and legitimacy [12] The effectiveness of political crisis communication depends on consistency between the message conveyed and the actual actions of the government; When rhetoric is not in line with policy reality, public trust will be quickly eroded and legitimacy crises will be difficult to avoid.

Political public relations work as a link between power and the public. Its main function is not just political promotion, but to build meaningful, sustainable, and trusted communication [13] The crisis situation of political public relations is responsible for ensuring that the government's message is understood correctly, not misinterpreted [14]. He became a mediator between the interests of the political elite and the need for public information. When there is a crisis of legitimacy, this role becomes more vital because it determines the direction of public trust. Without a planned communication strategy, any crisis has the potential to cause prolonged delegitimization and have a far-reaching impact on government stability [15], [16] Political public relations are determined by the extent to which they are able to strike a balance between political interests and the ethics of public communication, since manipulative communication will only reinforce citizens' cynicism towards state institutions

Banyak studi terdahulu menyoroti crisis communication from the perspective of the management of an organization or company, not politics. These studies emphasize more on the strategy of saving corporate reputation than restoring public trust in the government [17] The study of political beliefs is often separate from crisis communication analysis. Political research tends to focus on voter behavior, institutional performance, or corruption, without looking at how public communication plays a role in shaping public perception. This creates a conceptual gap between communication theory and political legitimacy theory that are supposed to complement each other [18] As a result, there is still little research that integrates crisis communication approaches with studies of the legitimacy of governance, especially in the context of emerging democracies. In fact, the restoration of political legitimacy is not only determined by substantive policies, but also by the way the government manages public narratives when public trust is being eroded

Research that combines the concepts of crisis communication, political belief, and power legitimacy is still limited [19] Most studies stop at the descriptive level without explaining the mechanism of the relationship between the three elements, even though political legitimacy is not only the result of policy performance, but also the result of public perception formed through the process of communication [20] When communication fails to respond to fear, confusion, or public anger, the legitimacy of power is eroded. If communication successfully displays empathy, responsibility, and assertiveness, public trust can be restored even in the midst of a major crisis [21] The emptiness of this study shows the need for an interdisciplinary approach that links crisis communication theory with political legitimacy theory to understand how government messages, symbols, and narratives affect people's perceptions of trust. Thus, this study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing how political crisis communication strategies contribute to the reconstruction of public trust and the restoration of the legitimacy of post-crisis governance.

Research gaps are also seen in geographical and cultural contexts. Most crisis communication theories are developed in Western countries that have different political cultures and media structures than developing countries [22] In the context of a country like Indonesia, public trust in the government is influenced more by emotional, symbolic, and religious factors, rather than mere policy rationality [23]. Thus, the adaptation of crisis communication theory to the Indonesian political realm requires an understanding of the distinctive socio-cultural contexts, including moral values, public ethics, and local communication traditions [24] This gap opens up opportunities for new research to explain how crisis communication strategies work in complex political environments. Current literature is still limited in explaining how cultural and religious dimensions affect the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in rebuilding political legitimacy. New research is needed to explore how empathy, moral symbolism, and information openness can be used as legitimate and ethical political instruments in the context of fragile democracies. Thus, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of Political Public Relations that is more inclusive of cultural variables and religiosity in the dynamics of crisis communication.

The issue of political legitimacy is increasingly relevant when the government is facing great pressure due to the global economic crisis, pandemic, or policy conflict. Legitimacy depends not only on the ability to resolve crises substantively, but also on public perception of that ability [25] The public assesses not only the results of policies, but also how leaders communicate during the crisis handling process. Errors in message delivery can deepen mistrust and accelerate

legitimacy crises [26] This is where political public relations must play a strategic role in designing narratives that foster a sense of security, openness, and accountability.

Various global political cases show that effective crisis communication is able to restore public trust despite major scandals. Failed communication causes a domino effect in the form of loss of legitimacy, increased public dissatisfaction, and even regime change [27] This confirms that crisis communication is not just a technical tool, but a moral and strategic instrument to maintain the sustainability of the political system [28] A government that is able to communicate honestly and empathetically will gain a new space of trust from the public. Meanwhile, a defensive and closed government is accelerating the erosion of legitimacy.

This research seeks to examine How political public relations strategies play a role in restoring political trust and legitimacy of power after a crisis. The objectives of the study include the analysis of message structure, delivery techniques, and public response to the communication strategies used. The formulation of the main problem includes three main questions. 1) How is the crisis communication strategy structured to deal with the decline in public trust? 2) To what extent does crisis communication affect the restoration of political trust? 3) How do political community relations contribute to the restoration of post-crisis government legitimacy? This research is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to strengthening government communication strategies in the digital era which is full of uncertainty and reputational challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007; 2015) is an important conceptual framework in understanding how organizations, including political actors, respond to crises strategically [29]. This theory departs from the assumption that public perception of the level of responsibility (attribution of responsibility) is the main factor in determining the effectiveness of crisis communication responses [30] In other words, the greater the responsibility attributed to political actors for the occurrence of the crisis, the higher the public's expectation of admitting mistakes and real corrective actions.

In the political context, Situational Crisis Communication Theory provides guidance in choosing the communication strategy that best suits the character of the crisis and public perception. Coombs (2015) groups crisis strategies into several main categories: *denial*, *diminish*, *rebuild*, and *reputation*

strengthening bolstering [31] Political crisis situations such as scandals, ethical violations, or policy failures of leaders or government agencies need to adjust their communication strategies so as not to exacerbate the loss of public trust. For example, *apology* and *corrective action* strategies have been shown to be more effective in restoring legitimacy than defensive strategies such as *denial*, especially when the wrongdoing is obvious and confirmed by the media Avery (2010).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory places crisis communication not only as a reactive action, but also as a process of managing perception and political legitimacy. In the digital age, crises can develop rapidly due to the massive virality of information and public interaction on social media [32], [33]. Therefore, the effectiveness of political crisis communication is highly dependent on the speed, transparency, and consistency of the message conveyed. When political actors are able to display an empathetic and responsible response, they not only minimize reputational damage, but also re-install the basis of political trust in the public eye [34] SCCT is a relevant theory to explain how Public Relations plays a strategic role in restoring political legitimacy through the management of targeted and ethical crisis communication.

2.2 Political Crisis Communication and Public Trust Dynamics

Political crisis communication is a strategic effort by the government or political actors to manage public perception when the legitimacy of power is under pressure [35] This situation can arise as a result of scandals, policy failures, economic instability, or the spread of disinformation that damages a political image [36]. In a modern political context full of information disclosure, the ability to manage crisis communication is key to maintaining credibility and avoiding social panic. According to Coombs (2015), effective crisis communication should emphasize three main principles: transparency, empathy, and consistency. All three serve to restore narrative control in the midst of a rush of public opinion, as well as show that the government has a moral responsibility to society.

Political trust plays a vital role in determining the stability and legitimacy of government [37] Easton (1975) defines political trust as the public's belief in the competence, honesty, and goodwill of political institutions in managing public affairs. When political communication is carried out honestly and openly, it is easier for the public to accept policies and understand the mistakes that have occurred [38] Communication that is closed, manipulative, or full of inconsistencies can raise suspicion and deepen a crisis of trust. In such conditions, the crisis is not only informative, but also emotional, because it touches on the psychological relationship between the people and the government [39]

Failure to handle crisis communication can have a ripple effect on public trust. When people feel deceived or ignored, the level of political satisfaction decreases, public participation weakens, and the legitimacy of government is threatened. Good crisis communication should not stop at clarification alone, but also build a narrative of recovery based on responsibility and empathy [40]. This is where it is important to understand the dynamics of political trust as an ongoing process, not the result of momentary actions. Thus, planned and ethical crisis communication becomes a strategic instrument in restoring public trust and maintaining the foundations of political legitimacy in the modern democratic system.

2.3 The Strategic Role of Public Relations in Restoring Political Legitimacy

Public Relations (PR) has a fundamental role in maintaining reciprocal relations between political actors and society, especially when political systems are faced with legitimacy challenges [41]. In the political context, PR is not only a tool for conveying information, but also functions as a means of image formation, management of public perception, and the construction of meaning for the policies carried out [42]. Heath and Johansen (2018) explain that Political PR works in three strategic domains: representation, policy communication, and crisis management. All three show that PR is an integral part of the political process, not just a complementary function. When the legitimacy of power is shaken, Political PR becomes at the forefront of maintaining the stability of public discourse and reinforcing trust in political institutions through systematic and planned messages [43].

Political PR must be able to play a role as a facilitator of dialogue between the government and the community. The communication strategy used should reflect honesty, empathy, and social responsibility [44]. When the public experiences a loss of trust due to controversial policies or government communication failures, PR must be present to reorganize the trust relationship through a humane and open approach. Coombs (2015) emphasizes that the success of crisis communication depends not only on the speed of response, but also on the ability of political organizations to show genuine concern for the affected public. In this case, PR is not only the spokesperson of power, but also a moral representation of socio-political responsibility [45]. The effectiveness of political PR is measured not only by the ability to restore the government's image, but also by the extent to which it is able to rebuild public trust, involvement, and solidarity in the post-crisis recovery process. Communication that prioritizes moral values and social justice will be more sustainable than just symbolic rhetoric. The role of political PR is becoming increasingly important as a guardian of the integrity of

public communication that bridges the interests of power with the voice of the people.

The ethical aspect is an inseparable dimension of political PR practice. Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) highlight that political communication practices that ignore honesty and transparency have the potential to exacerbate the legitimacy crisis at hand. Information manipulation may provide short-term benefits, but in the long run it can destroy political credibility [46]. Therefore, PR must carry out its functions based on ethical principles, ensuring that every message conveyed reflects reality and does not mislead the public. Communication ethics is the moral foundation that determines whether efforts to restore legitimacy are really accepted by society or are only considered as a mere branding strategy. The application of ethics in political PR is not only limited to avoiding lies, but also includes the responsibility to voice the truth, protect the public interest, and maintain a balance between power and justice. Ethical political communication is the main instrument in building long-term trust and strengthening institutional legitimacy. The success of true political PR is measured by its ability to maintain moral credibility while creating a healthy space for dialogue between the state and citizens.

The role of political PR in restoring legitimacy also depends on its ability to integrate strategic communication with concrete actions from the government. Political legitimacy cannot be restored only through narrative, but also through consistency between words and deeds [47]. Habermas (1996) argues that political legitimacy is built through rational and participatory communication that allows the public to critically assess policies. Therefore, political PR must encourage public involvement in the communication process so that a sense of ownership of the policies taken is formed. Thus, Political PR plays a role not only as an image manager, but also as an architect of public trust, which through ethical and participatory communication is able to re-strengthen the moral and social legitimacy of power.

2.4 Political PR Transformation in the Digital Era and the Challenges of Communication Ethics

The development of digital technology has fundamentally changed the landscape of political communication around the world. If previously the flow of information was controlled by mainstream media institutions, now the power of communication is spread across various digital platforms that are open and participatory [48]. Political Public Relations (PR) must adapt to this new dynamic, where information moves quickly, the public becomes more critical, and opinions can be formed in seconds. Chadwick (2017) calls this phenomenon a *hybrid media system*, which is a political communication system formed from the complex interaction between traditional media, social

media, and digital algorithms. The control of political narratives is no longer in the hands of the government or elites alone, but is also influenced by social media users, influencers, and digital communities who shape public opinion spontaneously [49]. This condition makes crisis communication management even more challenging, because any misinformation can immediately go viral and worsen public perception. Political PR in the digital era is required to be not only fast and responsive, but also authentic and consistent in maintaining the credibility of the message. The government's ability to manage communications in the digital space is a key factor in maintaining public legitimacy and trust amid the rapid flow of disinformation and political polarization online.

Digital transformation brings Political PR into the communication arena that demands speed, accuracy, and sincerity. Crisis communication strategies in the digital age must not only be able to navigate the rapid flow of information, but also involve the public in a more open dialogue [50], [51]. Every political statement can now be monitored, disseminated, and even twisted en masse, so that a small mistake can trigger a major crisis in a short period of time. For this reason, Political PR needs to develop data-based communication strategies, digital monitoring, and public sentiment analysis to understand public perception in real time. The effectiveness of technology should not override human values and communication ethics. In this context, technology is merely a tool, while moral values and integrity remain the main cornerstones in maintaining political legitimacy [52]. Digital transformation requires political PR not only to be proficient in managing messages, but also to maintain the integrity of communication ethics in an increasingly transparent public space. The success of crisis communication in the digital age depends on the ability of political actors to establish an authentic and consistent presence in cyberspace. Narratives that are empathetic, fact-based, and respect public intelligence will be much more effective than manipulative approaches that are only image-oriented. Therefore, Political PR needs to combine technological literacy with moral literacy to ensure that digital communication remains a means of strengthening trust, not just a tool to maintain power.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Type

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-interpretative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of political crisis communication and the role of *Public Relations* in restoring political legitimacy [53]. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to trace the phenomenon of political communication within a real-life context, taking into account the

interactions among political actors, the media, and the public.

According to Yin (2018), qualitative case studies are particularly effective for examining complex contemporary events, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined.

This research focuses on a specific case of political crisis communication in Indonesia, which reflects the dynamics of public trust in the government during a legitimacy crisis [54].

The Indonesian context was selected because it represents a democratic setting characterized by high political polarization, intensive media exposure, and the increasing role of digital platforms in shaping public trust and political legitimacy during crisis situations.

3.2 Analytical Approach

The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main analytical tool to uncover the hidden meanings, ideologies, and legitimization strategies embedded in political communication. CDA is grounded in the view that language is not neutral but functions as a medium for the production and reproduction of power (Fairclough, 1995). Through CDA, this study seeks to understand how political messages are constructed to shape public opinion, reinforce the moral image of leaders, and rebuild public trust after a crisis. This approach also enables the exploration of rhetorical structures, word choices, and narrative strategies used to symbolically affirm political legitimacy.

3.3 Data Sources and Collection Techniques

The data for this study were obtained from various relevant secondary sources, such as online news reports (*CNN Indonesia*, *Kompas*, *Detik*, and *Tempo*), official government statements, political speeches, and social media publications of related institutions. Data selection was carried out using purposive sampling, focusing on texts or documents that explicitly address issues of political crisis and the public communication strategies employed in response [55]. The data collection process covered a specific time frame representing the crisis and post-crisis phases, allowing for a clear identification of shifts in political narratives.

The selection of data was based on several specific criteria. First, the selected texts had to be related to political or policy-driven crises that triggered public controversy and posed a potential threat to governmental legitimacy. Second, the data were required to include official government responses disseminated through formal statements, speeches, or verified digital platforms. Third, the availability of media coverage and public reactions was considered

essential to enable discourse analysis of trust-building and legitimacy-restoration narratives.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in three main stages following Fairclough's (1995) model: 1) Text analysis, identifying linguistic structures, metaphors, and persuasive elements used in crisis communication. 2) Discourse practice analysis, examining how texts are produced and consumed by political actors and the media. 3) Social practice analysis, connecting the findings to the broader socio-political context, particularly issues of public trust and political legitimacy. To strengthen the interpretation, the findings are integrated with Coombs' (2015) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), particularly in explaining communication strategies such as *denial*, *apology*, and *corrective action* adopted during political crises.

3.5 Data Validation

Data validity was ensured through source and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing different types of texts and statements from various actors (media, officials, and the public). Theoretical triangulation involved integrating CDA with SCCT to achieve a more comprehensive analytical depth [56]. This methodological integration allows the study to move beyond descriptive analysis toward a critical examination of how power relations, ethical considerations, and legitimacy claims are constructed through political crisis communication. Hence, the methodology is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Political Public Relations studies in the digital era, characterized by information complexity and trust crises.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Crisis Communication Strategies in the Face of Declining Public Trust

The results of the discourse analysis of various political communication texts show that the government's crisis communication strategy is generally prepared by considering three main aspects: the narrative of responsibility, social empathy, and information transparency. Based on *the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)*, this strategy falls under the category of *rebuild strategy* that focuses on reputation restoration through corrective action and open communication. In the case of economic crises and public policies in Indonesia, the government seeks to prioritize the message that every policy taken is rational, data-based, and oriented to the interests of the people. The use of diction such as

stability, independence, and sustainability is a form of *framing* that emphasizes the moral and rational capacity of the government in the midst of a crisis.

The results of the CDA analysis show that there is a tension between the ideal narrative and public perception. Although the government's message emphasizes transparency, the public often sees the communication as a form of *defensive image repair*, rather than a reflection of substantive honesty. This shows that the effectiveness of a crisis communication strategy is not only determined by the content of the message, but also by the communicator's pre-crisis level of trust and reputation. When public trust is low, the strategy of *justification* or *denial* actually worsens perception, because the public considers it an effort to avoid responsibility. The most successful strategy found in the data is the *corrective action strategy*, in which the government not only explains the causes of the crisis, but also announces concrete steps for recovery and involves the public in the policy evaluation process.

The use of social media is an important instrument in crisis communication strategies in the digital era. Analysis of official posts and online press conferences shows that communication based on direct interactions, such as public question and answer sessions or open statements from key officials, is more effective in reducing negative perceptions. This pattern shows a shift from *top-down communication* to more participatory communication, in line with the principles of *dialogical communication* in *modern Public Relations*[57] An adaptive, open, and empathy-based crisis communication strategy has proven to be a key factor in dealing with the decline in public trust in the era of *mediatized politics*.

Dari perspektif teoritik temuan ini sejalan with research by Regester & Larkin (2018) which confirms that rebuild strategies are the most effective option to restore legitimacy when organizations or governments are faced with a high crisis of public trust. These results are also strengthened by Alfarisi's research (2025) which shows that crisis communication based on empathy and public participation can reduce the negative impact of perception on the credibility of political actors. However, this study differs from the findings of Sellnow (2022) which highlights that *corrective action strategies* are not always successful if they are not followed by behavioral and policy consistency after the crisis has subsided. Thus, this study expands the understanding of SCCT in the context of Indonesian politics, that the success of crisis communication is not only determined by the strategy chosen, but also by the quality of the socio-political relations between the government and society that have been built before the crisis.

4.2 The Impact of Crisis Communication on the Restoration of Political Trust

Systematic crisis communication has a significant effect on the process of restoring political *trust*, although the effect is gradual and depends on the consistency of the message. Based on the results of the discourse analysis, the public begins to show *trust rebuilding* when political messages are conveyed in an empathetic tone, admitting mistakes, and displaying a willingness to make policy improvements. The strategy of *apology* and *corrective action* used by several political actors is a factor that strengthens the perception of moral integrity. On the other hand, strategies that emphasize self-justification or *shifting blame* tend to prolong the crisis of trust and weaken political legitimacy.

The context of SCCT theory of the effectiveness of crisis communication on the restoration of trust is influenced by two main variables: the attribution of public responsibility and the actor's reputation history. Governments or officials who have a positive track record tend to find it easier to regain public trust through open communication. On the other hand, if the public judges the crisis to be due to negligence or moral error, then recovery takes longer. This finding is in line with Easton's (1975) view that *political trust* is built not only from policy outcomes, but also from ethical perceptions of government actions. Thus, successful crisis communication not only improves the image, but also regrows the moral legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people.

In addition to the moral dimension, the results show that public involvement in digital communication plays an important role in reshaping *trust*. Open discussions on social media, direct clarification by officials, and transparent publication of policy data reinforce the perception that governments are willing to be scrutinized and criticized. This practice shows a shift from *the propaganda to participation paradigm*, where trust is not built through the dominance of messages, but through open communication and information collaboration. Participatory-oriented crisis communication is not only a means of controlling reputational damage, but also an instrument of democratization in the relationship between the state and citizens.

Several studies are in line with this study that show that crisis communication that emphasizes empathy, openness, and moral responsibility has a positive effect on the restoration of political trust. Verhoeven (2023) emphasized that *the apology* and *corrective action* strategies directly contribute to the increase in *post-crisis organizational trust* because they show a commitment to ethical values and public accountability. Diers-lawson (2017) also found that transparency-based crisis communication and confession of guilt are more effective in restoring

political legitimacy compared to defensive strategies such as *denial* or *justification*. Yuan's (2023) research in Singapore shows that two-way communication in the digital space accelerates *the process of trust rebuilding* because it creates a space for public participation that fosters a *sense of belonging* to government policies. Thus, the results of this study reinforce the view that public trust cannot be restored by image manipulation alone, but through sincere and participatory moral communication.

Several studies show different results Kitagawa & Chu (2021) argue that crisis communication strategies that are too oriented towards empathy and apology can lead to perceptions of political weakness, especially in countries with hierarchical political cultures. Chen (2022) also highlighted that *the apology strategy* without being followed by real corrective actions actually lowers the credibility of political actors because it is considered a mere symbolic rhetoric. Meanwhile, research by Youk & Park (2023) found that in some cases of East Asian politics, *justification* strategies with rational and data-driven arguments are more widely accepted than *apologies*, as they are considered to demonstrate leadership capacity and control of the situation. These differences in results show that the effectiveness of crisis communication is highly dependent on cultural contexts, political history, and the level of public media literacy, so that successful strategies in one country are not necessarily effective in other socio-political contexts.

4.3 The Contribution of Political Public Relations to the Restoration of Post-Crisis Government Legitimacy

Political *Public Relations* plays a strategic bridge between power and the public in the process of restoring government legitimacy. The results of the analysis show that the success of the restoration of legitimacy is highly dependent on the ability of political PR to integrate symbolic communication, image management, and ethical strategies simultaneously. In the post-crisis context, PR not only builds a narrative that calms the public, but also plays a role in rebuilding *a political narrative* that affirms the moral responsibility and capabilities of the government. This function is in line with the view of Heath and Johansen (2018) that modern political PR must combine *strategic communication* with *public accountability*.

The findings of the study show that in many cases PR communication that emphasizes transparency and social empathy is able to accelerate the process of reconstructing political legitimacy. Through the use of inclusive and participatory language, the government can present an image of leadership that is adaptive and open to criticism. Discourse analysis shows that political messages that contain moral values, such as justice, caring, and solidarity, have a stronger

legitimacy effect than technocratic narratives that are dry from social meaning. This shows that post-crisis political legitimacy is not only built through policy achievements, but also through communication symbols that represent public values.

Conceptually, *Political PR's contribution* to the restoration of government legitimacy lies in its ability to build bridges of trust between the state and society. When political PR carries out its role with the principles of honesty, transparency, and social responsibility, crisis communication transforms from a tool of justification to a means of political transformation. In the context of the digital era full of disinformation and uncertainty, the function of political PR has become increasingly vital as a guardian of the moral reputation of power as well as a mediator of democratic communication. The results of this study confirm that ethical and participatory crisis communication not only improves the image, but also strengthens the foundation of sustainable governance legitimacy.

Various studies in line with this research show that Political Public Relations has a real contribution to rebuilding the legitimacy of post-crisis governance through communication strategies based on empathy and transparency. According to Context & Forward (2021), the South Korean government's success in managing the political crisis in the aftermath of *the Sewol Ferry scandal* was largely determined by the government's PR ability to create symbolic communications that affirmed concern for victims and commitment to policy reform. Kurniawan's research (2025) also confirms that political PR practices that are oriented towards *public engagement* accelerate the *trust rebuilding* process because it creates a dialogue that allows people to feel involved in the recovery process. Similar results were found by Kumalasari (2024) who explained that political legitimacy does not only depend on policy performance, but also on how PR is able to instill a moral narrative about responsibility and integrity in public communication. Thus, ethical and participatory political communication has proven to be a key element in restoring trust and legitimacy of the state in the eyes of citizens.

Several studies show different results Ekman & Widholm (2023) criticize that in practice, Political PR often functions more as a propaganda tool than a means of democratic communication, especially when used to cover up policy failures with manipulatively constructed symbolic narratives. Horz's research (2024) also highlights the tendency of political PR in the digital era to shift from public service functions to image management, where communication success is measured based on media popularity, not the quality of honesty. In the context of developing countries, Pysarenko (2024) found that the use of political PR often reinforces pseudo-legitimacy, because people

accept government narratives not based on substantive beliefs, but because of media dominance and weak political literacy. These differences in findings show that the effectiveness of Political PR is largely determined by the integrity of political actors and the openness of the communication system itself, whether it is used to build public participation or simply to control public opinion.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study confirms that crisis communication plays a central role in restoring public trust and political legitimacy, particularly when implemented through ethical, participatory, and transparent Public Relations (PR) practices. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), it was found that the most effective crisis communication strategies are those that emphasize moral responsibility and corrective actions rather than mere self-justification. The success of crisis communication in rebuilding political trust is significantly influenced by the credibility of the communicator, message consistency, and the government's willingness to acknowledge mistakes while demonstrating a genuine commitment to policy improvement.

These findings indicate that trust restoration is not solely a communicative outcome, but a moral and relational process that requires alignment between discourse, ethical responsibility, and concrete governmental actions

5.2. Comparison with Previous Research

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the moral and strategic dimensions of crisis communication in political contexts (Coombs, 2015; Fairclough, 1995). However, this research extends the discourse by showing how the SCCT framework can be adapted to political crises, where public perception is shaped not only by communication strategy but also by the ethical integrity of the actors involved. Unlike earlier research focusing mainly on corporate reputation management, this study highlights that political legitimacy restoration requires deeper moral engagement and symbolic communication that connects the government to the citizens' sense of justice and trust.

By situating SCCT within a political and democratic context, this study broadens its theoretical relevance beyond organizational crisis management and demonstrates its applicability to issues of governance, legitimacy, and public accountability.

5.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the application of SCCT within the domain of Political

Public Relations, emphasizing that legitimacy recovery involves both strategic communication and ethical reconstruction. It integrates SCCT with CDA to reveal how political discourse constructs, maintains, or challenges power relations in times of crisis. This integration offers a conceptual contribution by positioning political PR as an ethical-mediating mechanism that bridges power holders and citizens, rather than merely a technical instrument of message control. It also reinforces the view that legitimacy is discursively produced through narratives of responsibility, empathy, and transparency.

The research suggests that political PR should function not merely as a reputation management tool but as an instrument of moral reconciliation between the state and its people. Governments and PR practitioners are encouraged to adopt communication practices that are transparent, empathetic, and dialogical, particularly in digital environments characterized by high public participation and rapid information dissemination.

Practically, these findings imply that policymakers and government communication units should prioritize open dialogue, timely acknowledgment of errors, and corrective policy actions when managing political crises. Such practices are crucial to preventing prolonged trust erosion and sustaining democratic legitimacy in the digital era.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could explore the comparative effectiveness of different crisis communication strategies across various political systems or cultural settings. Further research may also integrate quantitative sentiment analysis of public responses on digital platforms to complement discourse analysis findings. In addition, scholars may examine how religious or cultural values influence the perception of legitimacy and trust recovery in political crises, offering a more contextual understanding of ethical communication in governance. Future research may also investigate the long-term impact of crisis communication strategies on political trust to assess whether trust recovery is sustained or merely temporary following crisis resolution.

5.5 Academic Contributions of the Study

This study offers several academic contributions to the field of Political Public Relations and crisis communication. First, it extends the application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) from corporate contexts to political legitimacy crises, particularly within a non-Western democratic setting. Second, by integrating SCCT with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research provides a novel analytical framework for examining how political discourse constructs trust and legitimacy during crises. Unlike prior studies that emphasize strategic message

management, this study highlights ethical responsibility, moral narratives, and discursive power relations as central elements of trust restoration, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on crisis communication and political legitimacy.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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