

Crisis Communication and Leadership Response: Expert Assessments of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's Kelana Jaya LRT Incident

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ABSTRACT

In May 2021, Prasarana Malaysia Berhad faced a critical crisis when a manually operated train collided with an automated passenger train on the Kelana Jaya LRT line, injuring 213 passengers. The situation worsened due to ineffective leadership and poor communication during a press conference by then chairman Dato' Sri Haji Tajuddin Abdul Rahman, which led to his dismissal and intensified public criticism. This study focuses on communication experts' assessments of the leadership and crisis communication management strategies demonstrated by Prasarana during the incident. Using a qualitative approach, online interviews were conducted with communication professionals to explore their evaluations of the organization's crisis response. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis and guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Experts acknowledged that Prasarana's use of the rebuild strategy, particularly compensating the victims, was appropriate and aligned with SCCT principles for handling a preventable crisis. However, they also highlighted weaknesses in leadership decisions and criticized the initial use of denial and diminishing strategies, which contradicted best practices in crisis communication and leadership accountability. This study underscores the crucial role of leadership in managing public perception and maintaining credibility during a crisis. It also emphasizes the need for aligning communication strategies with established theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: *Leadership, crisis strategy, crisis communication management, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Kelana Jaya LRT incident.*

INTRODUCTION

The May 2021 collision that happened on the Kelana Jaya line between Kampung Baru and Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC) is regarded as the most serious incident on the Kelana Jaya LRT line since it started operating as the Putra line in 1996. A total of 213 passengers were injured, including 47 who sustained serious injuries. Following the crash, Rapid Rail and its parent company, Prasarana Malaysia Bhd, faced lawsuits from several injured passengers alleging negligence (Free Malaysia Today, 2026). Dato' Sri Haji Tajuddin Abdul Rahman faced strong public criticism for his handling of the news conference following the LRT Kelana Jaya train collision, with many accusing him of being rude, lacking empathy, arrogant, and making racist remarks

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during the session. Although he was appointed as the spokesperson to clarify the situation, his performance during the briefing was widely seen as ineffective in communicating the crisis (Abd. Rahman, 2021). As a result, his service in Prasarana Malaysia Berhad as non-executive chairman has been terminated.

Prasarana Malaysia Berhad is Malaysia's public transport system and services, fully owned by a government entity. It was first established in 1998 by the Ministry of Finance (Malaysia) with Tan Sri Mohd Nadzmi Mohd Salleh serving as the company's first chairman. The company was initially named Syarikat Prasarana Negara Berhad (SPNB). It was later rebranded in 2014 to Prasarana Malaysia Berhad to represent its national responsibility for operating and developing public transport systems in Malaysia. Prasarana is responsible for operating a bus system (Rapid Bus) and railway systems (Rapid Rail), including Light Rail Transit (LRT) systems, Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) services, and Monorail services. Since 2021, Prasarana Berhad has been managed by Tan Sri Jamaludin Ibrahim as the chairman, replacing the former chairman, Dato' Sri Haji Tajuddin Abdul Rahman. By 2023, Prasarana will be growing beyond its role as a transportation provider by implementing innovative strategies and sustainable practices. Its Sustainability Blueprint 2023-2030 promotes sustainable development by focusing on the Prasarana Sustainability Strategic Goals: environment, safety, social, and governance. Since the company was established in 1998, it has been one of the largest public transport companies in Malaysia.

Upon the collision between railways on the Kelana Jaya line on 24 May 2021, Dato' Sri Haji Tajuddin was appointed as the spokesperson for the press conference on 25 May 2021. However, the press conference was seen as controversial due to the chairman's inappropriate remarks when he referred to the collision as "just two cars kissing each other." Following the conference, the public made negative comments about the chairman and asked him to step down as he was seen as being a threat to Prasarana's image. This specific phenomenon is labelled as 'double crisis', where an organization's improper response to an initial crisis leads to a secondary crisis. Generally, bigger companies attract greater media attention due to their complex operations and visibility to the public's eye; these companies face a higher risk of reputational damage (Abdul Rahman et al., 2024). As crises are often unpredictable, emotionally charged, and time-sensitive, their complex environments can challenge professional norms and ethical decision-making (Mohamed et al., 2022), leading to a 'double crisis'. In short, this scenario represents how failure to communicate in a crisis by not following the PR script may lead to a bigger reputational threat.

This study addresses a research gap by exploring the communication strategies and crisis management practices employed by railway companies in Malaysia during times of crisis. While many studies explore crisis communication management in airlines (e.g., Othman and Yusoff, 2020; Taher and Tak, 2023), little research focuses on railway companies. This study aims to explore communication experts' perceptions of the leadership and crisis communication strategies employed by Prasarana Malaysia Berhad during the Kelana Jaya LRT collision.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Communication Management

Crisis Communication Management (CCM) is a planned method to manage and lessen the impact of unforeseen events that might put a company's operations, stakeholders, or reputation at risk

(Gasana, 2024). It involves disseminating quick and accurate information, engaging proactively with stakeholders, and making decisive decisions. According to Coombs and Holladay (1996), the process of conducting a great CCM consists of gathering, analysing, and sharing data needed to deal with a crisis. CCM can be laid out in two categories, which are reactive and proactive. Reactive crisis management is the approach to communicating with the stakeholders after a crisis has happened to clarify the situation, provide information, and control the public's view. Like Johansson's (2024) statement, reactive CCM includes conducting a press conference or providing updates to media and stakeholders. Proactive crisis management involves preparing communication strategies beforehand to lessen the upcoming or potential crisis. When facing a crisis, owning a great CCM helps to change the stakeholders' perspectives of the crisis and the company that is handling the crisis.

Chronology of Kelana Jaya LRT Collision on 24 May 2021

On May 24, 2021, at 8:13 pm, the empty train (TR40) was experiencing a breakdown while moving between Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) and Kampung Baru. The control centre got cut off, which led to a failed communication between the trains. The train was manually driven to Dang Wangi station to reset it to automatic mode when the operators mistakenly set it to travel north toward Gombak instead of to the south. Meanwhile, the other train (TR81), carrying 213 passengers, was released from the KLCC station (Ramlan, 2021). At 8:33 pm, the crash between TR81 and TR40 occurred roughly 100 meters from the KLCC station. The crash was severe, resulting in 166 passengers sustaining minor injuries and 47 sustaining severe injuries (The Star, 2021).

The chronology highlights a major train collision due to a technical malfunction that resulted in passenger injuries. The public is required to know the actions of the company that will guarantee their safety. Hence, information must be quickly and accurately conveyed. Managing this incident requires an immediate response, maintaining public trust, and minimizing misinformation. This scenario shows the importance of CCM.

An Overview of Crisis Management Practices in Organizational Contexts

Othman and Yusoff's (2020) study explored the crisis communication management strategies employed by Malaysia Airlines in the MH370 crisis using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This study was conducted using qualitative methods by collecting 15 media statements, six newspaper articles, and four website articles covering the MH370 crisis as the data for this research. By using the diminished and rebuilding the crisis response strategy by giving compensation and offering counselling to victims or relatives involved, MH370 successfully handled the crisis, although the initial response was late. The findings contribute to the present study by supporting the recommendations of SCCT and providing a practical understanding of how the framework can be applied to analyse crisis situations.

Moreover, a study conducted by Latiff Azmi et al. (2022) aims to qualitatively analyse and compare the effectiveness of crisis management between Air Asia and Malaysia Airlines (MAS) by utilizing the Conceptual Framework of Input, Treatment/Services, Outcomes, and Impact. The comparative content analysis was done by collecting document types in the written format of press releases and media coverage by local and western daily press as the secondary data.

Focusing on the Input alone, MH370, MH17, and QZ 8501 all faced extensive media coverage. Post-crisis efforts focused on providing support to victims' families through accommodations, counselling services, and compensation. Air Asia managed the crisis rapidly, compared to MAS, which took over a year to resolve it. The findings of this study are beneficial as they provide an understanding of how different companies deal with different crises.

Masduki's (2020) study examines how MAS and Air Asia managed their brand recovery strategies following the 2014-2015 plane crashes, analysing their public communication responses to the crises. The method used in this research is qualitative with a content analysis approach, as it examines public statements, press releases, and other communication materials. Benoit's framework, referred to in recent literature as 'image repair theory,' suggests that an organization's image can be improved, though not necessarily fully restored (Benoit, 2008). The study found that both airlines implemented openness and cooperation strategies, where Air Asia more directly acknowledged their responsibility and applied immediate engagement post-crisis. On the other hand, the search failure of MAS limits the chance of their brand to recover. The findings of this study provided insights into how the use of different frameworks allows researchers to analyse the same situation.

Next, a case study by Taher and Tak (2023) reviewed the Sriwijaya Air crash from the crisis communication and management lens. This study is done qualitatively by analysing related past studies, websites, and online newspapers with SCCT as the framework. It is found that Sriwijaya Air's actions are aligned with SCCT elements, as the airline's CEO is the spokesperson representing the company in the press releases. Moreover, it provides support centres with the victims' families with counselling and meeting them personally. Although Sriwijaya Airlines does not engage with its stakeholders effectively and produces a late initial response to the crisis, they are active in informing the public about the crisis through social media. As a result, the airline company struggles to restore its image. The findings of this study are vital for my study as they revolve around the same framework and show how the diminish and rebuild strategy of SCCT was used through this situation.

Meanwhile, a study by Kamboh et al. (2023) investigates Pakistan Railways' recent incident and how it used information technology and image-repair-centred crisis response strategies on social media. The study utilized a mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) content analysis approach to find out if Pakistan Railways was able to improve its reputation among consumers and in print media by implementing Benoit's recommended image restoration techniques on social media. The findings revealed that Pakistan Railways primarily employed techniques reducing the offensiveness of the events (40%), corrective action (34%), evasion of responsibility (10%), and mortification (6.4%). In addition, they tailor their message to fit the audience and the nature of each social media platform. Hence, Pakistan Railways was somewhat successful in handling the crisis, considering that public emotions shifted from negative to ambivalent, and media coverage improved from highly negative to more positive following the introduction of a Twitter handle. The study demonstrates the relationship between Image Restoration Theory and crisis communication, presenting an alternative perspective to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007, builds on Attribution Theory by emphasizing how organizations should tailor their crisis responses based on the level of responsibility attributed to them and public perception. SCCT is widely used in crisis communication as it helps organizations maintain a positive reputation by aligning their responses with stakeholders' expectations (Adebayo, 2017). The theory advises crisis managers to assess the type of crisis, the organization's history with similar events, and its prior reputation to select suitable communication strategies. Coombs (2007) outlines four main strategies: deny, which involves rejecting the crisis or blaming others; diminish, which seeks to reduce perceived responsibility or harm; rebuild, which includes offering compensation or apologizing to restore trust; and bolster, which highlights past achievements or portrays the organization as a victim. These strategies aim to protect or repair an organization's reputation based on how the public interprets the crisis.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as a guide to analyse data to find relevant insights. It also functions as a roadmap throughout the study as it helps to clarify the rationale for the researcher's methodological choices and supports the development of theory based on the research findings (Lacerda et al., 2024).

As shown in Figure 1, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) begins by identifying the crisis type, whether the situation or incident is seen as a victim, accidental, or preventable crisis. Identifying the type determines the company's level of responsibility towards the situation. If the crisis falls under the victim type, the company has a low level of attribution. If the situation is accidental, the attribution level towards the crisis is moderate. However, if the crisis is preventable or intentional, the company owns a high level of responsibility. After identifying the crisis type and attribution level, certain crisis response strategies need to be used.

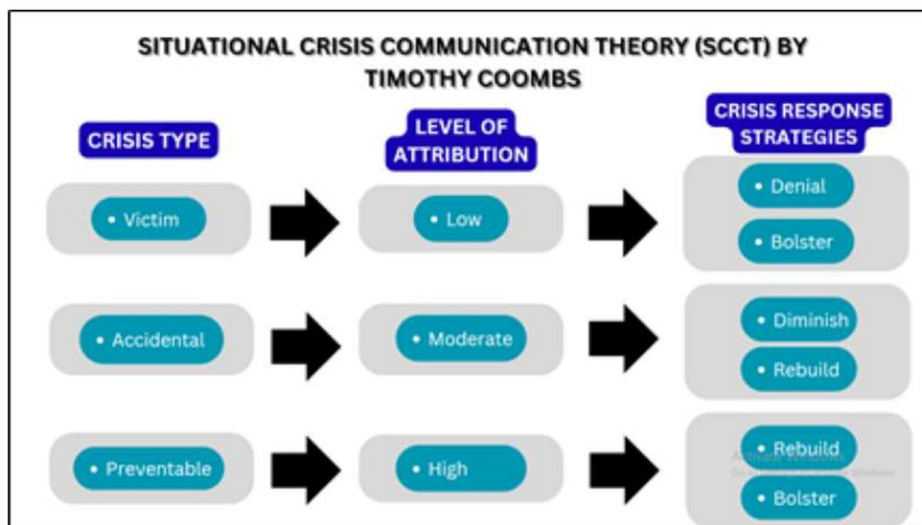


Figure 1: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

For instance, if a flood or hurricane happens, putting the organization as the victim and they have low attribution towards the situation, denial and bolster crisis response strategies are the most effective to deny the situation and remind their stakeholders of their past good works. Next, when a crisis happens, like product defects, it makes the company hold a moderate level of responsibility, and the most appropriate strategies to respond to the situation are to diminish and rebuild by denying the intention to harm and saying sorry to the victims and the public. Lastly, when a preventable crisis like a railway collision happens, this puts the company at a high level of responsibility. Hence, the company is highly advised to use the rebuild and bolster response strategies by asking for forgiveness, providing gifts to the victims, and ensuring stakeholders are confident that the organization is handling the situation.

The use of the SCCT framework in the context of the Kelana Jaya LRT collision, as well as the crisis response strategies used by Prasarana Malaysia Berhad, are illustrated in Figure 2. From the figure, the collision between two trains is considered a preventable crisis type as it was a man-made mistake by the operator. A human error is often connected to a lack of training, poor management, or failure to create safety standards. Hence, the level of responsibility for a preventable crisis is high. However, instead of using rebuild and bolster strategies in their communication, the spokesperson utilized denial and diminish strategies, which are completely against the SCCT guidance.

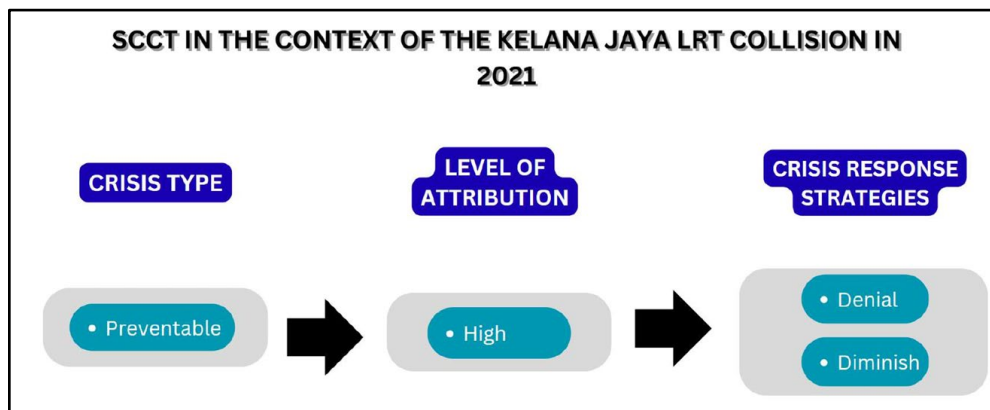


Figure 2: Situational Crisis Communication Theory Layout based on the Kelana Jaya LRT Collision Incident

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative method to gain an in-depth understanding of expert perceptions regarding Prasarana Malaysia Berhad’s crisis communication strategies during the Kelana Jaya LRT collision in May 2021. In-depth interviews were conducted to facilitate detailed, open-ended discussions between the interviewer and communication professionals, allowing for the exploration of complex views and experiences related to leadership and crisis response. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with institutional ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants’ identities were kept confidential, and all data were anonymised and used solely for research purposes.

Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method commonly used in qualitative research. Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in crisis communication and public relations. Their professional knowledge enabled them to provide valuable insights into the crisis communication strategies adopted by Prasarana Malaysia Berhad during the Kelana Jaya LRT collision.

A total of three communication professionals were interviewed for this study. These included a senior brand and marketing communication leader from a government-linked organization, a managing director of a communication consultancy, and a head of marketing and communications from an international hotel chain. Each informant was selected based on their senior leadership roles and extensive experience in strategic communication, branding, and crisis response. Their diverse industry backgrounds offered a well-rounded perspective on the effectiveness, appropriateness, and public impact of Prasarana's crisis communication efforts. Their contributions were essential in understanding how crisis leadership and messaging align with best practices and theoretical frameworks in the field. In-depth interviews were conducted virtually using the Google Meet platform to accommodate the schedules and preferences of the informants. Despite the virtual format, the interviews maintained the depth and openness necessary for qualitative inquiry, fostering meaningful discussions and allowing participants to share detailed insights based on their professional experience.

Data Analysis

For the qualitative data collected from the interviews, thematic analysis was employed as the primary method for data interpretation (Qaissi, 2024). The researcher engaged in multiple thorough readings of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. During this iterative process, significant patterns and recurring ideas were identified and systematically categorized. To enhance organization and clarity, these themes were assigned specific colour codes; for example, blue was used to represent notions of responsibility, while green denoted perceptions of the company's effectiveness in managing the crisis. This visual coding technique facilitated easier comparison across different responses and helped to uncover both commonalities and divergences in the expert opinions. Ultimately, this thematic approach enabled a nuanced exploration of how communication professionals perceived Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's crisis communication strategies during the Kelana Jaya LRT incident, highlighting critical insights related to leadership, accountability, and communication effectiveness.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the key findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with three communication professionals. The purpose of these interviews was to explore expert perspectives on the crisis communication strategies implemented by Prasarana Malaysia Berhad during the Kelana Jaya LRT collision. Using thematic analysis, five main themes emerged from the data, reflecting how the experts evaluated the company's leadership, communication approach, and alignment with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). To ensure confidentiality, informants were assigned codes: CCM01, CCM02, and CCM03, which were used

throughout the analysis and reporting. Their responses were analysed using thematic analysis. The themes are: 1) Taking Responsibility, 2) What Worked in the Response, 3) What Did Not Work and Lessons Learned, 4) Spokesperson’s Professionalism, and 5) Public and Media Reactions.

Taking Responsibility

All three informants agreed that Prasarana Malaysia Berhad was responsible for the railway collision. CCM01 believed the company was responsible because it blamed the train operator for taking the wrong track, which led to the collision. CCM02 also attributed the incident to Prasarana, describing it as a human error and suggesting that poor maintenance of the train system may have contributed to the accident. Similarly, CCM03 stated that the collision resulted from operational and technical issues. In addition, CCM03 emphasized that Prasarana was responsible for ensuring regular maintenance and compliance with safety protocols.

When discussing the company’s responsibility, the informants linked their responses to the communication strategies used by the chairman of Prasarana during the crisis. CCM01 and CCM03 shared similar views, stating that the company was responsible for ineffective communication before, during, and after the crisis. In contrast, CCM02 emphasized that taking responsibility in a crisis involves acknowledging the issue and accepting accountability in order to address it.

Table 1: Excerpts of informants’ opinion on the level of responsibility of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad

Informant	Excerpt from the interview transcriptions
CCM01	“It was in fact the fault of Prasarana because the driver of the manually driven train took a wrong turn. So, it was their fault.”
CCM02	“Every time whenever there’s a crisis, there is some responsibility that the organization needs to handle. You can’t assign yourself from fault and need to admit culpability.”
CCM03	“Yes, the organization is responsible for the collision because they are also responsible for ensuring safety protocols and regular maintenance.”

The informants’ responses indicating that Prasarana was responsible for the collision and that communication was poor are consistent with Coombs’ SCCT and Attribution Theory. According to CCM01 and CCM03, the incident resulted from human error and the company’s lack of attention to railway system maintenance. Therefore, the crisis can be classified as a preventable crisis type. In SCCT, identifying the crisis type is linked to how much responsibility is attributed to the organization. In this case, Prasarana is seen as having a high level of responsibility for the LRT collision. This view also aligns with Attribution Theory, which suggests that causes of events are often linked to internal factors such as organizational actions rather than external factors. As a result, the incident is categorized as a preventable crisis within the SCCT framework.

What Worked in the Response

Based on the interview, all three informants had a comprehensive view of the effectiveness of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad’s crisis management in response to the Kelana Jaya LRT collision incident. CCM01 shared her opinion, saying Prasarana was effective in being fast in conducting

the press conference early in the morning after the incident happened the night before. Meanwhile, CCM02 expresses her opinion, saying that Prasarana was effective in providing timely updates through media releases post-crisis. CCM03 shares a different viewpoint of Prasarana's effectiveness in handling the crisis. Generally, CCM03 applauds Prasarana for saving passengers' lives by coordinating with authorities, such as the police and firefighters, at the scene. The company also successfully allocated the victims to the hospital. In addition, CCM03 mentioned that it is effective for the company to give compensation to the victims.

Table 2: Excerpts of informants' opinion on the effectiveness of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's crisis management

Informant	Excerpts from the interview transcriptions
CCM01	"Maybe they're fast, so fast they passed because they conducted the press conference the next morning. Maybe I can just give credit for the speed."
CCM02	"The strategies had some effectiveness. The timely updates by Prasarana on their website were helpful."
CCM03	"They cannot avoid what happened but managed to save people. The investigation, what happens to a system glitch, and blackout. But at that time the first responders were there, the firefighters, police, and the minister who was there having dinner and managed to go there to help, that's fantastic!"

Hence, all of the informants agree that there was effectiveness in Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's crisis management in response to the incident of the Kelana Jaya LRT collision, as the crisis response was seen as effective due to the speed in conducting the press conference, the constant post-crisis updates, and for saving victims' lives.

These findings indicate that the effectiveness of Prasarana in responding to the crisis is a deciding factor for the public in determining whether the company is seen as successful in handling the crisis. As Coombs (2010) noted, the success of a company's response to a crisis is determined by how effective it is in preparedness, proactivity, and responsiveness. CCM01 perceived Prasarana's initial response through the press conference as rapid action. The incident occurred at 8:13 PM on May 24, 2021, and the company conducted the media session early in the morning of May 25, 2021. Hence, the initial response of Prasarana was considered swift. This is similar to the comparative study by Latiff Azmi (2022) and Masduki (2020) on the CCM between Malaysia Airlines and Air Asia, which found that Air Asia responded more rapidly to the crisis than Malaysia Airlines. Air Asia's QZ8501 disappeared from radar at 7:24 AM Western Indonesian Time (WIB), but the company did not alert the public until 7:55 AM, 31 minutes later (Mullen, 2015). This can be supported by Coomb's (2007) ideology emphasizing that the first phase in crisis management is to respond quickly.

Besides that, the timely updates after the incident by Prasarana through their official website were considered effective by CCM02. This is due to their post-crisis updates on providing compensation to victims, explaining the cause of the collision and the improvements that will be implemented (Figure 3), and offering counselling and financial support to affected passengers (Figure 4).

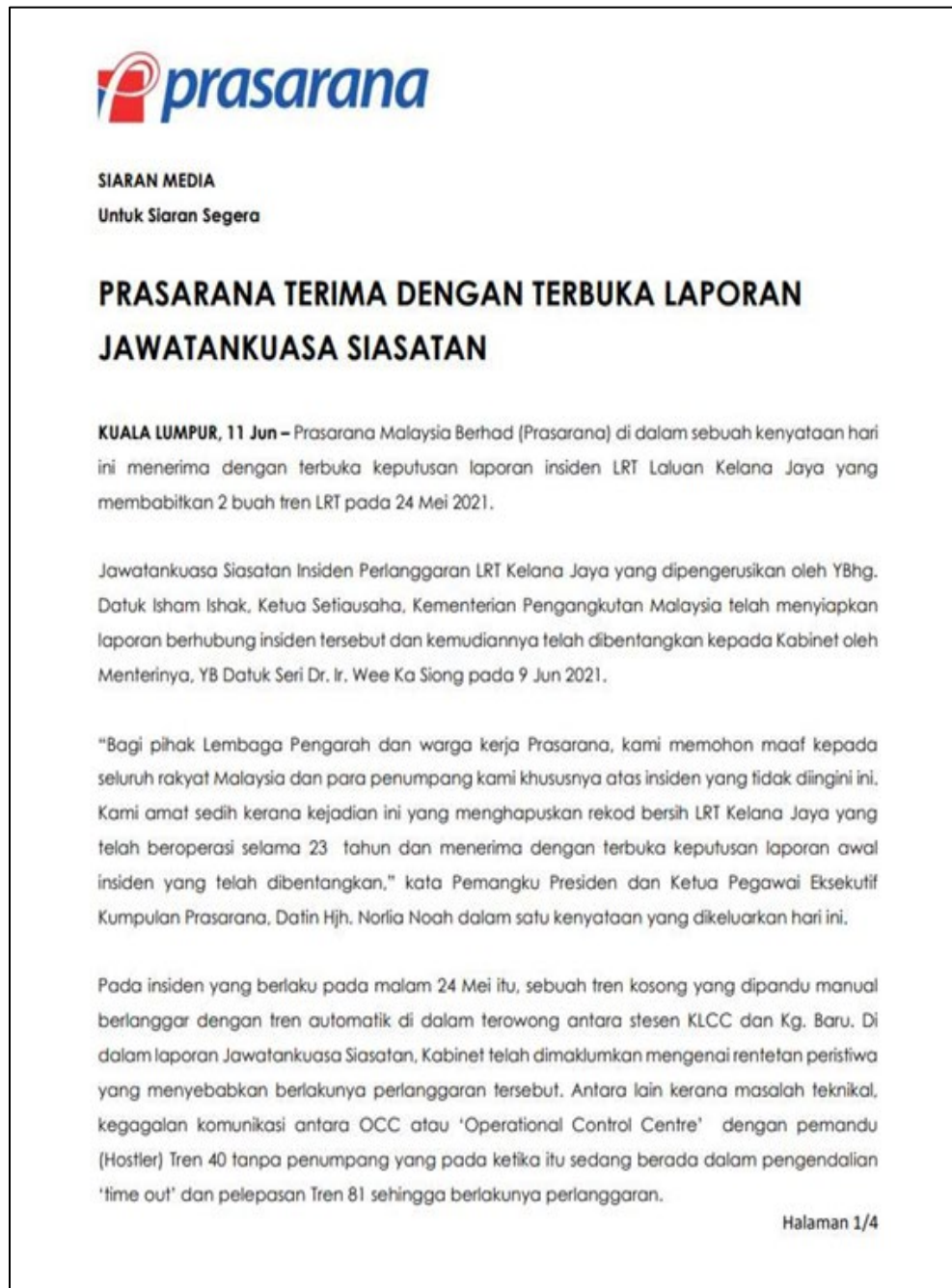


Figure 3: Media release by Prasarana Malaysia Berhad regarding the cause of the collision and mitigation measure to prevent the crisis

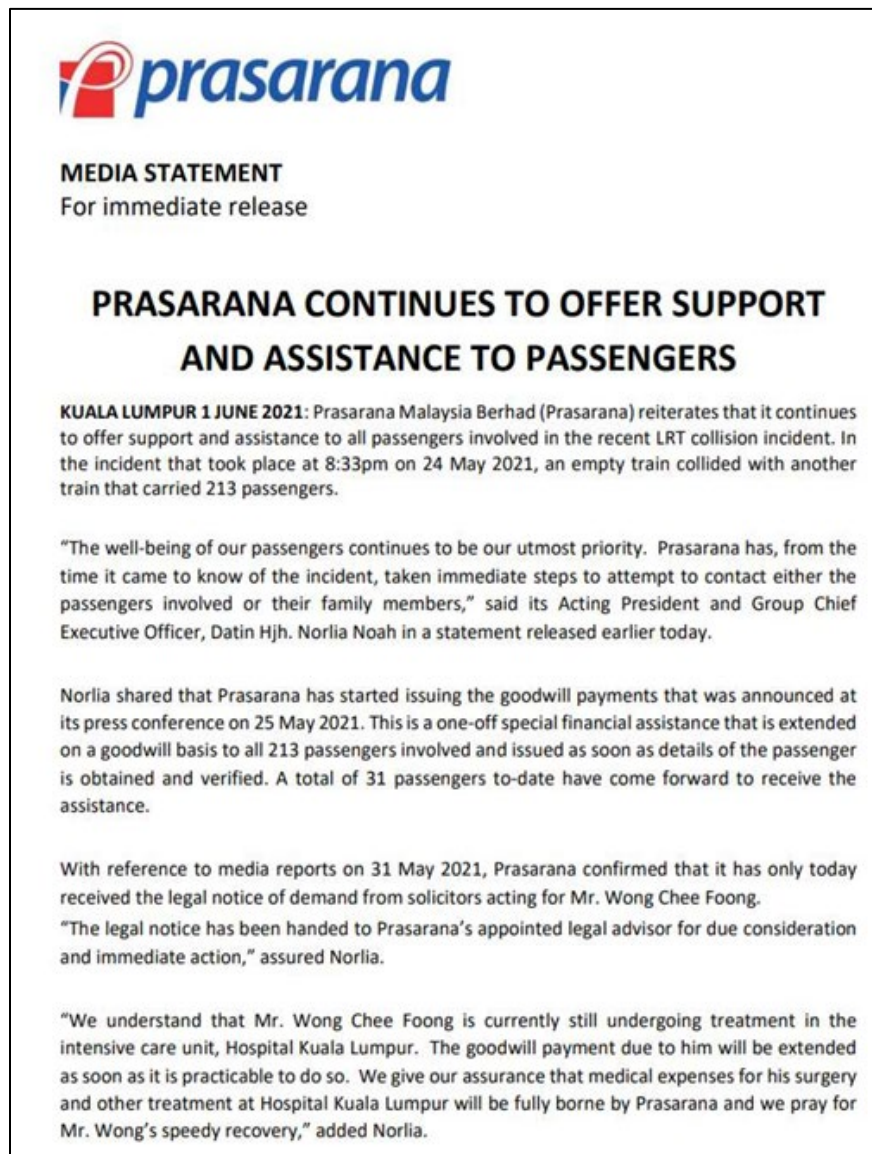


Figure 4: Media release by Prasarana Malaysia Berhad offering counselling and financial support to the victims

The conduct of engaging with the public by giving updates after the crisis is aligned with the past studies of the CCM of Malaysia Airlines by Othman and Yusoff (2020), the comparative study between Malaysia Airlines and Air Asia by Latiff Azmi (2022) and Masduki (2020), CCM of Sriwijaya Airlines by Taher and Tak (2023), and the CCM of Pakistan Railways (Kamboh et al., 2023). All these companies took a similar approach after a crisis, mainly providing compensation to the victims and financial and psychological support to the victims and their families, as well as discussing measures to prevent a similar situation from happening in the future. This aligns with the rebuild strategies from the SCCT theory that emphasizes how organizations give gifts, money, or other approaches to apologize to the affected parties. According to Coombs (2015), providing updates after a crisis reassures the stakeholders that the organization can address the crisis. It also builds confidence and reduces panic among the public.

Therefore, Prasarana's crisis management was seen as effective as they conducted the press conference rapidly, providing updates after the crisis happened, and managed to save lives. However, it was worth noting that Prasarana's initial response only included compensation and financial support, the cause of the incident and corrective actions were not communicated until one week later.

What Did Not Work of the Response and Lesson Learned

Despite some strengths, the informants also highlighted weaknesses in Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's crisis response. CCM01 and CCM02 noted a lack of transparency and accuracy during the media briefing, with CCM01 emphasizing that failing to address the root cause created further issues.

It was bad enough that they are not ready to communicate and address the issue at hand, they are also creating another crisis. Beyond the failure to maintain communication readiness and confront the immediate problem, they effectively triggered a secondary crisis (CCM01).

Although CCM01 acknowledged the swift press conference, CCM03 disagreed, stating that the initial hours saw no public communication. She described the situation as a "loss of control," citing poor message clarity, lack of explanation on the cause, and ineffective delivery by the spokesperson. She added that the communication team of Prasarana failed to control how the information was delivered through the spokesperson and how the communication team failed to control his manner. Moreover, she also highlights her opinion on this matter saying that the poor communication was avoidable, which the company failed to avoid.

They are not responsive as they have made no statements. Everything was quiet for the first few hours. People only get second hand stories from someone else (CCM03).

Overall, the crisis response was seen as lacking due to the absence of mitigation measures, limited transparency, and failure to address public trust. According to Coombs (2010), corrective actions are essential in restoring reputation, yet Prasarana's communication did not align with this principle. The spokesperson's uncertainty, including inaccurate details about the number of injured victims, further undermined credibility. By maintaining organizational transparency, companies can cultivate public confidence and empower their stakeholders with the necessary clarity to navigate critical decision-making processes (Rawlins, 2008; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016) which Prasarana failed to achieve. The absence of a strong Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) contributed to these shortcomings. Prasarana's failure to anticipate and plan led to reputational damage, as highlighted in the SCCT framework.

Table 3: Excerpts of informants' opinion on the ineffectiveness of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's crisis response

Respondent	Excerpts from the interview transcriptions
CCM01	"I don't think I've ever heard of the name of the driver, nobody mentioned that, how it happened, how he can turn the wrong way?... <i>kan</i> ? Isn't there a map or a safety measure and things like that? While they try to compensate while paying RM 1k, that's irrelevant. I think people would really want to know if it's gonna happen again. Right? I mean, yes, now they are trying to fix it. But is it gonna happen again? I think the worst is having that kind of response to the crisis. That was a tragedy, worse than the train collision itself."
CCM02	"There were gaps in information transparency and in addressing the emotional and trust-related concerns of the public."
CCM03	"They did not control the situation. I would put the Prasarana situation as a loss of control, you did not control the narrative or spokesperson. The incident might have been avoidable if they had looked at their system properly, checked on maintenance, etc. But, in this scenario of communication, it is avoidable and they failed."

Professionalism of the Spokesperson

This study demonstrates that all informants held union perspectives on professionalism, noting that Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's spokesperson was seen as unprofessional in communicating about the crisis during the press conference. From the interview, it was seen that all informants agreed that the spokesperson appeared unprepared as he lacked information, was not being briefed or practiced by the team, and did not read the script prepared. Other than that, CCM01 and CCM03 elaborate that Prasarana's spokesperson was empathetic as he downplayed the severity of the incident.

The situation? Normal. Only the two cars were together, they kissed each other. The lines are okay, there's nothing wrong with the line. (Dato' Sri Tajuddin, the spokesperson of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad)

CCM01 and CCM02 support their answer, saying the spokesperson was empathetic by linking the behaviour to the politician's personality, since Dato' Sri Tajuddin is a Member of Parliament (MP) for Pasir Salak. They mentioned that politicians are usually jovial, hence they might bring that unfitting personality into a serious situation. CCM01 and CCM03 also added that since he is a politician, he might not have the time to practice before the media session. Not only that, CCM01 and CCM02 considered him unprofessional as he took the questions personally and belittled a few journalists during the question-and-answer (Q&A) session by questioning their backgrounds and warning them not to provoke him when being asked about his availability the night of the incident.

So, no matter what, when I found out—although it was late—I made up my mind that I would come first thing in the morning. Do you know what 'first thing in the morning' means? Do you understand English? 'First thing in the morning' (laughs). That means how serious I am. How serious I am (laughs) about this matter. So,

early in the morning, I went down to see, went into the tunnel and everything. Please don't try to provoke us. It's not good. Some people like to provoke. Yesterday, even the minister came down, the CEO also came. Everyone went there. Do you understand? I don't like this... provoking. What's the point? No, wait—wait, I'll manage this. So, okay (laughs). Calm down. The most important thing is that we are taking care of the passengers and the service. We are not neglecting our responsibilities. That is the most important. Sorry, I have to say this. You all like to criticize others, so let me criticize you for once (laughs). (The spokesperson of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad)

Table 4: Excerpts of informants' opinion on the professionalism of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad's spokesperson

Respondent	Excerpts from the interview transcriptions
CCM01	"He was not empathetic. When you see the chairman was giving the statement, he obviously was not prepared. He doesn't even know how many people were injured. He was not familiar with the terms to use. Instead, he used the word 'kissing-kissing'. It shows that he takes things so lightly and too jovial for that moment. The media was furious because he belittled some of the journalists."
CCM02	"When that thing happened, when you look at it, he was not trained. He's a politician, he doesn't care. I guess the personality comes out. He thinks he is going to give a political speech when it's actually a crisis, everything went wrong at the onset. If I'm the spokesperson, I'll stick to the script, and make sure I have the right briefing and notes in front of me and read it, but he did not, I'm sure it was there but he did not."
CCM03	"The spokesperson is not credible enough to speak on behalf of the company." "He does not show any empathy from his face and body language."

In responding to a crisis, the person assigned to deliver the message and the channel are far more important than the information itself. This is due to the spokesperson's behaviour that may impact the organization in the long term (Marsen, 2020). This incident could also be related to a leadership management issue as they are accountable for making the public understand the situation, taking appropriate decisions, as well as stopping the crisis and learning from it (Boin et al., 2005). A study of Wu and Chen (2023) highlights that organizational leaders are expected to make ethical decisions, manage stakeholders' emotions and actions, and understand the changes after a crisis. This incident could also be related to a leadership management issue as the role of a leader is important during a crisis.

Hence, the spokesperson was seen as unprofessional in communicating about the crisis during the press conference, as he downplayed the severity of the incident, lacked empathy, and answered questions with emotion. In the SCCT, downplaying the severity of a case is classified under the diminished crisis response strategy. However, according to Coombs (2015), the diminish strategy is effective to be utilized if it is an accidental crisis type. It was not suitable for an organization that caused a train collision, which is a preventable crisis type, to respond using the diminish strategy. Hence, the spokesperson's response to the incident has contrasted with the SCCT framework. Moreover, the lack of empathy portrayed by the spokesperson in front of the media is similar to the spokesperson of BP Oil when the company faced a crisis where the

Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, leading to a massive oil spill in the ocean. Hayward's comments during the BP oil spill were interpreted as self-centred and insensitive to victims (Millar & Heath, 2003).

Another example of an unprofessional spokesperson could be seen when Facebook was revealed to be harvesting users' data for political advertising without consent. In response, the CEO, Mark Zuckerberg minimized the seriousness of the incident by giving a defensive response, saying it was a 'breach of trust' rather than a data breach to reduce their accountability towards the situation (George & Migdal, 2018). Hence, It is similar to the response given by Dato' Sri Tajuddin during a media session, where he downplayed the seriousness of the collision by describing it as trains "kissing" each other. His remarks, along with joking during his apology, were perceived as lacking empathy and insincere. Research shows that humorous or joking responses in serious crises can reduce perceptions of sincerity and trust, particularly when stakeholders expect seriousness and accountability (Xiao et al., 2018). Adebayo (2017) highlights that the choice of spokesperson is important as they are the ones who will speak with many stakeholders. Hence, the spokesperson must be sufficient, experienced, media-trained, equipped, and have self-control. Having a great spokesperson to represent the company is a crucial aspect of a good CCM and a part of the SCCT standard (Coombs, 2007).

Public Reaction and Sentiment

The informants shared their opinions regarding the public reaction and sentiment of the crisis communication delivered by the spokesperson of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad. CCM01 stated her disappointment with the company for the communication.

If I were one of the victims, I would be very sad because people are paying to use the transport right? It's not like it's free. And then, something happened and we found out it was caused by the staff who made a mistake and did not even apologize for that thing. Is the staff still working? Fired? Nobody knows! Right? (CCM01).

The response was similar to CCM02's as she stated the company failed to fulfil the public's expectations to know more about the incident, as it lacks clarification.

They failed the public's expectations because what would people expect from the press conference? They are expecting to know what and why happened. But none of that being clarified (CCM02).

Apart from that, the informants shared their opinions regarding the public's reaction, saying the communication by the chairman eroded the public's trust in the company, which led to reputational damage. CCM02 also said that although the company lost the public's trust, some passengers would still use the train as it was the only railway in the Kelana Jaya route.

Table 5: Excerpts of informants' opinion on the public reaction and sentiment regarding the Kelana Jaya LRT collision incident

Informants	Excerpt from the interview transcriptions
CCM01	"You give a wildpark figure, one thousand to all, is that fair? The ones that are critical should be given more money than those with just bruises. Do you agree? I think the compensation was not being discussed and thought about thoroughly because I truly believe that those who are less injured should get less. Or, just tell them "We are gonna cover the expenses hundred percent". Send somebody to send food to the kids at home because the father is injured. That would feel more personalized and sympathetic and empathetic, instead of just giving 1K. No, not enough corrective action."
CCM02	"You saw him laughing and making jokes, right? How would you feel if you're one of the victims, and watching that? Of course they will be mad., but people still use the train right because they have no choice. Yes, it eroded the public trust, and yes, it destroyed Prasarana's reputation."
CCM03	"Of course, public trust was affected. Why? Because they don't communicate corrective measures. So, what can people believe from you? What can people hope from you? The spokesperson's handling of the communication amplified the public's dissatisfaction."

CCM03 elaborated that the way the spokesperson communicated about the situation raised public dissatisfaction due to him being unprofessional by taking things personally and being defensive.

The way he was being so defensive, right? Saying do not provoke me and such...that kind of communication amplified the public's dissatisfaction (CCM03).

CCM02 also expressed her frustration towards the spokesperson for not showing remorse while giving the speech about a tragic incident, as he was smiling, laughing, and making jokes, saying the two trains were just 'kissing' each other. He also questioned the press's background and their ability to speak English. This unprofessional conduct during a media session raised frustration among the stakeholders.

Other than that, CCM01 shared her thoughts regarding the unfair compensation to the victims. She mentioned that the organization has not thought deeply about the compensation, as the victims who have worse injuries deserve more rather than everyone getting the same amount.

This can also be seen on social media. Based on the responses, the public was highly dissatisfied with the communication of the chairman of Prasarana Malaysia Berhad regarding the railway collision. Figure 5 shows an X user describing the chairman's response as lacking empathy and accountability, noting that he told reporters not to ask provocative questions. In addition, a YouTube user commented that the chairman appeared non-empathetic, poorly prepared, and showed the wrong attitude for such a serious issue. The user also suggested that he could be replaced with someone more suitable to represent Prasarana (Figure 6).

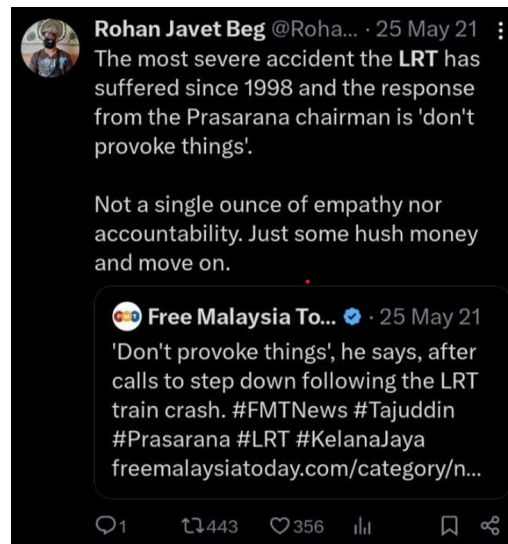


Figure 5: Example of the Public's Perceptions of Prasarana's Spokesperson's Communication regarding the LRT Collision on X

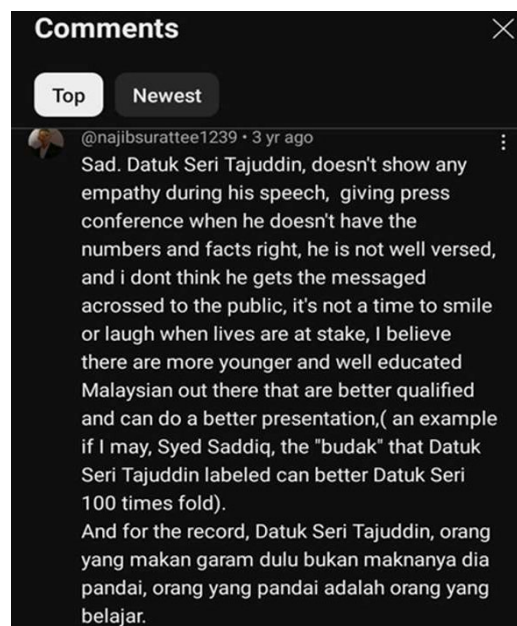


Figure 6: Example of the Public's Perceptions of Prasarana's Spokesperson's Communication regarding the LRT Collision on YouTube

The public response to the spokesperson's communication is similar to the public response when BP Oil's spokesperson, Tony Heyward, turned the focus of the crisis to his life by saying, "There's no one who wants this thing over more than I do. I want my life back." The statement indicated it was perceived by the public as insensitive and lacking empathy towards those who were suffering, which led to public anger towards the company. The lack of compassion for victims and stakeholders may create public rage as the affected parties may feel undervalued by the organization (Coombs & Tachkova, 2023). The public also might perceive the organization as detached from the human impact of the crisis.

Overall, the crisis communication speech delivered by the chairman of Prasarana created disappointment and anger among the public due to a lack of clarity and confidence in providing information about the victims. Moreover, confusion is also spiralling around the public as the communication lacked explanation regarding the cause of the collision. Lastly, the public was frustrated as the spokesperson did not show any remorse when addressing such a traumatic incident. According to Coombs (2007), crisis responses that include corrective actions are positively linked with rebuilding trust and reducing reputational damage. Seeger and Ulmer (2001) also mentioned that it is the responsibility of the spokesperson to extend the need for compensation and make promises to mitigate similar situations from happening again in the future. Although Prasarana provided compensation to victims, concerns remained regarding the communication approach taken by its leadership. The chairman's use of humour and perceived lack of empathy during a serious incident were seen as inappropriate for the situation. In crisis communication, even when corrective actions are taken, insensitive or light-hearted messaging can weaken public trust and reduce the effectiveness of response efforts, particularly when stakeholders expect seriousness and concern (Coombs, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The findings show that the organization's response was not fully aligned with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Weak messaging and poor leadership during the crisis made the situation worse and caused lasting damage to the reputation. Although Prasarana's communication team put in strong efforts, there is still a need to improve crisis preparedness, especially through proper training of official spokespersons. In today's digital environment, information spreads very quickly, and public attention is constant. Because of this, spokespersons must be able to communicate clearly, quickly, and consistently across both traditional and online media. As stated by Suteja, Veritasia, and Umar (2024), crisis management should be planned, with clear strategies and communication plans already in place before a crisis happens.

This study also contributes to SCCT research in Malaysia by showing how response strategies, media coverage, and public opinion are closely linked in the digital age (Koh, 2025). Using SCCT alongside network crisis communication theory also helps explain how social media accelerates the spread of crisis information and affects public trust (Jamal et al., 2023). As social media allows stakeholders to actively monitor public discourse, attention on the platform should be given (Indrayani, 2024). In practice, the findings highlight the importance of trained spokespersons during crises, as poor communication can turn a small issue into a major reputational problem. Organizations should ensure their responses are transparent, consistent, and well-prepared. Relying only on corrective actions is not enough to rebuild public trust without clear openness and accountability (Koh, 2025). Future research could explore how public opinion changes during and after crises, including the role of media coverage and public figures. As media framing could influence the public discourse and perception (Ghazali et., 2022), its analysis could offer important insights of its role during crises. It should also examine how media monitoring tools can help track public sentiment, improve crisis communication strategies, reduce uncertainty, and build trust (Mancangara & Risdayani, 2024).

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