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DIGITAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN TELKOMSEL NETWORK DISRUPTION 2026: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO RESTORE AND REPUTATION

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Abstrak: *This study proposes a conceptual framework to analyze digital crisis communication strategies during large-scale telecommunications service outages, using the 2026 Telkomsel network disruption as an empirical illustration. As societal dependence on digital connectivity intensifies, network failures represent significant organizational crises that threaten corporate reputation and stakeholder trust. By synthesizing Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model, this research identifies the causal mechanisms between crisis response strategies, digital communication, and transparency. In the proposed model, crisis response strategy serves as the independent variable, while digital communication acts as a mediating mechanism that shapes how stakeholders interpret organizational messages. Transparency is positioned as a critical moderating factor that reinforces the relationship between response strategies and stakeholder trust, which ultimately determines long-term corporate reputation. The study develops five propositions suggesting that proactive, transparent, and digitally mediated responses are essential for mitigating reputational damage in a high-velocity digital ecosystem. While providing a strategic roadmap for public relations practitioners in the telecommunications sector, this research also calls for future empirical validation through quantitative and comparative studies to test the robustness of the conceptual links across different industrial and cultural contexts.*

Keyword: *Crisis Communication, Telecommunications Outage, Digital Communication, Transparency, Stakeholder Trust, Corporate Reputation.*

INTRODUCTION

Large-scale service disruptions affecting telecommunications infrastructure are recognized as critical events that significantly destabilize societal digital connectivity. In an era of increasing dependence on mobile and internet services, network stability serves as the fundamental pillar for economic activity, social interaction, and systematic communication. When such disruptions occur, the impact extends beyond technical failure, profoundly influencing public perception regarding the service provider's credibility and organizational reputation. In early 2026, a nationwide decline in network quality affecting Telkomsel subscribers was extensively reported by national media, severely hampering digital communication across various Indonesian regions (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Liputan6.com,

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2026). Such large-scale outages demonstrate the inherent vulnerability of modern communication systems to operational failure and underscore the necessity for rapid, structured organizational responses when public expectations for continuous connectivity are breached (Schachenhofer, 2023).

Within the framework of organizational communication, a crisis is defined as an unpredictable event that threatens stakeholder expectations and risks serious reputational damage if not managed appropriately (Coombs, 2007). Consequently, crisis communication is viewed as a vital public relations function aimed at strategically managing information flow to mitigate reputational erosion and maintain public trust. When telecommunications services fail, the role of organizational communication becomes paramount, as the messaging disseminated to the public dictates how the crisis is perceived and evaluated by stakeholders (Larisu & Zulham, 2024). As Indonesia's dominant cellular operator, Telkomsel occupies a strategic position within the national telecommunications ecosystem. Industry data from 2025 indicates that Telkomsel remains the most widely used provider, commanding a 45.7% market share (APJII, 2025). This dominance establishes the company as the primary benchmark for national mobile services, making network reliability a baseline public expectation.

As societal reliance on digital data intensifies, expectations for network quality and stability rise concurrently. Communication management literature identifies service quality as a primary determinant influencing customer loyalty and corporate trust (Tarmidi, 2023). Therefore, when service disruptions occur within a market-dominant organization, the perceived threat to reputation is intensified. This escalation is driven by heightened public attribution of responsibility toward organizations deemed to have superior capacity and resources to maintain service stability (Coombs, 2007; Heath & Millar, 2004). In the specific case of the 2026 Telkomsel disruption, media reports highlighted millions of users experiencing degraded internet and voice services (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Liputan6.com, 2026), creating a scenario where the organization's fundamental ability to provide reliable utility was publicly questioned, thus making the effectiveness of its communication strategy a decisive factor in shaping public sentiment.

Crisis communication literature suggests that delayed or opaque organizational responses exacerbate negative public perceptions and amplify reputational fallout (Ulmer et al., 2018). Furthermore, the evolution of digital media has fundamentally altered crisis dynamics; information regarding service failures spreads rapidly via social media and digital

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platforms, accelerating the formation of public opinion (Jin et al., 2014). In this context, organizations are tasked not only with technical restoration but also with the expert management of public discourse. Rapid, transparent, and consistent communication helps reduce public uncertainty and minimizes broader reputational harm. During the Telkomsel outage, updates regarding restoration efforts were channeled through various platforms, including mass media and official digital outlets (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Liputan6.com, 2026). Such practices illustrate that crisis communication serves both as an information tool and a strategic mechanism for sustaining stakeholder confidence in a real-time, high-pressure digital environment.

Despite the expansion of crisis communication literature, research gaps remain regarding telecommunications service disruptions. Most studies employing Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) focus on corporate scandals or product failures, leaving the specific context of network outages relatively under-explored. Additionally, existing research often fails to fully integrate the rapid dynamics of social-mediated communication. There is a notable lack of studies that simultaneously synthesize multiple frameworks, such as SCCT, the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model, and Excellence Theory. Addressing these gaps, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework explaining the interactions between crisis response strategy, digital communication, and transparency in influencing stakeholder trust and reputation. Using the 2026 Telkomsel disruption as an empirical illustration, this article seeks to provide a theoretical contribution to crisis studies and offer an analytical framework for public relations practitioners facing large-scale service interruptions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Communication Theory

In the study of organizational communication, a crisis is conceptualized as an unpredictable event that poses a substantial threat to operational continuity and public image due to its potentially widespread societal impact. Organizational crises are defined as unexpected occurrences that exert negative pressure on reputation and stakeholder trust, making effective communication responses a critical factor in mitigating such consequences (Coombs, 2007). The massive network service disruption on January 22, 2026, which impacted millions of subscribers, illustrates that a crisis affects not only technical infrastructure but also public perceptions of organizational credibility when information

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regarding the failure and subsequent recovery is disseminated via digital and mass media (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Tempo.co, 2026). Within this literature, "reputational threat" serves as a metric for the potential image damage an organization may incur if it fails to provide an adequate response. Crisis communication theory posits that as the level of public attribution of responsibility increases, the threat to reputation intensifies; accordingly, thus, the chosen communication strategy dictates the formation of public perception (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a comprehensive conceptual framework by integrating attribution levels, crisis history, and prior organizational reputation to determine appropriate response strategies (Coombs, 2022; Jong, 2025). SCCT offers evidence-based guidance by identifying crisis types and recommending specific responses such as deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering tailored to the level of reputational threat. For instance, the "deny" strategy seeks to sever the perceived link between the organization and the crisis, while "diminish" aims to minimize organizational accountability by framing the event as beyond full corporate control (Coombs, 2022; Diskominfo Aceh Provinsi, 2022). Conversely, the "rebuild" strategy involves apologies or compensation to acknowledge responsibility, and "bolstering" reinforces the corporate image by highlighting past positive contributions. This perspective emphasizes that attributes such as locus of causality and controllability are essential in shaping stakeholder views, necessitating aggressive strategies like rebuilding when internal errors are identified as the crisis trigger (Arindra, 2024; Coombs, 2022).

Public Relations and Reputation Management

The role of Public Relations (PR) in modern organizations has evolved into an essential strategic function responsible for managing stakeholder relationships and maintaining institutional legitimacy. The shifting communication landscape driven by digital media has expanded PR's scope from mere message dissemination to the strategic design of organizational responses that are sensitive to evolving public dynamics (Men, 2020). In the context of telecommunication disruptions, PR must address the "perceptual footprint" left by media reports to ensure a structured and timely recovery of public trust (Kontan.co.id, 2026). Furthermore, the Excellence Theory emphasizes that effective PR must facilitate two-way symmetrical communication to foster a mutually beneficial dialogue, thereby minimizing conflict and strengthening the legitimacy of organizational decisions amidst the

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rapid flow of digital information (Grunig, 2013; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Organizations that adopt this symmetrical approach are better positioned to hear stakeholder concerns and respond with precision, effectively lowering the risk of negative perception.

In the nexus of communication, trust, and corporate reputation, PR-managed relationships serve as the primary conduit for long-term organizational standing. Corporate reputation is influenced not only by technical performance but also by the organization's ability to deliver credible and responsive messaging regarding issues that could trigger negative perceptions (Coombs, 2007). Trust established through consistent and transparent communication is a significant predictor of a resilient reputation, positioning the organization favorably even during communication challenges (Emovwodo, 2024; Lee, 2021). Moreover, the role of PR as a "boundary spanner" allows the function to act as a bridge, bringing public feedback from social media, surveys, and mass media into the organization to refine strategic policies (Men & Bowen, 2017). By acting as a strategic interlocutor, the PR function facilitates an ongoing dialogue that contributes to the organization's adaptation to stakeholder needs and concerns during periods of service instability.

Digital Media in Crisis Context

In the modern landscape, social media serves as a strategic real-time communication channel where information is rapidly accessed by stakeholders. Reports on network outages in Indonesia demonstrate that organizations like Telkomsel utilize digital platforms to provide immediate status updates, even while facing the challenge of rapid issue escalation (Kontan.co.id, 2026; SuaraSurabaya.net, 2026). The speed of platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook allows for a direct exchange of information, enabling crisis responses to be monitored and analyzed almost instantaneously. However, social media also introduces significant risks of escalation, as unvalidated information can lead to the proliferation of speculation and rumors amplified by user interaction. Prior research indicates that user behavior during a crisis can accelerate negative narratives if the organization fails to respond with transparency and accuracy, thereby threatening corporate credibility (Civelek et al., 2016; Elfattah, 2024). Consequently, real-time monitoring systems are recommended as a vital tool for mitigating these digital risks.

The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model explains the dynamic interaction between organizations, the public, and social media, which differs significantly from traditional conventional media communication. In this model, organizations must not

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only disseminate information but also actively monitor digital conversations that influence stakeholder understanding of the ongoing crisis (Austin et al., 2012; Upadhyay, 2023). SMCC views crisis management as an interactive process involving replies to queries, comments, and feedback, rather than a one-way broadcast. Digital engagement is thus regarded as an effective mitigation strategy; direct interaction via regular updates and contextual content has been shown to reduce stakeholder uncertainty and improve emotional engagement (Elfattah, 2024). Therefore, digital engagement is not merely a metric of activity but a strategic instrument to counter misinformation and build a narrative that supports organizational reputation recovery in a high-velocity digital environment.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method designed for conceptual article development, focusing on the synthesis of existing theoretical frameworks to address specific organizational phenomena. The qualitative approach is utilized to provide a comprehensive and deep understanding of how crisis communication strategies and digital engagement function within the telecommunications sector (Babatunde, 2022). By adopting a descriptive lens, this research aims to systematically map the intersection between Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model to explain organizational behavior during large-scale network disruptions (Austin et al., 2012; Coombs, 2022). This methodological choice allows for an in-depth exploration of how transparency and organizational responsiveness contribute to the maintenance of corporate reputation and stakeholder trust in a high-pressure digital environment (Lee, 2021; Schoofs & Claeys, 2021).

The research design integrates a narrative literature review and a case-based conceptual analysis, specifically utilizing the 2026 Telkomsel network outage as an empirical illustration. Data for this conceptual analysis are derived from secondary sources, including industrial reports on internet penetration (APJII, 2025), academic journals regarding crisis management (Jin et al., 2014; Munro, 2024), and extensive national media coverage that documented the timeline of the service disruption (Kontan.co.id, 2026; MediaIndonesia.com, 2026). The use of computational and mixed-methods perspectives found in recent literature is also considered to enrich the conceptual framework, ensuring that the analysis accounts for the rapid information flow inherent in modern telecommunications crises (Munro, 2024; Upadhyay, 2023). This integration serves to

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bridge the gap between abstract crisis theories and the practical realities of managing public relations in the Indonesian digital ecosystem.

To ensure analytical rigor, the study applies a thematic synthesis approach to evaluate various crisis response strategies such as deny, diminish, and rebuild (Coombs, 2022). The analysis focuses on how these strategies are operationalized through Public Relations functions as "boundary spanners" between the organization and its millions of subscribers (Men & Bowen, 2017). By examining the role of dialogic competency and communication transparency, the methodology evaluates the effectiveness of internal and external communication flows in mitigating reputational threats (Kim, 2023; Schoofs & Claeys, 2021). Ultimately, this qualitative descriptive framework provides a structured mechanism to analyze the interaction between organizational responses and public sentiment, offering a comprehensive theoretical contribution to the field of telecommunications crisis management (Jiang, 2025; Jong, 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Frameworks Development

a. Research Design and Theoretical Integration

This study This study adopts a conceptual research design aimed at developing a theoretical framework to explain digital crisis communication within telecommunications service disruptions. Rather than empirical hypothesis testing, this research focuses on synthesizing relevant literature and integrating theoretical perspectives to build a robust conceptual model (Jiang, 2025). Conceptual research is particularly suitable for identifying relationships between key constructs and proposing propositions that guide future empirical investigations (Jong, 2025). The literature analyzed spans from 2000 to 2025, prioritized from databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on crisis communication, social media engagement, and corporate reputation (Munro, 2024; Upadhyay, 2023).

The analytical approach employs theory integration, where key constructs are synthesized to explain the relationship between crisis response strategies, digital communication, transparency, and stakeholder trust. By integrating multiple perspectives, the proposed model captures the complexity of crisis communication in a digital environment (Cheng, 2019; Binlibdah, 2025). This integration allows for a nuanced

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understanding of how organizations maintain legitimacy when technical failures occur in highly dependent societies.

b. Key Constructs and Operationalization

Telkomsel is positioned in this study as a case example of a "service outage" crisis type, allowing the framework to be operationalized within the telecommunications industry context. A service outage is understood as an event where core service delivery is disrupted, hindering customer continuity and causing widespread operational interference (Schachenhofer, 2023). The network disruption on January 22, 2026, serves as a relevant empirical example, as the decline in data and voice access affected millions, leading to observable micro and macro-level socio-economic impacts (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Liputan6.com, 2026). This specific crisis type is focused on due to the high public dependency on the service and the intensive technical coordination required (Coombs, 2007).

Crisis response strategy is treated as the second key construct, describing the communicative and operational choices made by the organization. According to SCCT, these are classified into strategies such as deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering, chosen based on the level of responsibility attribution (Coombs, 2022). In practice, these strategies encompass both technical corrective actions and public messaging designed to manage public perceptions and minimize reputational fallout (Ulmer et al., 2018). Digital communication is modeled as a mediating variable, as the dissemination of crisis information through digital platforms significantly influences how stakeholders interpret organizational responses during a service disruption (Jin et al., 2014; Uzone.id, 2026).

Proposed Conceptual Model and Propositions

a. The Interaction of Trust, Transparency, and Reputation

In the proposed model, crisis response strategy is the independent variable influencing stakeholder trust. Digital communication functions as the mediating mechanism through which messages are disseminated and interpreted in online environments (Austin et al., 2012; Upadhyay, 2023). Transparency acts as a moderating factor that strengthens the link between the response strategy and trust. Ultimately, stakeholder trust contributes to long-term corporate reputation recovery (Nuortimo, 2024; Schoofs & Claeys, 2021). In the case of the 2026 national network outage, the organization's official updates and status recovery reports were widely publicized, simultaneously shaping public perception of the

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organization's seriousness in handling the crisis (Kontan.co.id, 2026; MediaIndonesia.com, 2026).

The logical flow of the model begins with the crisis type, followed by specific communication strategies channeled through digital media with varying levels of transparency. This process results in different levels of trust, which eventually impact corporate reputation. This framework is developed to systematically explain how organizations like Telkomsel can maintain public legitimacy when service disruptions occur on a large scale and public expectations for accountability are high (Larisu & Zulham, 2024; Lee, 2021).

b. Proposition Development

P1: Crisis response strategy positively influences stakeholder trust. Proactive communication and rapid initial responses, such as those reported in January 2026, reduce uncertainty and enhance perceptions of organizational competence (Coombs, 2007; Liputan6.com, 2026).

P2: Crisis response strategy positively influences digital communication. A structured response encourages the active use of digital channels like social media and official websites to reach stakeholders broadly (Jin et al., 2014).

P3: Digital communication positively influences stakeholder trust. Socially mediated communication allows for interactive engagement, bridging the effect of response strategies on stakeholder perception (Austin et al., 2012; Upadhyay, 2023).

P4: Transparency moderates the relationship between crisis response strategy and stakeholder trust. Clear, consistent, and timely information strengthens the positive effect of response strategies on trust (Schoofs & Claeys, 2021; Ulmer et al., 2018).

P5: Stakeholder trust positively influences corporate reputation. Higher levels of trust contribute significantly to the recovery and maintenance of reputation following an organizational crisis (Grunig, 2013; Nuortimo, 2024).

Conceptual Application: The Telkomsel Case

a. Crisis Characteristics and Response Analysis

The network disruption on January 22, 2026, was a national-scale event where simultaneous service degradation affected tens of millions of users across Indonesia (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Suara.com, 2026). This incident was not merely a technical glitch but

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an organizational crisis affecting national communication infrastructure. The impact was felt through the disruption of socio-economic activities, particularly for users reliant on stable networks for productivity (Uzone.id, 2026; WamaNews.id, 2026). Media and social media scrutiny further characterized the crisis, as hashtags related to the outage trended on platforms like X, accelerating issue escalation and requiring immediate PR intervention (Suara.com, 2026; Tempo.co, 2026).

In response, Telkomsel issued an official acknowledgment through its VP of Corporate Communications, confirming that data service quality had declined since 11:03 WIB (Kontan.co.id, 2026; Uzone.id, 2026). This acknowledgment is vital as it reduces public ambiguity and serves as a "corrective action" strategy (Ulmer et al., 2018). Furthermore, an explicit public apology was issued to mitigate tension and demonstrate empathy (SuaraSurabaya.net, 2026; Uzone.id, 2026). Technical explanations regarding network optimization and recovery processes were also provided to reduce speculation and reinforce organizational credibility (Jin et al., 2014).

b. Theoretical Interpretation

From a theoretical standpoint, Telkomsel's response aligns with the SCCT "rebuild" and "corrective action" strategies. By openly acknowledging the disruption and providing a technical roadmap for recovery alongside an apology, the organization aimed to minimize perceived responsibility (Coombs, 2007; Kontan.co.id, 2026). The framing of these messages emphasized the organization's commitment to digital connectivity, attempting to position the crisis as a top-priority technical challenge being actively resolved (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). The high level of transparency observed in providing periodic updates through official digital channels likely strengthened the organization's credibility, consistent with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, 2013; Schoofs & Claeys, 2021).

Discussion of Implications

a. Theoretical Implications

The application of SCCT in this context reinforces the theory's strength in telecommunications outages, where the scale of the crisis necessitates strategies that match high public accountability expectations (Coombs, 2022; Jong, 2025). Furthermore, integrating Excellence Theory with digital dynamics proves that traditional PR principles of dialogue must be adapted for real-time digital interaction (Grunig, 2013; Men, 2020). This

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study contributes to literature by filling the gap in telecommunications-specific crisis research and establishing digital communication as a critical mediator and transparency as a vital moderator (Schoofs & Claeys, 2021; Ulmer et al., 2018).

b. Practical Implications

For PR practitioners, the importance of response time is a primary takeaway. In the Telkomsel case, the immediate deployment of technical teams and communication updates starting at 11:03 WIB minimized the window for rumors to spread (Kontan.co.id, 2026). A fast response time ensures that the organization remains the primary source of information, thereby maintaining control over the crisis narrative and safeguarding stakeholder trust in an increasingly volatile digital ecosystem (Austin et al., 2012; Larisu & Zulham, 2024

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital crisis communication during telecommunications service outages is a multi-dimensional process defined by the causal interaction between response strategies, digital engagement, and transparency. The proposed conceptual model establishes that a crisis response strategy serves as the fundamental driver of organizational communication, which is then filtered through digital platforms. Digital communication acts as a vital mediating mechanism, as the way stakeholders interpret an organization's message is heavily influenced by the dynamics of online discourse (Austin et al., 2012; Jin et al., 2014). Furthermore, transparency functions as a critical moderating factor; a high degree of openness regarding the cause and recovery process significantly amplifies the positive impact of a response strategy on stakeholder trust (Schoofs & Claeys, 2021). Ultimately, this trust serves as the essential precursor for the long-term restoration and maintenance of corporate reputation (Coombs, 2007).

The theoretical implications of this research highlight the necessity of evolving traditional crisis theories to fit the high-velocity digital ecosystem. By integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory with social-mediated models, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of reputational resilience in the telecommunications sector (Coombs, 2007; Austin et al., 2012). It demonstrates that for dominant market players, the alignment between technical recovery and communicative transparency is paramount. The framework suggests that when organizations prioritize real-time digital engagement and maintain a symmetrical dialogue with the public, they can effectively mitigate the information vacuum that often leads to negative speculation (Grunig, 2013; Schoofs & Claeys, 2021).

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Consequently, this conceptual contribution offers a strategic roadmap for public relations practitioners to navigate the complexities of national-scale outages while safeguarding organizational legitimacy.

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