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CEO ACTIVISM AND THE BACKFIRE EFFECT: LESSONS FROM ERSPO'S REPUTATIONAL CRISIS AND THE MECHANICS OF DIGITAL SPILLOVER

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Abstract: *The digital landscape of 2026 has witnessed a fundamental transformation in public relations, where the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) serves as a symbolic manifestation of corporate identity. This conceptual article examines the "reputational spillover" phenomenon, where an executive's personal digital behavior directly impacts institutional legitimacy. Using a descriptive qualitative method and a literature study approach, this research analyzes the communication crisis of the sportswear brand Erspo (2024-2025). The study identifies that the crisis escalated from technical product criticism to a systemic character crisis due to the leader's defensive and confrontational social media responses.Findings reveal that in identity-driven markets like Indonesia, digital arrogance from leadership triggers collective anger, especially when national symbols are involved. This research proposes the "Empathy-First" Model, which advocates for the separation of personal communication authority and official corporate channels during a crisis. Furthermore, the study introduces the concept of PR Governance for Executives, emphasizing digital humility and emotional intelligence as essential safeguards against "cancel culture." Ultimately, the article concludes that institutional stability in the digital era depends on the leader's ability to synchronize their digital persona with public ethical expectations, transforming potential crises into opportunities for strengthening stakeholder trust.*

Keywords: *CEO Activism, Digital Humility, Reputation Spillover, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Empathy-First Model, PR Governance.*

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental shift in the global public relations landscape has been observed, where the role of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is no longer confined to internal managerial functions but has transformed into a symbolic representation of corporate values in the public sphere. This phenomenon is amplified by the digitization of communication, where a leader's personal identity is often perceived as a direct manifestation of the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2019). In the Indonesian market, the emotional bond between audiences and leadership figures is remarkably strong, as reflected in the communication crisis experienced by the sportswear brand Erspo between 2024 and early 2025. Public negative sentiment was triggered by the leader's defensive responses on the social media platform X, which subsequently escalated the crisis from mere product design criticism into a mass boycott movement threatening corporate image stability (CNBC Indonesia, 2024a). Consequently, contemporary reputational risks are exacerbated by "identity spillover," where a leader's digital behavior is inseparable from institutional business ethics. While aggressive personal

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branding is often used as a marketing tool, the absence of empathy-based crisis management can turn it into a strategic liability (Benoit, 2015), necessitating a new conceptual framework to mitigate the destructive impacts of character crises on brand equity in vocal markets like Indonesia (Kriyantono, 2021).

The distinctive boundary between personal opinion on social media and official corporate positions is increasingly thinning, a phenomenon theoretically identified as "context collapse." In the Erspo case, the separation between the CEO's personal statements and corporate public policy experienced a functional failure, where narratives uploaded through personal accounts were identified by the public as authoritative representations of the organizational entity (Ward & Gaither, 2017). From a public relations lens, this ambiguity creates significant systemic risks; reactive communication by individual leaders is no longer viewed as an independent expression but is constructed as a manifestation of a collective corporate culture (Zerfass et al., 2020). Erspo's reputational crisis demonstrates that the inability to moderate one's "digital ego" can instantly destroy professional boundaries, triggering public perception that a leader's behavior is a direct reflection of institutional integrity (Kompas, 2024b).

The escalation of the Erspo crisis was observed to shift from technical product quality failures toward a profound "crisis of character" resulting from digital arrogance in the public space. Initial consumer dissatisfaction regarding the aesthetics and functionality of the Indonesian National Team jersey was classified as a performance crisis; however, confrontational and non-empathic responses from leadership transformed the narrative into a value crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). In public relations literature, this is identified as a failure in impression management, where arrogant behavior on social media is regarded as a disregard for consumer sovereignty, triggering collective anger far more destructive than criticism of the product itself (Tempo, 2024b). Conceptually, Image Repair Theory explains that defensive strategies chosen by leaders often worsen corporate reputational damage (Benoit, 2015). Instead of minimizing impact through adaptive strategies, communication that belittles audience criticism is constructed as a leadership ethics failure, leading to a loss of stakeholder trust and necessitating a long-term restoration of moral integrity (Kriyantono, 2021).

Public emotional attachment to national identity serves as a significant amplification factor in Erspo's reputational crisis, where the National Team jersey is viewed as a symbol of cultural sovereignty rather than a mere commercial commodity. Consumer sensitivity toward corporate leadership behavior increases drastically when products are closely linked to nationalism and collective pride (Lau et al., 2022). This phenomenon relates to "consumer

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ethnocentrism," where public expectations regarding the ethics of local brand leaders holding state licenses are significantly higher than those for ordinary commercial brands (Kriyantono, 2021). Furthermore, national football supporters identify as "emotional owners" of the identity represented by the product (Republika, 2024a). The failure to align digital personal branding with the sanctity of national symbols triggered a massive emotional defensive reaction, resulting in extreme degradation of brand loyalty as a form of moral punishment against leaders deemed unworthy of representing the nation's identity (The Jakarta Post, 2024; Coombs, 2019).

The primary objective of this conceptual article is to deeply analyze the spillover mechanism of negative sentiment from individual identity to the organizational level within the framework of CEO Activism. This reputational spillover is analyzed as a cognitive transmission process where an executive's personal communication failure serves as the primary catalyst damaging institutional legitimacy (Park & Berger, 2024). Through an exploration of the Erspo case, this article formulates new propositions on how reactive social media behavior can escalate technical crises into systemic reputational crises that transcend operational boundaries (Ward & Gaither, 2017). Furthermore, this research projects a conceptual framework integrating digital leadership ethics with modern public relations strategies, focusing on identifying variables that cause audiences to generalize a leader's character as a reflection of the entire organizational culture (Zerfass et al., 2020). Ultimately, this article aims to provide a theoretical contribution to international PR literature regarding executive personal branding management in emerging markets (Kriyantono, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. CEO Activism and the Digital Persona

CEO activism in the digital sphere is conceptualized as a strategic action where top executives utilize social media platforms to publicly express stances on social, political, and cultural issues that often transcend immediate corporate economic interests. This phenomenon represents an evolution of corporate social responsibility, wherein public discourse is no longer exclusively managed by public relations departments through official channels but is instead personally articulated through the leader’s digital persona (Park & Berger, 2024). Through active engagement in digital spaces, a leader is projected as a moral agent expected to align their personal vision with the values held by organizational constituents within a fragmented media ecosystem (Zerfass et al., 2020). However, a "backfire effect" emerges as a mechanical consequence when a discrepancy exists between the displayed digital persona and actual behavior or normative public expectations. Impulsive digital activism can be perceived by audiences as performative insincerity,

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triggering sentiment polarization and a mass rejection of the leader's legitimacy (Coombs, 2019).

Theoretically, the intensity of this backfire effect is explained through cognitive dissonance theory, where audiences experience perceptual conflict when a leader holding a national symbolic mandate exhibits communication behavior contradictory to public decorum. When a digital persona is identified as a manifestation of arrogance rather than intellectual authority, stakeholder punishment mechanisms are automatically activated (Benoit, 2015). The failure to synchronize a digital persona with public expectations results in the delegitimation of the firm's competitive position, particularly in collectivist markets like Indonesia (Park & Berger, 2024). Consequently, if digital activism is not accompanied by emotional maturity, the resulting "reputational spillover" spreads like a domino effect beyond the leader's personal account, affecting operational aspects and consumer perceptions of physical products (Ward & Gaither, 2017). Therefore, navigating the balance between digital freedom of expression and stakeholder sensitivity is crucial for contemporary public relations risk mitigation (Ward & Gaither, 2017).

B. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Emotional Intelligence

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework serves as a primary analytical instrument for mapping organizational response strategies against various categories of reputational crises. This theory posits that public relations managers must align their communication strategies with the level of crisis responsibility perceived by the public to mitigate image damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In crises triggered by leadership behavior, the level of organizational responsibility is often assessed as very high by audiences, necessitating the selection of accommodative rather than defensive response strategies (Coombs, 2019). Within this framework, emotional intelligence emerges as a decisive variable for the successful implementation of SCCT in vocal digital environments. Without adequate emotional intelligence, organizational responses tend to fall into defensive patterns or denials, which further exacerbate public perceptions regarding institutional integrity (Park & Berger, 2024).

In mapping response strategies, the "rebuild" category is found to be most effective for addressing crises related to ethical violations. Through sincere apologies and tangible corrective actions, organizations can gradually neutralize widespread negative sentiment (Benoit, 2015). Conversely, a failure to demonstrate emotional intelligence specifically through the use of "deny" or "diminish" strategies in situations involving digital arrogance triggers a broader escalation of conflict between the firm and its consumers. Modern crisis

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management demands that leaders suppress personal egos to prioritize the collective reputational interests of the institution through narratives of humility and behavioral commitment (Kompas, 2024b). Ultimately, the integration of SCCT logic and leadership emotional capacity is an absolute prerequisite for navigating crises in the era of digital transparency, where technical information delivery must be balanced with human sensitivity (Zerfass et al., 2020).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method designed for conceptual articles to systematically analyze the phenomenon of reputational spillover in the digital era. This approach focuses on providing a comprehensive summary of events and experiences by exploring the "how" and "why" of a communication crisis through non-numerical data. Following the principles of qualitative public relations research, this method allows for a deep exploration of social reality, specifically regarding how digital arrogance and leadership behavior are constructed as corporate identities by the public (Kompas, 2024b). The descriptive nature of this research is utilized to map the shift in PR functions where the CEO's digital persona has become a primary symbolic representation of the firm, thus requiring a framework that prioritizes context and narrative depth (Zerfass et al., 2020).

The research further integrates a case study approach, focusing on the communication crisis of the sportswear brand Erspo between 2024 and 2025 as the primary unit of analysis. This additional method is used to observe the practical application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory in a real-world digital environment (Coombs, 2019; Benoit, 2015). Data for this conceptual analysis are gathered through a "documentation technique" or literature study, which involves a rigorous review of academic journals, books, and digital news reports from authoritative sources such as CNBC Indonesia, Kompas, and Tempo (CNBC Indonesia, 2024a; Kompas, 2024b; Tempo, 2024b). By utilizing these diverse textual sources, the study ensures a triangulation of perspectives to validate the analysis of how nationalism and emotional attachment amplify brand boycotts (Kriyantono, 2021; Republika, 2024a).

The data analysis process is conducted through a multi-stage conceptual synthesis, starting with data reduction, followed by data display and conclusion drawing. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns of "context collapse" where personal and professional boundaries blur, leading to systemic reputational damage (Ward & Gaither, 2017). Every piece of information retrieved from the literature is categorized based on theoretical themes, such as CEO activism risks and the effectiveness of accommodative versus defensive

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response strategies (Park & Berger, 2024; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This systematic approach allows the research to formulate new propositions regarding digital leadership ethics and provides a robust theoretical foundation for managing the relationship between an executive's digital ego and institutional image stability (Kriyantono, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. The Mechanics of Reputation Spillover

1. From Individual Ego to Institutional Crisis

Analysis of communication dynamics on the X platform demonstrates that defensive tweets uploaded by a leader can function as a primary trigger for an explosion of collective anger in the digital space. In the case of Erspo, it was observed that individual ego reflected through confrontational word choices triggered a dissonance of expectations between the public and corporate authority figures (Coombs, 2019). This phenomenon is understood through audience perception mechanisms, where inadequate responses to public criticism are constructed as a form of "digital arrogance" that directly challenges the self-esteem of the consumer community (Park & Berger, 2024).

The transformation from mere product design criticism into a mass boycott movement, or "cancel culture," occurs through a systematic escalation of sentiment. The leadership's inability to manage negative feedback wisely results in a public shift from technical issues (jersey quality) toward ethical leadership issues (Benoit, 2015). In contemporary public relations literature, this is explained as a reputation spillover, where negative characteristics inherent in an individual are automatically attached to the institutional entity they represent (Ward & Gaither, 2017).

Social media algorithms amplify these negative narratives, accelerating the formation of group identities aimed at delivering social punishment to the brand. The mass boycott experienced by Erspo is identified as a manifestation of collective anger organized organically through hashtags and rejection narratives in cyberspace (Kompas, 2024b). Consequently, professional boundaries collapse, and the firm is forced to face the consequences of an uncontrolled individual digital ego within a highly transparent communication environment (Park & Berger, 2024; Zerfass et al., 2020).

2. The Paradox of Authenticity

The dilemma between the desire for self-expression on social media and the responsibility of being the "face of the firm" serves as a primary trigger for executive communication failure. This "authenticity paradox" arises when the urge for unfiltered personal expression clashes with public expectations of professional corporate communication protocols (Park & Berger, 2024). In the Erspo case, the leader's attempt to

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show an "honest" digital self was instead constructed by the audience as a violation of the institutional integrity expected of a national product license holder.

Conceptually, digital authenticity is often misunderstood by leaders as the freedom to provide direct emotional responses to online criticism. However, from a public relations perspective, authenticity should be realized through consistency between personal moral values and organizational strategic goals to build stakeholder trust (Ward & Gaither, 2017). The failure of two-way symmetrical communication between Erspo and national football supporters is a consequence of the organization's inability to listen empathetically. An ideal PR framework should be based on balanced dialogue to achieve mutual understanding (Kompas, 2024b), yet in this case, the narrative remained one-way and defensive, closing the space for constructive discussion (Coombs, 2019; Zerfass et al., 2020).

B. Proposed Framework: The "Empathy-First" Model

1. De-escalation Strategies

The separation of communication authority during a crisis is a crucial first step in de-escalation to prevent individual ego from interfering with corporate narratives. When a crisis is triggered by leadership behavior, communication authority must immediately be shifted from the executive's personal accounts to official organizational channels managed by professional PR staff (Coombs, 2019). This separation functions as a reputational isolation mechanism, allowing the company's voice to be constructed as a more objective entity capable of dampening emotional tensions between the leader and the digital audience.

Transitioning from defensive top-down communication to "dialogic communication" is an absolute prerequisite for restoring brand legitimacy. Dialogic communication requires organizations to abandon positions of superiority and treat the public as equal partners in seeking conflict resolution (Kompas, 2024b). Applying this strategy to the Erspo crisis requires an explicit acknowledgment of communication failures by top management. The proposed framework emphasizes that every public statement must contain elements of genuine empathy to demonstrate corporate sensitivity toward the values held by the wider community (Benoit, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2020).

2. PR Governance for Executives

PR Governance for Executives is conceptualized as an internal regulatory framework governing the digital communication behavior of top leaders. This need arises from the inherent risk of reputation spillover, where every personal statement by an executive has a direct impact on public perception of the organization (Park & Berger, 2024). Through the

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implementation of strict communication protocols, social media interactions can be filtered to ensure alignment between individual identity and the collective ethical values of the company.

In this governance framework, emotional intelligence training and digital crisis management must be provided regularly to organizational leaders. Erspo's communication failure is identified as a result of lacking digital conduct guidelines capable of limiting personal ego during mass public criticism (Coombs, 2019). Effective PR governance also demands that executives understand their role as the "face of the firm" cannot be discarded even in private digital spaces (Ward & Gaither, 2017). By integrating strategic control and emotional intelligence into executive digital behavior, organizations can build a robust reputational fortress against the character crises often emerging in dynamic social media ecosystems (Kompas, 2024b; Zerfass et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The primary conclusion of this analysis underscores that in the current 2026 digital landscape, corporate reputation is the result of a precise harmony between technical product quality and the communicative behavior of top executives. A brand's success is no longer determined solely by the functional or aesthetic superiority of its commodities but depends heavily on the character integrity projected by leaders in the digital sphere. The evidence suggests that a failure to maintain a balance between business performance and communicative ethics can trigger an instantaneous collapse of public trust, even for companies holding strategic market positions. Therefore, "digital humility" is identified as a vital pillar in modern public relations management to mitigate the risk of confrontation with vocal audiences.

Furthermore, the transformation of crisis management from a reactive approach to a character-based preventive strategy is an absolute necessity for future business sustainability. Every interaction by a leader on social media platforms must be managed with the full realization that stakeholders no longer perceive any boundary between personal identity and official corporate positioning. The implementation of the "Empathy-First" model proposed in this study serves as a guide for practitioners to prioritize humanity over formal authority. This shift ensures that symmetrical relationships between organizations and the public remain well-maintained, transforming potential character crises into institutional resilience.

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