

APOLOGY STRATEGY, SOURCE CREDIBILITY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION: A CRISIS COMMUNICATION EXPERIMENT ON THE MAKAN BERGIZI GRATIS (MBG) PROGRAM IN WEST JAVA

Dary Farah Fikriyyah^{1a*}, Dian Wardiana Sjuchro^{2b}, and Heru Ryanto Budiana^{3c}

¹²³ Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Communication Science, Padjadjaran University, Sumedang, 45363 Indonesia

^aE-mail: daryfarah@gmail.com

^bE-mail: d.wardiana@mail.unpad.ac.id

^cE-mail: heru.ryanto@mail.unpad.ac.id

(*) Corresponding Author

daryfarah@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of apology message type and source credibility on organizational reputation during a public sector crisis. Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and source credibility theory, this research using a 2×2 between-subjects experiment with 160 Generation Z participants in West Java. Participants were exposed to simulated crisis scenarios involving a mass food poisoning incident in Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program. Data were analyzed using Two-Way ANOVA. The findings show that apology message type did not significantly affect organizational reputation ($p = 0.259$). However, source credibility had a significant effect ($p = 0.004$, $\eta^2 = 0.052$), with official government sources producing more favourable reputation evaluations than influencers. No significant interaction effect was found between apology message type and source credibility ($F(1,156) = 0.120$, $p = 0.730$). Additional analyses suggest that participants' prior attitudes toward the MBG program may also influence reputation assessments. The results indicate that, in public sector crises involving public safety concerns, source credibility is more influential than message variation in shaping organizational reputation. The study contributes to crisis communication research and offers practical implications for government institutions seeking to maintain public trust during crises.

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INTRODUCTION

A crisis is an unexpected event that poses a threat to stakeholders and has the potential to negatively impact an organization. For governments, effectiveness of crisis management and public response are essential, because media coverage and public discourse largely determine public perceptions of the organization. Organizational reputation defined as the audience's beliefs and judgments regarding the organization, is particularly vulnerable during crises and had direct impact for the organization's legitimacy and performance (Carpenter, 2010; Coombs dan Holladay, 2021). Consequently, well-crafted crisis communication strategies are central to efforts to repair reputation.

The mass food poisoning incident that occurred in 2025 in the Indonesian free meal nutrition programme, known as Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG), serves as a cautionary example, highlighting the rapid deterioration of a public programme's reputation. The incident resulted in a national communication crisis, with negative sentiment predominating in the digital sphere. An analysis conducted by Drone Empirit (October 2025) at a time when the crisis was escalating, recorded a negative sentiment rate of 77%, with over 172,000 mentions and 542 million interactions. Meanwhile, an examination of Google Trends and online media coverage revealed a surge in negative searches and news coverage throughout September–November 2025. The findings of a national survey (CELIOS, 2025) also indicate a decline in the perceived performance of the leadership of the Badan Gizi Nasional (BGN). This is indicative of the fact that the handling of the MBG crisis has affected public perception not only of individual leaders but also of the organisation's overall reputation. The public's propensity to seek information during periods of crisis indicates a requirement for transparency, accountability, and corrective action.

Crisis communication literature identifies apology as one of recommended strategy for rebuilding reputation of organization when the organization is held responsible. An apology can be partial (an expression of concern or regret) or full (acceptance of responsibility), with the main difference lying in the organization's commitment to accepting responsibility. Research shows that apologies can reduce public anger and distrust, yet its effectiveness is not always consistent and depends on message construction and the context of public reception. Additionally, the dynamics of the digital space and shifting audience preferences which dominated by Generation Z tend to place greater value on empathy, transparency, and accountability as factors influencing how apology messages are received (Karinshak et al., 2024). Although they are not direct beneficiaries of the program, Generation Z's perception of the national program can be considered representative of public opinion (Jamal et al., 2023). This makes them a relevant group of respondents for measuring public perceptions regarding information literacy and digital trust (Indrayani, 2024).

From the messenger's perspective, the credibility of the source is a key variable that moderates the persuasive power of communication (Hovland & Weiss, 1952). Trustworthiness and expertise as the main components of credibility determine the extent to which the public accepts new information from a particular source (Ohanian, 1991; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Yu & Chen, 2020). In crisis communication, the selection of a credible spokesperson plays a significant role in rebuilding an organization's reputation. However, despite its importance, source credibility has not been fully explored in many crisis communication studies, particularly those focused on public organizations (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Shah & Wei, 2022).

This study responds to three interrelated gaps. First, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of apologies is mixed: some studies report positive reputational effects, while others show contingent or null results depending on framing and audience. Second, the moderating role of source credibility in public sector crises remains under-explored. Third, existing research disproportionately examines corporate crises and organizational actions, with fewer investigations into public reactions to crises within government agencies. The MBG case foregrounds these gaps: effective public sector crisis response must both convey facts and restore public trust through appropriate communicative choices.

Based on the gap, this study simultaneously examines the effects of the type of apology message and the source's credibility level on organizational reputation in the case of the MBG Program crisis. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) Does the type of apology message affect the BGN organization's reputation during a crisis?; (2) Does the source's credibility level affect the BGN organization's reputation during a

crisis?; and (3) How does the interaction between the type of apology message and source credibility affect the BGN organization's reputation? An experimental approach was chosen to test the causal influence of these two variables in a controlled crisis situation, while also providing an empirical contribution to the literature on public sector crisis communication.

Theoretical integration draws on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Corporate Apologia, image repair theory, and source credibility theory to explicate the mechanisms through which apology content and messenger attributes influence public evaluations. Guided by these frameworks, the study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: *The type of apology message (accommodative vs. defensive) exerts a significant main effect on organizational reputation.*

H2: *The level of source credibility (government vs. influencer) exerts a significant main effect on organizational reputation.*

H3: *There is a significant interaction effect between the type of apology message and source credibility in shaping organizational reputation.*

Theoretically, this study integrates SCCT, Corporate Apologia Theory, Image Repair Theory, and Source Credibility Theory to understand the mechanisms by which apology messages and source credibility work to influence public reputation evaluations. Practically, the findings are expected to provide strategic recommendations for policymakers and public communication practitioners in designing evidence-based crisis responses, positioning source credibility and the construction of apology messages as central elements for restoring legitimacy, particularly among young audiences in digital spaces.

METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with an experimental design to identify casual effects of manipulated independent variables on the dependent variable. Based on Coombs's (2007) recommendation to employ experimental methods in SCCT research, a quasi-experimental 2×2 factorial between-subjects design was implemented to test the joint and main effects of apology type and source credibility. The design enables rigorous testing of two manipulated independent variables and their interaction under controlled conditions.

The target population comprised Generation Z (born 1997–2012), with the sample drawn from undergraduate students at public and private universities in West Java. Sample size was determined through an a priori power analysis using G*Power (alpha = 0.05, power = 0.80, effect size $f = 0.25$ [equivalent to Cohen's $d \approx 0.5$], numerator $df = 1$, four groups), which produced a minimum $n = 128$; this was increased to $n = 160$ to account for potential attrition. Participants met inclusion criteria: age 18–29, at least a high-school diploma or current bachelor's enrollment, active social media use (≥ 3 hours/day), prior awareness of MBG food-poisoning reports, and informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Padjadjaran University.

Data collection was conducted simultaneously over three days to minimize temporal bias. The grouping of participants into four experimental groups was conducted spontaneously based on the order in which participants filled out the consent form to participate in the experiment, ensuring no researcher intervention in the treatment assigned to participants. Respondents completed a digital survey instrument that presented the experimental stimuli representing the four conditions (Group 1: accommodative apology $\times$ government; Group 2: defensive apology $\times$ government; Group 3: accommodative apology $\times$ influencer; Group 4: defensive apology $\times$ influencer) followed by standardized measures aligned with the study variables. Manipulation checks were performed in a pilot ($n = 30$) and during the main data collection ($n = 160$). The experimental stimuli consisted of realistic, mock Instagram posts customized for each treatment condition. The textual stimuli for all four conditions are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. The context of manipulation instruments for the four experimental group

Apology Type (X1)	Government Source (Head of Badan Gizi National Account)	Influencer Source (@ferryirwansyah, representative social influencer)
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Accommodative with responsibility	[Group 1 Treatment Text]: An official statement from BGN acknowledging systemic failures, offering a public apology, and expressing a willingness to take responsibility for the victims, along with a commitment to further investigation.	[Group 3 Treatment Text]: An influencer post voicing the program's apology, expressing deep empathy for the victims, and urging the public to support the next steps taken by the organization.
Defensive Apology	[Group 2 Treatment Text]: An official statement from BGN denying the allegations outright, emphasizing that the fault lies with the supply chain/farmers, and defending internal procedures.	[Group 4 Treatment Text]: An influencer's post stating they are not part of the program and blaming a third party for the incident.

The four manipulation instruments are presented as Instagram posts, adapted to the design styles of the two account types. The BGN Head's account is distinguished by the presence of a logo and a more formal font. Concurrently, the influencer's account exhibited a screenshot of a note on a telephone, thereby aligning with the prevalent trend of clarification posts disseminated by influencers. The inferential analyses comprised two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test main and interaction effects, with supplementary ANCOVA models controlling for baseline attitudes toward MBG, perceived source credibility, and program involvement. Descriptive statistics were prepared in Microsoft Excel, and hypothesis testing was executed in IBM SPSS Statistics 29.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Participant Characteristics

The study recruited 160 participants: 31.88% male and 68.12% female. All respondents belonged to Generation Z: 56% were aged 18–21, 40% were 22–25, and 4% were older than 25. Geographically, 48% resided in Bandung, 10% in Depok, 9% in Bekasi, and the remaining 26% were distributed across other regions in West Java. The sample was nearly balanced by university type (47% public, 52% private). By highest education attained, 67.50% were college graduates, 31.25% held a bachelor's degree (S-1), and 1.25% had a diploma.

Validity and Reliability Test

Item validity was assessed using Pearson correlation. Source credibility items (X2) yielded an average validity coefficient of 0.475, while organizational reputation items (Y) ranged from 0.693 to 0.758; all exceeded the critical r value ($r_{table} = 0.155$), and thus were retained. Internal consistency was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha. The source credibility scale produced $\alpha = 0.642$, which is acceptable for exploratory and early-stage explanatory research (Hair et al., 2017). The organizational reputation scale demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.968$). Overall, the instrument shows satisfactory psychometric properties for subsequent analyses.

Manipulation Check and Assumption Testing

The manipulation check was conducted to determine whether participants perceived the experimental stimuli in accordance with the intended manipulation. Manipulation checks used one-sample t-tests against the scale midpoint (3). For apology type (X1), the mean was 3.47 ($n = 160$), indicating participants correctly distinguished accommodative versus defensive framings. For source credibility (X2), the mean was 4.11, confirming participants perceived differences in source legitimacy between the government and influencer conditions. Levene's test for homogeneity indicated non-significant results across groups (Median-based $p = 0.560$), fulfilling the homogeneity assumption for Two-Way ANOVA.

Table 1. Results of the two-way ANOVA test

Code	Path Analysis	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Partial Eta Squared</i>	Decision
H1	Apology → Reputation	1	232.806	1.284	.259	.008	Not Significant
H2	Source → Reputation	1	1556.256	8.580	.004	.052	Significant
H3	Apology*Source → Reputation	1	21.756	.120	.730	.001	Not Significant

Main Effect of Apology Message Type on Organizational Reputation

The Two-Way ANOVA showed no significant main effect of apology type on BGN's reputation, $F(1,156) = 1.284$, $p = 0.259$, Partial $\eta^2 = 0.008$, so H1 is not supported. From an SCCT perspective, this result suggests that altering rhetorical framing alone (accommodative vs. defensive) does little to change reputational judgments when audiences rely on broader cues to attribute responsibility (Coombs, 2007).

A likely explanation is limited textual elaboration processing: although the manipulation check mean (3.47) indicates general recognition of an apology, participants focused primarily on opening sentences that signaled an apology in both conditions and did not consistently register deeper differences in subsequent paragraphs. This cognitive shortcut reduces the practical impact of nuanced message framing. Bundy et al. (2018) and Li (2024) similarly argue that reputation management depends on more than rhetorical choices; an organization's avowed identity in text often fails to shift the public's ascribed identity rooted in prior beliefs. In some Asian contexts, apologies have become routinized and lose persuasive power unless accompanied by tangible action (Wu & Cui, 2019).

When food poisoning cases peaked across several provinces, the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) responded with an official apology. However, social media monitoring by Drone Emprit (2026) revealed that negative sentiment continued to dominate the digital space, specifically on X (89.7%), Facebook (44.9%), Instagram (30.0%), YouTube (24.0%), and TikTok (20.4%) fuelled by critical narratives such as "MBG Head Blames Farmers for MBG Poisoning" and "Hundreds of Students Poisoned by MBG."

Viewed through William L. Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory and Hearit (2006), BGN's public statement proved theoretically and practically ineffective due to both structural and contextual shortcomings. First, the apology was delivered by the Deputy Head of Public Communications rather than the organization's top leader, a lower-level delegation that diminished its perceived sincerity. Second, while the message was cooperative and acknowledged the error, it offered mere normative promises against future recurrence instead of providing concrete compensation or material restitution (Putri Syam, 2024). Because the crisis was both severe and recurrent, this lack of tangible remedies ultimately backfired; the public perceived the conciliatory language as a sign of systemic failure rather than genuine accountability, thereby failing to restore institutional trust.

Finally, multi-actor complexity within MBG (BGN as regulator, SPPG implementer, suppliers as third parties) produced a "blame game" dynamic that blurred responsibility and diluted the effect of a single organization's apology. When accountability is fragmented across actors, isolated textual apologies lose persuasive force regardless of framing. In sum, based on the SCCT and the data confirm, apology message as standalone variable cannot overcome cognitive shortcuts, contextual distrust, and multi-actor diffusion of responsibility in high-stakes public safety crises.

Main Effect: The Influence of Source Credibility on Organizational Reputation

The Two-Way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of source credibility on organizational reputation, $F(1,156) = 8.580$, $p = 0.004$, Partial $\eta^2 = 0.052$, thus supporting H2. From an SCCT perspective, this indicates that who delivers a crisis message function as a primary cue in public evaluations of responsibility and reputation (Coombs, 2007). The effect size (Partial $\eta^2 = 0.052$) corresponds to a medium effect (Cohen, 1988) and implies that source credibility alone explained roughly 5.2% of variance in reputation scores. This finding aligns with source credibility theory: perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise shape message acceptance and downstream organizational judgments (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In the experiment, participants rated BGN's reputation higher when the message originated from a government spokesperson than from an influencer, showing that perceived messenger legitimacy mitigates reputational harm more effectively than changes in textual framing.

ANCOVA results reinforce this conclusion: individual perceptions of source credibility accounted for a substantial portion of explained variance ($\approx 31\%$) when controlling for covariates. Practically, this suggests that audiences use source credibility as a salient heuristic in crisis contexts; credible messengers increase persuasive impact and may enhance compliance with corrective measures (Shah & Wei, 2022). These empirical patterns are consistent with SCCT's emphasis on credible actors and channels as central to reputation protection (Coombs, 2009). They also caution against overreliance on influencer partnerships for high-stakes, safety-related crises. Although influencers can extend reach among Gen Z (Karinshak et al., 2024), the present study shows that, when physical safety is at stake, Generation Z respondents in West Java preferred formal authorities as reliable information anchors (Jin et al., 2022; Lee, 2022).

Finally, the results critique real-world BGN practice: delegating crisis messaging to lower-level officials or external endorsers risks signaling insufficient organizational seriousness. Theory and prior evidence indicate that top leadership presence confers symbolic accountability and credibility; its absence can prolong negative sentiment and impede image repair (Fombrun, 2007). Empirically, the public views the presence of top leadership—as the personification of the organization—as the most trustworthy, accountable, and credible source of crisis response (Kim & Park, 2017 in Beldad & von Rosenstiel, 2024). The findings may indicate that delegating crisis communication to lower-level officials was perceived less favourably by participants. Delegating the task to the Deputy Head of Public Communications explains why negative public sentiment remained widespread. The public perceived that the organization did not demonstrate the level of seriousness expected of a regent or agency head, so the communication strategy implemented failed to restore the institution's reputation as a whole (Coombs, 2008; Hearit, 2006). In sum, both theory and data underscore that messenger credibility is a decisive factor in reputational outcomes during public-safety crises.

The Interaction Effect of Apology Message Type and Source Credibility on Organizational Reputation

Based on the hypothesis testing regarding the interaction effect between apology message type and source credibility, an F-value of $F(1, 156) = 0.120$ was obtained with a significance level of $p = 0.730$. Consequently, this non-significant result requires the formal rejection of the third hypothesis (H3), indicating that the combination of message framing and source attributes does not jointly influence stakeholder perceptions. From an SCCT perspective, the non-significant interaction indicates that messenger attributes and message framing operate largely independently in shaping reputational judgments. Statistically, the interaction accounts for only 0.1% of variance, which is practically negligible.

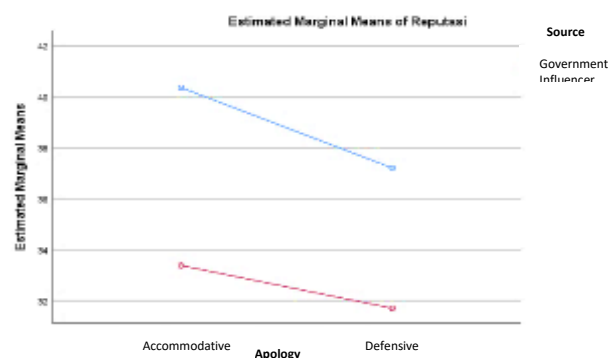


Figure 1. Interaction graphic between X1 and X2

Methodologically, a significant interaction is indicated by intersecting plot lines, suggesting that the direction of influence of one variable change depending on the level of the other variable. However, the visualization in Figure 1 shows two plot lines (the Government group and the Influencer group) moving in parallel from an accommodative

message condition toward a defensive one. The consistent vertical distance and width between the two lines confirm that the Government group consistently receives significantly higher reputation ratings compared to the Influencer group.

The result shows that the strong influence of the source credibility variable is independent and constant, unaffected by variations in the message strategies employed. This indicates that participants process the two elements of crisis communication (message content and the source of the crisis communication) as two relatively independent variables. When the source is perceived as credible, reputation tends to remain better, regardless of the type of message. Conversely, when the source is viewed as less credible, reputation remains lower even if the message content is altered. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that an apology during a crisis is not always sufficient to bring about a change in reputation unless it is followed by tangible, consistent accountability measures and a trusted communication source. Several studies indicate that the public tends to assess the authenticity and seriousness of a crisis response based on the authority of the source, not merely on the rhetorical construction of the message (Hearit, 2006; Benoit, 1995; Shah & Wei, 2022). In the context of MBG, this makes sense because recurring and public-facing crises tend to make audiences more sensitive to institutional credibility than to the nuances distinguishing accommodative from defensive messages.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that accommodative and defensive apology messages, as crisis response strategies, are not strong enough to influence or interact with source credibility regarding organizational reputation. In other words, participants tend to perceive the organization's reputation as better when the message is delivered by a source deemed more credible, and as lower when the source is viewed as less credible. These findings suggest that in crisis situations, the public not only evaluates what the organization says but is also significantly influenced by who delivers the message. Consistent with this, the literature on source credibility emphasizes that trustworthiness and expertise are the two primary components shaping public acceptance of communication messages (Hovland & Weiss, 1952).

These results are based on *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT), which emphasizes that the effectiveness of a crisis response depends heavily on the attribution of responsibility and the legitimacy of the communication source in the public's eyes (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2009). Within this framework, source credibility functions as a heuristic cue that helps the public assess whether an organization's response is trustworthy, especially when they face situations filled with uncertainty. Therefore, the absence of an interaction effect in this study can be understood as an indication that the influence of source credibility is relatively stable and does not change significantly even when the apology message is modified into an accommodative or defensive form. This finding reinforces the view that during crises, the authority of the source often serves as a stronger initial determinant than variations in the message's rhetoric itself (Bundy et al., 2018; Shah & Wei, 2022).

To explore the dynamics of audience perception more comprehensively, the researchers conducted a follow-up analysis using ANCOVA, incorporating several control variables: initial preference for the MBG Program, perception of source credibility, and participants' level of involvement in the FNM program. This step was taken because audience responses to crises are often an accumulation of past psychological predispositions, rather than merely an immediate reaction to experimental stimuli (Loge & Coombs, 2019). The results indicate that initial preference for the MBG program had the greatest contribution, with a Partial Eta Squared of 62%. Perception of source credibility accounted for 31%, while participant involvement in the MBG program accounted for 6%. These findings suggest that participants' initial attitudes toward the program serve as a crucial filter in interpreting the message stimulus. The public who were already skeptical of the MBG program from the outset tend to engage in cognitive rejection of the organization's image-recovery efforts—a phenomenon known as the *velcro effect* in crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

The distribution of participants' initial preferences also supports this explanation. A total of 39% of participants had a negative initial preference, 29% were neutral, and 32% were supportive of MBG. This composition indicates that the majority of respondents did not enter the experiment with a truly neutral attitude. In such a context, the impact

of the apology message becomes harder to discern because participants' evaluations of the organization have already been shaped by their prior experiences, media exposure, or existing opinions. This finding is significant because it confirms that, on highly contested public issues, communication messages interact with the audience's pre-existing predispositions.

In practice, the findings of this study offer critical strategic insights for public relations practitioners in the public sector, particularly in designing effective crisis communication strategies. In the event that an organization finds itself confronted with a crisis, the implementation of expeditious and customized planning that is in alignment with the distinct phase of the crisis in question assumes paramount importance (Zuhdi & Ayuningtyas, 2024). A crisis management team's mandate must encompass comprehensive media handling, which includes managing aggressive journalistic inquiries and carefully selecting verbal framing, as well as actively mitigating public backlash across social media platforms. The resolution phase is expected to result in the development of new, robust policy programs that will serve as a pivotal moment in the process of institutional recovery and success following the crisis (Nugraha & Choerunnisa, 2020).

Additionally, the ability to communicate with precision, transparency, and credibility during emergencies is a fundamental leadership competency that differs significantly from routine, peacetime organizational communication (Silviani et al., 2020). When a crisis threatens public safety, a normative, on-paper apology will never be sufficient to restore an organization's reputation unless it is paired with tangible corrective actions and delivered by a trusted authority. In situations of high stakes, the credibility of institutions is paramount. The use of third-party endorsements, facilitated by influencers or popular figures, is not a substitute for institutional credibility. The public inherently demands accountability from formal authorities who possess direct responsibility, expertise, and the executive capacity to act. Consequently, organizations must position their top leadership or an official spokesperson with high legitimacy as the primary face of the crisis response to successfully restore public trust (Benoit, 1995, 2015; Hearit, 2006; Kim & Park, 2017).

This finding also suggests that, particularly among Generation Z in West Java, digital popularity does not always supersede the authenticity and authority of the source, particularly in cases involving public safety. Despite the pervasive influence of these social media personalities and their ubiquity in the digital landscape, the findings of this study suggest that trust in formal institutions continues to play a pivotal role in determining reputational assessments during times of crisis. Consequently, public organizations should not place too much reliance on external figures as reputation protectors. Instead, they should develop communication strategies that are firmly based in transparency, accountability, and the consistency of messages from formally responsible sources.

CONCLUSION

This study yields two interrelated implications. Theoretically, the findings indicate a substantial shift in the antecedents of reputation evaluation within the SCCT. "Who is speaking" has a more significant influence than "what is said." Through experimental testing in the context of the MBG Program crisis, it was demonstrated that manipulating textual messages framed as accommodating or defensive failed to trigger a change in public perception of the BGN organization's reputation as an organization in crisis. Conversely, the credibility of the information source emerges as a stable and constant determining variable. Although many previous studies have examined the role of source credibility, most of them treated source credibility as a moderator variable that either strengthens or weakens its impact in crisis communication. This study provides new insights by treating source credibility as a primary variable that has a direct and significant influence on organizational reputation.

Practically, the findings of this study serve as a stark warning for the communication management of bureaucratic institutions. The findings suggest that reliance on external endorsers may be less effective than official institutional spokespersons in public safety crises. Delegating crisis response to second-tier officials or digital partners is instead perceived by the public as a sign of insincerity and a shirking of responsibility, which in turn exacerbates the crisis of state legitimacy. To restore public trust within a multi-actor crisis structure, the highest responsible

institution must place its top leadership on the front lines as a tangible demonstration of accountability and commitment.

The reconstruction of the reputation of a public organization plagued by recurring crises will never be complete if it relies solely on the skill of crafting words or polishing narratives on paper. A bureaucratic apology will only hold statistical and social significance if it is delivered directly by a trusted top leader, and followed by a declaration of corrective actions and a concrete compensation scheme for affected victims. This study opens the door for future research to explore more dynamic crisis communication management through audiovisual stimuli and variations in response timing, in order to formulate public communication patterns that are not only digitally responsive but also morally responsible.

This study has several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, the short timeframe and text-based stimuli may not fully capture the dynamic, evolving nature of public perception compared to longitudinal designs or realistic audiovisual formats. Second, the focus on Generation Z in West Java and the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program limits the generalizability of these findings to other demographics, regions, or organizational contexts. Finally, participants' initial preferences emerged as a strong confounding factor, highlighting the need for stricter controls on audience predispositions.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track how the effects of source credibility and apologies evolve into the crisis recovery phase. Additionally, incorporating variables such as institutional trust, media exposure, issue engagement, and concrete corrective actions will provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how public trust is built, maintained, and restored during public sector crises.

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