



Situational Crisis Communication Theory Analysis on PT Kereta Api Indonesia's Crisis Response to the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train Incident in 2026

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the crisis communication strategy implemented by PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) in handling the 2026 Argo Bromo Anggrek train incident using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with document analysis as the primary data collection technique. The data were obtained from official statements, press releases, company publications, and relevant news reports related to the crisis response undertaken by PT KAI. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that PT KAI implemented three major crisis communication strategies, namely instructing information, adjusting information, and rebuild strategy. Instructing information was reflected in the dissemination of information regarding the chronology of the incident, evacuation processes, and operational updates. Adjusting information was demonstrated through expressions of empathy and condolences toward victims and their families. Meanwhile, rebuild strategy emerged as the dominant approach through victim assistance, safety evaluation commitments, and efforts to restore public trust. The study concludes that the implementation of crisis communication strategies aligned with SCCT principles contributes to effective crisis management and organizational reputation recovery. This research provides theoretical contributions to crisis communication studies and practical recommendations for public transportation organizations in responding to crisis situations.

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Introduction

Public transportation is one of the sectors that has a high level of vulnerability to crises because its operations are directly related to human safety and public services. When a transportation accident occurs, organizations face not only operational disruptions, but also challenges in maintaining public trust and company reputation. In these conditions, crisis communication is a strategic aspect that determines how the organization responds to emergency situations, manages stakeholder perceptions, and minimizes the reputational impact that arises from the crisis. Research shows that crisis communication has evolved to become an integral part of organizational crisis management, especially in the digital age that allows the dissemination of information to take place very quickly (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2022).

The development of digital media and social media has also changed the communication pattern of organizational crises. Information about a crisis can spread widely in a matter of minutes through various digital platforms so that organizations are required to provide a fast, accurate, transparent, and empathetic response. The accuracy of communication strategies implemented during times of crisis will affect the level of public trust in the organization (Coombs, 2021). On April 27, 2026, an accident occurred involving the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train and the KRL in the East Bekasi area. The incident caused casualties and injuries and received wide attention from the public through mass media and social media reports. As a national railway transportation operator, PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) has become in the public spotlight in handling the crisis. This condition shows the importance of crisis communication as an instrument to maintain public trust and organizational reputation during times of crisis (Avery et al., 2021).

One of the theories that is widely used in crisis communication research is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs. This theory explains that an organization's response strategy must be tailored to the level of responsibility that the public associates with the organization. SCCT groups crisis response strategies into the categories of denial, diminish, and rebuild and emphasizes the importance of instructing information and adjusting information in the crisis communication process (Coombs, 2021). The study of crisis communication continues to develop as the complexity of the crisis faced by organizations increases. One of the most widely used theories in crisis communication research is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs. In the update of the SCCT concept, Coombs (2022) explained that crisis communication strategies must consider the perception of the responsibility given to the public to the organization so that the chosen response can minimize the threat to the organization's reputation.

Research conducted by Coombs and Tachkova (2023) developed SCCT by including elements of moral outrage or moral anger as factors that affect public judgment of a crisis. The results of the study show that public emotions have a great influence on the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies implemented by organizations. Furthermore, Frederick, Schmidt, and Pegoraro (2023) applied SCCT to crisis cases in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). The study found that communication strategies that align with the level of organizational responsibility can help the reputation recovery process and increase public acceptance of organizations that are facing a crisis. In the context of the transportation industry, Leung, Wu, and Sun (2022) found that transportation organizations facing crises with low levels of responsibility still need a communication strategy that is able to rebuild public trust. The research shows that rebuild strategies can have a positive impact on public perception and service usage intentions in the future.

In addition, the research of Hamid, Mohamad, and Ismail (2024) confirms that effective crisis communication is not only aimed at the external public, but also to the internal public of the organization. Clear, transparent, and consistent communication has been proven to contribute to the overall effectiveness of crisis management. In the Indonesian context, Makdin et al.'s (2023) research on the handling of the Brigadier J case shows that SCCT can be used to analyze how organizations rebuild public trust through transparent and sustainable information delivery during times of crisis. From these studies, it can be concluded that SCCT is still relevant to analyze organizational crisis communication strategies. However, most of the previous research has focused on the sports sector, government, corporations, and the aviation industry. Research that specifically examines PT Kereta Api Indonesia's crisis communication strategy on the Argo Bromo Anggrek train incident in 2026 is still very limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing communication strategies in crisis management of PT Kereta Api Indonesia using the SCCT perspective.

Previous research has extensively examined the application of SCCT in various organizational contexts, such as sports organizations (Frederick et al., 2023), government institutions (Makdin et al., 2023), and the aviation industry (Leung et al., 2022). However, research on the application of SCCT in the railway transportation sector in Indonesia is still relatively limited. In addition, there have not been many studies that specifically analyze PT Kereta Api Indonesia's communication strategy in handling the crisis caused by the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train incident in 2026. Therefore, this study offers a contribution in the form of an empirical analysis of the implementation of PT KAI's crisis communication strategy based on the perspective of SCCT in the context of Indonesian public transportation.

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand and describe the crisis communication strategy carried out by PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) in handling the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train incident in 2026. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on the interpretation of the meaning, message, and communication strategies conveyed by organizations during the crisis handling process. According to Creswell and Poth (2024), qualitative research allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of social phenomena based on the context and experiences that occur. The subject of this research is PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) as an organization that is facing a crisis due to the Argo Bromo Anggrek train incident in 2026. The object of the research is the crisis communication strategy applied by PT KAI in responding to crises based on the perspective of SCCT developed by Coombs (2022).

Primary data in this research was obtained through documentation of various forms of official communication of PT KAI published during the crisis, including press releases, official company statements, PT KAI's official social media uploads, and information published through the company's website. The selected documents are documents that were published from the occurrence of the incident to the end of the initial crisis response phase (adjust the date period according to the research data). The criteria for selecting primary data include: (1) documents come from PT KAI's official channels; (2) contain information related to the company's response to the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train incident; and (3) contain messages related to crisis communication strategies, such as information delivery, empathy, responsibility, or reputation restoration.

Meanwhile, the secondary data were obtained from journal articles, books, reports, and online media reports relevant to the research topic. The journal articles used are prioritized from publications in 2021–2026 to ensure the up-to-date study on crisis communication and the application of SCCT.

Meanwhile, classical literature that is the theoretical foundation is still used if it has a strong relevance to the focus of the research. The data collection technique was carried out through documentation studies. The researcher collected all documents related to PT KAI's communication response after the Argo Bromo Anggrek train incident, then carried out a selection process based on the criteria that had been set. Documents that do not directly address the company's response to the crisis or do not contain elements of crisis communication are not included in the analysis. Furthermore, documents that meet the criteria are classified based on the type of media, the time of publication, and the substance of the communication message delivered.

Data analysis was carried out using the interactive analysis model Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) which consisted of three stages: (1) at the data reduction stage, the researcher selects and groups data related to PT KAI's crisis communication strategy; (2) then at the data presentation stage is carried out by organizing the data into categories that are in accordance with the SCCT concept, such as instructing information, adjusting information, deny strategy, diminish strategy, and rebuild strategy; (3) the conclusion stage is carried out by interpreting the findings of the research to find out the crisis communication strategy that is predominantly used by PT KAI in handling the incident. To improve the validity of the data, this study uses a source triangulation technique by comparing information obtained from various official documents of PT KAI, mass media reports, and relevant academic literature. Triangulation is carried out to ensure data consistency and increase the credibility of research results.

Results and Discussions

1. Results

a. PT Kereta Api Indonesia's Initial Response in Facing the Crisis

Based on the results of the analyzed documentation, PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) responded immediately after the collision incident of the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train and the KRL Commuter Line in the East Bekasi area in April 2026. The response was conveyed through the company's official communication channels in the form of press releases and KAI's official social media. The initial information published included the chronology of the incident, the evacuation process of the victims, the condition of the train travel after the incident, and the handling measures taken by the company. In an official statement published by KAI, the company said that the evacuation process was carried out with related parties and passenger safety was the top priority in handling incidents. In addition, KAI also conveys the development of operational conditions of train travel periodically to the public. The results of the documentation also show that the company coordinates with various stakeholders, including health workers, security forces, local governments, and related transportation service operators. The coordination was carried out to support the process of handling victims and restoring post-incident transportation services.

b. Implementation of Instructing Information

The findings of the study show that PT KAI actively conveys information related to actions that the public needs to know during the crisis. The information includes the evacuation process of victims, train travel conditions, service transfers, and developments in handling incidents. Information is delivered periodically through official social media and company press releases. Information delivery is carried out from the initial stage of the incident until the handling process takes place so that the public gets continuous information updates.

c. Implementing Adjusting Information

The results of the study show that PT KAI not only conveys factual information related to the incident, but also provides a message that shows empathy for the victim and the victim's family. In various official statements, the company expressed its condolences to the affected victims and its commitment to provide assistance to victims undergoing medical treatment. In addition, the company also expressed concern for the psychological condition and needs of the victims during the handling process. These findings show that the communication carried out does not only focus on the operational aspect, but also pays attention to the humanitarian aspect.

d. Implementation of Rebuild Strategy

The findings of the study show that the most dominant strategy implemented by PT KAI is the rebuild strategy. This can be seen from various statements by the company that affirm its commitment to providing assistance to victims, evaluating operational safety systems, and improving aspects that are considered to contribute to the occurrence of incidents. In addition to conveying information to the public, the company also shows efforts to restore trust through concrete actions in the form of victim assistance, coordination with related parties, and conveying commitments to improve the safety of transportation services.

2. Discussion

The results of the study show that PT Kereta Api Indonesia applies a combination of instructing information, adjusting information, and rebuild strategy strategies in handling the crisis due to the Argo Bromo Anggrek train incident in 2026. The three strategies show compatibility with the SCCT which emphasizes the importance of information delivery, public emotion management, and efforts to restore an organization's reputation during times of crisis (Coombs, 2022). The first findings show that PT KAI provided information quickly through the company's official communication channels. This step reflects the application of instructing information that aims to reduce public uncertainty and help the public understand the conditions that are occurring. According to Coombs (2022), the rapid and accurate delivery of information is the initial response that organizations must carry out to reduce the risk of speculation and disinformation during a crisis. These findings are in line with research by Kim and Kim (2023) who showed that the speed of information delivery through digital media contributes to increased public trust in organizations facing crises. The similarity of this study with previous research lies in the importance of information transparency as the basis for crisis management. However, this study shows that in the public transportation sector, the need for information updates is more intensive because it is directly related to public safety.

The second finding shows that PT KAI conveyed a message of condolence and support to the victims and their families. This practice shows the implementation of adjusting information as described in SCCT. Coombs (2022) explains that organizations need to help stakeholders cope with the emotional impact that arises from crises. The results of this study also support the findings of Coombs and Tachkova (2023) who stated that the expression of empathy can reduce public anger and strengthen positive perceptions of organizations after a crisis occurs. The similarity of this research with previous research lies in the importance of empathic communication in maintaining organizational relations with the public. The difference is that in the case of PT KAI, empathy is not only realized through communication messages, but also through a commitment to assistance to victims during the recovery process.

The third finding shows that the rebuild strategy is the most dominant strategy used by PT KAI. This strategy is demonstrated through the company's commitment to providing assistance to victims,

conducting safety evaluations, and improving the quality of services after an incident occurs. According to Coombs (2022), rebuild strategies are generally used when organizations need to restore public trust through actions that show responsibility and concern for affected parties. The results of this study are in line with the research of Frederick et al. (2023) who found that organizations that combine transparent communication with corrective actions have a greater chance of restoring a post-traumatic reputation. The similarity of the two studies lies in the importance of organizational accountability in the reputation restoration process. However, this study shows that in the context of public transportation, the safety aspect is a more dominant factor in reshaping public trust than in other organizational sectors.

Overall, the results of the study show that the success of PT KAI's crisis communication is not only determined by the speed of information delivery, but also by the organization's ability to show empathy and responsibility to the public. These findings reinforce the relevance of SCCT in explaining crisis communication strategies in the public transportation sector which has a high level of risk to public safety. PT Kereta Api Indonesia applies a combination of instructing information, adjusting information, and rebuild strategy strategies in handling the Argo Bromo Anggrek Train incident in 2026. The three strategies show conformity with the principles described in Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Of the three strategies, the rebuild strategy is the most dominant strategy. This can be seen from the company's focus on providing support to victims, delivering evaluation commitments, and various efforts to restore public trust. These findings strengthen the argument of Coombs (2022) that an effective crisis communication strategy is not only oriented to the delivery of information, but also to actions that demonstrate the organization's responsibility for the impact of the crisis. In addition, the study also show that crisis communication in the public transportation sector has different characteristics compared to other sectors because it is directly related to public safety. Therefore, transportation organizations need a communication strategy that is not only fast and accurate, but also able to show empathy and accountability to the public.

Conclusion

PT KAI implements three main crisis communication strategies, namely instructing information, adjusting information, and rebuild strategy. The instructing information strategy is realized through the delivery of information about the chronology of the incident, the evacuation process, and the development of incident handling to the public. The strategy of adjusting information can be seen from the company's efforts to convey empathy, condolences, and support to the victim and the victim's family. The most dominant strategy is the rebuild strategy, which is realized through providing assistance to victims, commitment to safety evaluation, and various steps to restore public trust.

The findings of the study show that the implementation of communication strategies in accordance with the principles of SCCT can help organizations manage crises more effectively, reduce information uncertainty, and maintain a company's reputation in the midst of high public attention. Therefore, public transportation organizations need to have a crisis communication system that is fast, transparent, and oriented to the needs of stakeholders. The next study is suggested to examine the public's perception of the effectiveness of PT KAI's crisis communication strategy using a quantitative approach or mixed methods so that a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of crisis communication on the level of public trust is obtained.

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