Handling Viral Cases on Social Media by The Police Public Relations (Case Study: Vina Cire)

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Crisis Communication, Police Public Relations, Social Media, Public Trust, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Vina Cirebon Case.	This study investigates the communication strategy employed by the Public Relations Division (Humas) of the Indonesian National Police in handling viral crises on social media, focusing specifically on the Vina Cirebon case. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach, this research was conducted through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and media observation involving key stakeholders, including police officers, journalists, and digital communication analysts. The findings reveal that Humas Polri exhibited weak crisis preparedness, evident from the lack of early detection systems, risk profiling, and crisis-sensing capabilities. During the crisis period, the institutional response was characterized by delays, inconsistencies in official statements, and limited coordination between headquarters and regional police units. The study also found underutilization of social media platforms, which led to unaddressed public speculation and the dominance of alternative narratives. Moreover, the communication strategy applied did not fully align with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), as Polri tended to employ defensive rather than accommodative or restorative approaches. This condition ultimately led to a decline in public trust and institutional legitimacy. The study contributes to the field of police science and public relations by highlighting the urgency of integrated crisis communication strategies, particularly in managing public perception in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of digital disruption marked by the exponential growth of social media, the issue of crisis communication and information management by public institutions has become a global concern. The rapid spread of information on social media has not only changed the way people obtain news, but has also forced government agencies to adapt to new communication patterns that are more open, responsive, and based on public trust (Agrawal, 2023; An Nur & Hariyanti, 2019; Athoillah et al., 2023; Khoirudin, 2023; Maria et al., 2022). Public trust in state institutions such as the police is now greatly influenced by the way the institution responds to issues that go viral on social media. This phenomenon marks a paradigm shift from the dominance of the mainstream media towards horizontal communication, where the public becomes an active actor in shaping public opinion and disseminating information massively and quickly (Cooper, 2017; Leite et al.,

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2022; Novianti et al., 2022; Setu et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2018). This condition creates new demands for public institutions to not only manage substance, but also perception, especially in handling cases that capture public attention, such as the Vina Cirebon case.

There are several factors that trigger complexity in the management of crisis communication by institutions such as the Indonesian Police. First, the weak structural readiness in dealing with the dynamics of social media virality. Second, the lack of a qualified sense of crisis has resulted in a slow response to viral news (Antinyan et al., 2017; D'Souza et al., 2021; Hawro et al., 2015; van Oost et al., 2021). Third, inconsistencies in the delivery of information conveyed to the public, thus causing confusion and wild speculation from the public. Fourth, there has not been a crisis communication team that has the authority and capability to manage the public narrative effectively. Finally, the absence of a communication strategy based on scientific criminal investigation, especially in the context of public opinion management and institutional image reconstruction.

The accumulation of the above factors leads to a crisis of public trust deficit against the National Police institution. As explained by Grönlund and Lindgren (2015), public trust is highly dependent on public perception of an institution's ability, integrity, and goodwill. When the public finds inconsistencies in information and lack of transparency in handling cases, as in the case of Vina Cirebon, the institution of the National Police is vulnerable to losing social and political legitimacy. Data from Kompas R&D (2024) shows that 30.2% of the public considers the performance of the National Police to be poor in law enforcement. This reflects the direct effects of suboptimal crisis communication, where poorly managed news virality has the potential to shape negative narratives and worsen the image of institutions.

The main variable in this study is crisis communication carried out by the Public Relations Division of the National Police in handling viral cases on social media. Crisis communication in this context encompasses three main stages: pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis, as described in the framework *of Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022; Haavisto & Linge, 2022; Haupt, 2021; Marsen, 2020; Zhao, 2020). This communication strategy includes how the National Police identifies potential crises, designs narratives to be built, and determines appropriate communication strategies based on the type of crisis and public perception. In Vina's case, some of the crisis communication issues that arose include: the slow response of the media, the repeated change of narrative from accident to murder, and the lack of clarification and recovery after the court decision that canceled the PS suspect status.

The novelty in this study lies in the focus of analysis on the aspect of crisis communication by the Public Relations of the National Police in dealing with the phenomenon of virality in the era of social media, especially in the case study of Vina Cirebon. In contrast to previous research that highlighted crisis management from a purely structural or legal perspective, this study combines public relations management approaches, public communication, and trust theory to evaluate the effectiveness of Public Relations of the National Police in responding to public opinion crises. In addition, this study identifies the need for the formation of a crisis communication team that has a deep understanding of the logic of social media and mass psychology, something that has not been studied explicitly in the context of public relations of police institutions in Indonesia.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing intensity of viral cases that have a direct impact on public perception of the National Police institution. In the context of a democratic country, the legitimacy of the National Police as a law enforcement officer is highly determined by

the level of public trust. Therefore, crisis communication management is no longer just a technical need, but has become a strategic need in maintaining social stability and institutional legitimacy. Without an adaptive and strategic communication approach, the National Police will continue to face challenges in managing the recurring and escalating public trust crisis in the digital space. This research is important to provide an empirical evaluation of the communication patterns of the National Police and formulate a more effective crisis communication model.

This study aims to: (1) Identify and analyze the implementation of public relations management by the Public Relations Division of the National Police in responding to the Vina Cirebon case; (2) Examine the crisis communication strategies implemented, including the role and effectiveness of social media as the main channel for information delivery; and (3) Formulate key points that can be used as crisis communication guidelines in handling other viral issues by police institutions. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, this research will explore in depth the processes, obstacles, and opportunities for improvement in the public communication of the National Police in the digital era.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of police science studies, especially in the dimensions of communication and crisis management. This study emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in understanding and overcoming the socio-political dynamics that develop in the digital space. Practically, the results of this research are expected to be a reference for the National Police institution in formulating more effective public communication policies, forming an early detection system for viral issues, and developing an adaptive, fast, and accurate crisis communication protocol. On the community side, this research also aims to increase public literacy on the importance of information verification and understand the institutional communication framework so as not to get caught up in unverified and misleading opinions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative study with a descriptive approach that aims to provide an in-depth picture of how Public Relations of the National Police responds to and manages communication in crisis situations due to the viral news of the Vina Cirebon case on social media. The design of this study was systematically prepared to reveal the dynamics of crisis communication in the context of police institutions that are dealing with the pressure of public opinion and public expectations of transparency, accountability, and speed of information.

This research was carried out within the Public Relations Division of the National Police Headquarters as well as the working area of the West Java Police and the Cirebon Police as locations that have a direct connection with the chronology of the Vina Cirebon case. The selection of this location was carried out purposively, considering that the three institutions are the center of public communication activities related to the official narrative built by the National Police to the public. The research was conducted in the period from May to August 2024, which is the period after the release of the documentary film "Vina: Before 7 Days" until the issuance of a pretrial decision on the PS suspect, where there was a significant escalation of public attention to the case.

This research touches on several important aspects in institutional communication management. First, the public relations aspect as a strategic function in police institutions that plays a role in shaping public perception. Second, the crisis communication aspect related to the institution's response to viral conditions and public opinion pressure. Third, the aspect of information management in the digital era, especially through social media, which is now the main channel of interaction between institutions and the community. Fourth, the aspect of public trust which is the main indicator of the success of institutional communication strategies in dealing with crises.

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The population of this study consists of work units and individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in the public communication process related to the Vina Cirebon case. This study does not use a statistical population approach, but uses a conceptual approach based on functional engagement and key information possessed by informants. Therefore, the main subjects of this study are representatives from the Public Relations Division of the National Police Headquarters, West Java Police Public Relations officials, Cirebon Police Public Relations, as well as journalists and media observers who have involvement in the reporting and analysis of this case. The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques, taking into account their strategic position, experience, and informative capacity in explaining the dynamics of the National Police's crisis communication.

The main instrument used in this study is an in-depth interview guideline which is compiled based on the indicators of public relations management and crisis communication, especially *Situational Crisis Communication* Theory (SCCT) from Coombs (2007). The guidelines are semi-structured and designed to be flexible to allow for further exploration of informant answers that are deemed relevant and in-depth. In addition, this study also uses document analysis in the form of media releases, press conference transcripts, official social media uploads of the National Police, and mass media reports that represent the dynamics of crisis communication in this case.

The data collection process is carried out through in-depth interviews in person or online, depending on the availability of the time and location of the informant. This interview not only focuses on the description of the action, but also explores the motives, strategic considerations, internal barriers, and reflective views of the communicators. In addition, the researcher also observed the digital footprint of the National Police's communication on social media, including response time, tone of communication, form of clarification, and intensity of interaction with the community. This observation was made on the official accounts of institutions and news channels that became references for the public in accessing information related to the Vina case.

The data analysis strategy in this study is directed to build a complete understanding of the relationship between the communication strategy implemented and the public perception formed. Therefore, the researcher selectively reduced the data to focus the analysis on elements relevant to the crisis situation, such as response time, message consistency, and the accuracy of the appointment of spokespersons. The data is then categorized based on three stages of crisis according to SCCT, namely pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis, to see the extent to which the strategies implemented are able to reduce the escalation of negative opinions and rebuild trust.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses source triangulation methods and techniques. Source triangulation is carried out by comparing information from sources who have different backgrounds—both from within the National Police and externally, such as journalists and communication observers. Meanwhile, the triangulation technique is carried out by combining the results of interviews with news documentation and the results of social media observations, in order to create an integration of information that strengthens the interpretation of the results. Validity is also strengthened by conducting member checking of some of the sources to confirm the correctness of the data interpretation by the researcher.

This research strategy is designed to produce a holistic understanding of the ineffectiveness of handling viral cases by the Public Relations Division of the National Police, so that conclusions can be drawn that not only explain the problem, but also prepare solution recommendations based on systematic analysis. The analysis process is directed at identifying points of failure in communication management, then tracing the root of the problem through internal recognition and

external observation. Thus, this research not only serves as an institutional mirror, but also as a material for reflection and systemic improvement in the governance of public communication of law enforcement institutions in Indonesia.

Furthermore, this research is not aimed at judging individuals or institutions, but rather to demonstrate the importance of institutional readiness in responding to the dynamics of highly fluid, fast, and stressful public communication. Therefore, a reflective and interpretive approach is the main foundation in the analysis process, so that the results obtained not only describe the surface reality, but also capture the complexity of the meaning behind every communication action taken by the Public Relations of the National Police.

Overall, this research strategy is designed with the mindset that solutions to institutional communication crises can only be found through a deep understanding of the internal and external dynamics that occur simultaneously. By dismantling the communication process in handling viral cases such as the Vina Cirebon case, it is hoped that the results of this research will be able to make a real contribution to improving the quality of public communication by state security institutions, both in the context of crisis prevention, rapid response, and long-term reputation restoration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Location Profile and Research Informant

The research locations include the Public Relations Division of the National Police Headquarters, the Public Relations of the West Java Police, and the Public Relations of the Cirebon Police. These three locations were chosen purposively because they have direct involvement in delivering information to the public regarding the development of the Vina case. A total of 12 main informants were interviewed in this study, consisting of structural officials in the Public Relations of the National Police, technical implementation personnel, criminal journalists, and social media analysts who also monitored the development of public opinion during the viral period of this case (May-July 2024). Of the total informants, 10 of them said that they had direct experience handling or monitoring the news of the Vina case in the media.

Pre-Crisis Preparedness: Weak Early Detection and Risk Profile

One of the main findings in this study is the weak readiness of the Public Relations of the National Police in dealing with potential crises triggered by social media. Of the 12 informants interviewed, 8 people mentioned that before the viral film "Vina: Before 7 Days", there was no system or routine monitoring mechanism in place to detect old issues that have the potential to rise again. This shows that there is no early detection system or risk *profile* for cases that have viral potential if reexposed by mass media or content creators.

The absence *of a sense of crisis* is the dominant factor in this stage. Only 4 informants admitted that there was a discussion of the viral potential of Vina's case before the film was released, but it was not followed up systemically. The absence of an expert team or special unit assigned to map past issues also strengthens the finding that the Public Relations of the National Police has not made optimal use of media intelligence.

Response in Crisis: Late and Inconsistent

The crisis stage is a critical point in this study. As many as 10 out of 12 speakers stated that the response of the Public Relations of the National Police to the virality of the Vina film was considered too late. The first response issued by the Head of Public Relations only appeared two weeks after the film became trending on various social media platforms. When the response was submitted, there was a narrative inconsistency, especially regarding the number of suspects and the

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initial chronology of the incident. From the search of documents and interviews, it is known that the change in the National Police's statement regarding the status of the case from accident to murder, as well as the number of DPOs from three to two (with one person considered fictitious), caused public distrust.

Several informants from the National Police stated that the delay occurred due to the absence of a special *command center* that real-time monitors the escalation of information on social media. In addition, there is no officially appointed crisis spokesperson, so public statements are limited to the Head of Public Relations and the Head of the Population Division, who are not always able to respond quickly to the dynamics of virality in digital media.

The Role of Public Relations at Three Levels: Headquarters, Police, and Police

This study also found that there is an imbalance in coordination between Public Relations Headquarters, Police, and Police. A total of 9 sources indicated that the dominance of public communication related to the Vina case was controlled by the National Police Headquarters, while the role of Public Relations of the West Java Police and the Cirebon Police tended to be passive. Public Relations in the regions are only technical implementers without the authority to deliver official statements to the public. In fact, according to informants from the media, the local public urgently needs a quick clarification from the local police because the location of the incident is in Cirebon.

The Public Relations of the West Java Police had held a press conference, but the substance conveyed was limited to normative information, without providing detailed clarification on public speculation. This reinforces the impression that there is structural rigidity in crisis communication management that hinders the agility of institutions in responding to viral issues.

Social Media Utilization: Less Strategic

The Public Relations of the National Police already has official social media accounts such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. However, in Vina's case, 9 informants stated that social media had not been used strategically. Responses that appear on official channels tend to be infographics, rather than narratives that build empathy and openness. As a result, public comments urging clarification were not effectively answered, and in some cases even not responded to at all.

The Public Relations of the National Police has also not utilized interactive features such as live Q&A sessions, Twitter Spaces, or official podcasts to explain the complexity of handling cases. Communication strategies that tend to be one-way show that the transformation of digital public relations has not been accompanied by a change in the paradigm of two-way communication that characterizes modern public communication.

Information Consistency: A Key Challenge in Crisis Communication

From the results of document search and interviews, it was found that 10 sources highlighted the inconsistencies in the information submitted by the Public Relations of the National Police. These inconsistencies include: the chronology of the incident, the status of the victims, the number of suspects, and the status of the DPO. The misalignment of information between initial statements, media responses, and official releases creates confusion in the community.

This condition triggered the emergence of counter-narratives from civil society, human rights activists, and independent journalists. Some media informants revealed that changing the narrative without a logical explanation reinforces the public perception that there are things that are covered

up or hidden by the police. This has an impact on the declining public trust in the overall performance of the National Police.

Public Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Public trust in the National Police is one of the main indicators of the success of crisis communication. All of the speakers stated that the Vina case had worsened the institution's image. Even from the results of the Kompas R&D survey quoted by one of the informants, the performance of the National Police in law enforcement received the lowest score compared to other tasks such as protection and security maintenance.

Even after the designation of PS as a suspect was canceled by the court, no communication recovery strategy was carried out publicly. The absence of official updates and public evaluations from the National Police after the pretrial decision has led to the perception that the National Police is avoiding accountability. This shows that post-crisis is a phase that is still very weak in the communication management of the National Police.

Relevance to SCCT: Strategy Still Partial

This study uses *the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) as an analysis tool for the communication strategy of the National Police. Based on the results of coding on interview data and documents, it is known that the strategy used by the Public Relations of the National Police is at the defensive stage, namely *diminishment* and *justification*, without touching *on rebuilding* strategies such as apologies or confessions. Only 8 speakers confirmed that the SCCT strategy had ever been discussed or used as a reference in the preparation of public statements.

The non-use of accommodative approaches such as *rectification* or *apology* shows that the Police's communication approach is still predominantly normative and administrative. This is an important point in concluding that although the Public Relations of the National Police has resources and authority, the strategic approach based on crisis communication theory is still very limited.

Discussion

This discussion is intended to in-depth analyze the main findings resulting from the descriptive qualitative research process on the crisis communication strategy carried out by the Public Relations Division of the National Police in handling the virality of the Vina Cirebon case. This study departs from academic and social anxiety over the weak communication system of institutional crises, especially in the context of public opinion pressure through social media. Various data obtained from resource persons and public documentation were processed and studied within the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), in order to answer the urgency of the research: why the handling of Public Relations of the National Police in this crisis is not running optimally, what factors cause it, and what strategies can be offered as solutions.

Pre-Crisis Preparedness

One of the most prominent findings is the low readiness of institutions in anticipating possible communication crises from an early stage. As many as 8 out of 12 interviewees stated that the Public Relations Division of the National Police does not have a risk profiling system for old cases that have viral potential. The absence of an integrated monitoring dashboard or early warning system against the escalation of public discourse on social media made the Vina case, which was initially handled in 2016, suddenly reappear after the release of the documentary film "Vina: Before

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7 Days" in 2024. SCCT (Coombs, 2007) emphasizes that the pre-crisis stage is a strategic foundation to minimize the escalation of destructive public opinion. This unpreparedness leads to the defensive position of institutions in the face of criticism and public questions.

Response in Crisis

The National Police's communication response during a crisis was identified as the weakest point in public information management. Almost all of the speakers (10 out of 12) highlighted the slow initial response and inconsistency of statements from the Public Relations of the National Police. The narrative that originally referred to Vina and Eky's deaths as an accident turned into a murder, followed by a statement of revision of the number of suspects from 11 to 9 people, two of which were declared fictitious. This uncertainty and inconsistency creates speculative space and magnifies negative public sentiment. Sky Marsen (2020) in his study explained that delays and inconsistencies in crisis communication will prolong the crisis period and deepen the crisis of institutional legitimacy.

Post-Crisis Management

In the post-crisis stage, 7 out of 12 speakers stated that the Public Relations of the National Police did not show a clear recovery or reconciliation strategy. The absence of information updates, official clarifications, or evaluative statements on the communication process that has been carried out shows the absence of orientation to the restoration of public trust. Within the framework of the SCCT, rebuilding strategies such as public apologies, investigation transparency, and improvement action plans are important elements in reconstructing the institution's image. The failure to take these steps indicates the loss of opportunities to turn the crisis into a momentum for improvement.

The Role of Public Relations at Three Levels

The public relations structure of the National Police, which is divided into three levels – Headquarters, Regional Police, and Police – shows the inequality of roles. The majority of public communication is controlled by Public Relations Headquarters, while the role of Public Relations of the Police and Police in reaching out and interacting with local communities is minimal. This is an indication of weak vertical coordination and decentralization of communication, even though the public communication crisis should be handled in a multi-level manner. Hartono (2023) in his research on the Sambo case also stated that the weak distribution of responsibilities and the absence of special SOPs led to overlapping functions and a lack of effectiveness of public communication.

Utilization of Social Media

Consistency of information is the main requirement in building public trust. However, all the sources in this study agreed that the public communication of the National Police Public Relations regarding the Vina case was very inconsistent. Moreover, the use of social media by the official account of the National Police is considered very reactive and disproportionate to the intensity of the public conversation that occurs. As explained by Narayana (2011), modern public institutions are required to adopt new media responsiveness as part of crisis communication strategies. The inability of the Public Relations of the National Police to utilize social media to explain and direct public opinion has led to failures in controlling narratives.

Absence of Special Team and Sense of Crisis

One of the most fundamental root problems is the absence of a special team or work unit that professionally handles communication crises. Five sources confirmed that the handling of Vina's case communication was only carried out by structural officials such as the Head of Public Relations and the Head of the Penum Division, without the support of a trained crisis communication team. This reflects the weak sense of crisis in the public relations body of the National Police. Compare it with PT Blue Bird Tbk. in Muhariani's (2017) research, which has a crisis team and structured work protocols to deal with public pressure, so that it is able to restore the company's image in a short time. The National Police, as a public institution, should have more readiness than that, not the other way around.

The implication of this overall communication weakness has led to a decline in the level of public trust in the National Police. The Kompas R&D Survey (2024) shows that public trust in law enforcement by the National Police has decreased drastically, even becoming an aspect that is considered the worst compared to other functions. When public institutions fail to provide answers to people's expectations in a crisis situation, what happens is a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis of trust. In fact, in a democracy, public trust is the main basis for the sustainability of the mandate of state institutions (Grönlund & Lindgren, 2015). Therefore, a communication crisis such as the Vina case cannot be considered as a purely technical problem, but as a serious threat to institutional existence.

The findings of this study corroborate a number of previous studies, but also provide a new perspective that distinguishes it from previous studies. Hartono's research (2023) emphasizes more on the role of the post-Sambo case agenda, while this research focuses on the structure and function of crisis communication that has not been carried out in the pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis stages. Marsen (2020) and Narayana (2011) discussed the importance of adapting communication to the characteristics of new media, which is also a key finding in this study. However, the novelty of this research lies in the integration of the SCCT approach with the institutional context of the National Police which is multidimensional and hierarchical. In addition, this research introduces the importance of strengthening a sense of crisis as the foundation of organizational culture in facing the era of digital virality.

Based on the results of the analysis and discussion above, the main solution that can be proposed is the need to reformulate the crisis communication system in the National Police Public Relations body. First, the establishment of a Crisis Communication Task Force which is multidisciplinary and cross-functional work. This team is not only tasked with responding to issues, but also conducting early detection, mapping public opinion, and planning short- and long-term communication strategies. Second, strengthening the function of real-time social media monitoring through digital technology and AI-based sentiment analysis. Third, providing crisis sensitivity training and crisis management simulations to all public relations personnel. Fourth, the preparation of SCCT-based crisis SOPs that are contextual with the character of Indonesian media. Fifth, the integration of vertical and horizontal reporting systems between Public Relations Headquarters, Polda, and Polres units to prevent fragmentation of public narratives.

If this recommendation is implemented comprehensively, then not only the Vina problem can be controlled properly, but the National Police will have a crisis communication system that is adaptive to future challenges. This will certainly have a major impact on the recovery and strengthening of public trust, which ultimately increases the legitimacy and effectiveness of institutions in carrying out their functions as guardians of law and order.

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Conclusion

This study found several shortcomings in the Public Relations of the National Police's response to communication crises. First, the lack of a crisis risk profile, early detection system, and a well-developed crisis response framework hindered their ability to react effectively to the Vina case. The unpreparedness at the pre-crisis stage led to ineffective communication strategies. Second, the response during the crisis was slow, inconsistent, and uncoordinated, particularly due to the absence of a dedicated crisis communication team and the top-down communication model that caused disharmony among regional police ranks. Third, the National Police's digital communication strategy was insufficient, as they failed to fully utilize social media platforms to engage with the public, allowing counter-narratives to dominate. Fourth, the crisis communication strategy did not align with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), as it primarily used defensive measures rather than efforts to rebuild trust and restore legitimacy. Fifth, this research highlights the need for greater integration between communication functions, media intelligence, and reputation management within law enforcement agencies. Future research should explore integrating communication strategies with digital forensic analysis and evaluate cross-agency crisis management approaches. This would help develop a more comprehensive crisis communication model tailored to law enforcement institutions, allowing for better coordination and responsiveness in addressing public crises.

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