

## From Sehun EXO to Crisis and Public Trust: An Evaluation of Whitelab's Crisis Communication Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

Established in 2015, Whitelab is an Indonesian local beauty brand that has experienced significant growth in recent years, surpassing other industries. However, in 2022, Whitelab faced a crisis that nearly damaged its reputation following a fan meeting with its Korean brand ambassador called "One Memorable Day with Scientist Ganteng Oh Sehun." Although Whitelab issued a public apology, they also tended to blame other parties. It led to public criticism on social media and to a larger mass protest condemning the brand for the problems that occurred during the event. This qualitative paper aims to analyse and evaluate Whitelab's communication crisis strategies using Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory. A descriptive case study was employed and data were collected through observation, news reports, social media posts, and comments during the crisis period. The results show that the crisis affected public trust in Whitelab, which required immediate response. Twitter holds a dual role in both transmitting the crisis among the public and has become a crucial tool for Whitelab's crisis communication. The authors' evaluation concludes that there was a lack of crisis management from the pre-crisis phase, which resulted in Whitelab's inability to anticipate potential risks of crises during the fans' meeting. This ultimately led to the crisis expansion, posing a threat to Whitelab's corporate reputation. Calls to cancel the brand and demands for an apology on social media escalated the situation. Therefore, effective crisis communication is essential for companies and brands of all sizes, including growing local brands including Whitelab.

**Keywords:** *Crisis communication, SCCT, brand, beauty, Twitter.*

### INTRODUCTION

Whitelab is an Indonesian local beauty brand that was established in 2015 (Dinisari, 2022). This brand has contributed to the flourishing local beauty industry, which has experienced rapid growth in recent years, surpassing other industries, supported by digital technology. According to NielsenIQ Research (2021), the beauty industry is a dynamic industry, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, which has influenced consumer interests and behaviors and created entirely new consumption patterns. While beauty and self-care were not top priorities during the pandemic, it is undeniable that the widespread global restrictions on activities and mobility have also impacted individuals' mental well-being. As a result, self-indulgence and self-care have become highly valued transactions that marketers can offer to meet the basic needs for health and mental stability.

The increasing consumer demand has led to the emergence of many local beauty brands with competitive quality and prices, and strong marketing and branding strategies through social media and e-commerce (Busthomi, 2022). They aim to gain exposure that rivals international brands while accommodating the decreased purchasing power due to the poor financial conditions during the pandemic. The beauty industry has been in the spotlight in recent years, and Whitelab is one of the brands at the forefront of this trend. Not only the rise of demand, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as presented by Umar (2022), some industries also experienced crisis with their consumers, and social media held a dual role in transmitting and overcoming the crisis. This study offers a perspective on Whitelab's post-pandemic crisis which also occurs on social media and involves its consumers.

Whitelab experienced an incident during its event that led to a communication crisis, which posed a threat to its reputation. The brand held an open event for its customers in November 2022, a fan meeting with Oh Sehun of EXO, a South Korean artist (Garjito & Opita, 2022) who served as Whitelab's brand ambassador. However, due to lack of event management and fan service, the event was deemed "wrong" by the public and recorded in their social media posts, especially Twitter. The event faced public outrage with many people condemning Whitelab. In this regard, Whitelab was seen as unprofessional in organizing the fan meeting, which resulted in chaos during the event and was claimed to have caused harm to various parties. The EXO-L (EXO's fandom) and specifically Sehun's fans, felt harmed by the event and risked Whitelab's reputation. This led to the decrease in public trust.

This public outrage has led to various demands, condemnations, and calls for boycotts, as well as movements to cancel the brand on various social media platforms, particularly Twitter. The presence of social media and new media platforms has made crises more complicated and complex. The increase in information flow, uncertainty regarding rumors and gossip, and other ambiguities (Prastya, 2011; Umar, 2022) have the potential to amplify confusion amidst the ongoing crisis and even worsen the situation if not promptly addressed. This, of course, has an impact on the tarnishing of the brand's image and reputation that has been well-established.

Essentially, a crisis is a part of the corporate cycle and a normal occurrence of any company. For that reason, companies are expected to be well-prepared in facing crises (Nirmalasari, 2020). If a crisis occurs, as experienced by Whitelab, crisis management needs to be executed effectively to maintain public trust and prevent it from being lost due to poor crisis handling. The most crucial aspect of crisis management is crisis communication. It is fundamentally the primary strategy for addressing a crisis, especially in the current digital era. Not to mention, the rising popularity of both global and local beauty products during and after the pandemic has significantly affected the brand itself if it is about to survive. Social media magic power holds immense possibility whether to strengthen or to break and bend the market. Therefore, any information shared and circulated on it needs a careful and appropriate response. It is imperative for a brand to monitor the hashtags usage as it becomes primary tools for netters to interact with each other and later reinforce the existing perceptions. For these reasons, company cannot ignore the conversation on social media to prevent the negative conversation from happening and to anticipate the malign hashtags from spreading that will potentially lead to mobilizing mass cancellation.

This study aims to analyze and evaluate the crisis communication strategies employed by Whitelab, while also exploring what can and should be improved. The analysis and evaluation are conducted using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which emphasizes the need for prompt and effective crisis response to avoid negative public perceptions (Coombs, 2007). Based on the above description, the crisis management and response at Whitelab are perceived as inadequate, resulting in communication errors that not only fail to resolve the issues, but also prolong the chain of criticism and form negative assumptions among the public. This, in turn, leads to attitudes and behaviors such as brand cancellation or boycott. In examining the Whitelab's crisis, this essay demonstrates the failure of Whitelab in performing crisis communication strategies and evaluates what should have and should not have done by Whitelab to sustain in the current industry.

## LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### *Crisis Management*

Crisis is an unexpected situation that can occur in every company. It can happen anytime and threaten the company's reputation (Hidayat et al., 2020). According to Kathleen Fearn-Banks (2016), the crisis is interpreted as a tragedy that will have negative impacts to the company. Therefore, every company should have crisis management because a crisis is actually inevitable. As a threat, the crisis must be responded to quickly, so that the company can return to its normal activities (Fajri & Mawadati, 2018). Managing the crisis allows companies to maintain their publics and the ability to mitigate risks. It allows companies to learn more from a crisis, get a speedy recovery, and accelerate the end of a crisis. Crisis management is defined as the process of strategic planning for a negative event or crisis. The aims are to reduce uncertainty and risk and allow the company to control the situation during a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2016). According to Coombs (2021), crisis management refers to a set of activities to protect company, public, and whole industry from the negative consequences that can follow the crisis.

Crisis management is undertaken to deal with a crisis, whenever it happens. It includes company preparation and action plan, even before the crisis happens (Coombs, 2021). Crisis management is vital to the existence and stability before pursuing any further growth objectives and to protect the company reputation. It is an important matter since the bad crisis management may destroy the public trust and undermine the years of work. A good crisis management is helpful to avoid the hazards and enhance the reputation in the long term (Arandas & Ling, 2020). There are various possibilities that can occur after a crisis. First, the company was able to emerge from the crisis and enhance its standing. Second, the company's reputation suffered as a result of how poorly it handled the issue. In the first scenario, company operations can resume normally under contrast and in the second scenario, the company might cease to exist. Every company must practice crisis management to prevent the second scenario, especially in the current digital era (Devlin, 2006). Therefore, crisis management is crucial and imperative for company sustainability.

Some scholars have defined the concept of company crisis (Coombs, 2021; Fearn-Banks, 2016; Hidayat et al., 2020). Some previous studies have also explained about crisis management (Arandas & Ling, 2020; Coombs, 2021; Fajri & Mawadati, 2018; Fearn-Banks, 2016) and Devlin, 2007). The studies that have been conducted show that crisis management involves strategic

planning to handle negative events, aiming to protect a company's reputation and ensure stability. Effective crisis management can help a company recover and possibly enhance its reputation, while poor management can lead to significant damage and even threaten the company's existence. Meanwhile, the authors present the novelty of the study by focusing on crisis management within an Indonesian local beauty company, in the context of interactions with K-pop idols (as their brand ambassador) and fans.

#### *Crisis Communication and Social Media*

Previous literature has found that the development of social media accelerated the spread of the crisis (Juditha, 2017; Umar, 2022). One of the bad effects of social media is that it makes corporate crises spread easily and widely. The most critical aspect of crisis management is crisis communication (Kuruç & Opiyo, 2020). It is fundamentally the primary strategy for addressing a crisis, especially in this digital era (Nirmalasari, 2020). Crisis communication aims to control the information flow both internally and externally during a crisis. It can be used to bridge the gap between the company and its publics, and also to build long-term good relations with all publics (Zebua et al., 2021).

Crisis communication is a strategy to ensure that all crisis management efforts is successful (Ernayani et al., 2022). The use of social media is a challenge to adapt, especially during a crisis (Husain et al., 2014; Kuruç & Opiyo, 2020). Behind the resulting negative impact, social media can have a positive impact on crisis recovery and become a tool for crisis communication (Carlina & Paramita, 2017). Companies can use social media to disseminate information during crisis situations. Social media is also used to make a positive contribution to social (Kuruç & Opiyo, 2020; Umar, 2022; Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

Communication scholars have broadly studied the crisis (Husain et al., 2014; Kuruç & Opiyo, 2020), including from an Indonesian context (Ernayani et al., 2022; Priscilla & Lestari, 2019). Some of the existing literature have also used new media as a tool for analysis (Carlina & Paramita, 2017; Husain et al., 2014; Kuruç & Opiyo, 2020). While Nirmalasari (2020) and Umar (2022) have analyzed Instagram-based crises, the study offers a fresh empirical analysis on the crisis that occurred on Twitter. In addition, the analyzed crisis was occurring post COVID-19 pandemic which is interesting to be examined.

#### *Situational Crisis Communication Theory*

Crisis communication is a process of information control and dissemination to deal with situations that can threaten the company's reputation. Several communication scientists defined crisis communication as a continuing process between a company and its public to create mutual understanding when crisis occurs (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). In brief, the nature of crisis communication is giving immediate response (Putri et al., 2019). Coombs (2010) defines this term as situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). This theory puts public attribution during crises as a top priority which could threaten a company's reputation, especially in the digital era because public attribution reflects public feelings during the "turbulence". SCCT realizes that negative attribution can affect communication strategies that eventually influence corporate reputation (Haque & Ahmad, 2017). Hence, SCCT indicates that based on public attribution, companies can identify crisis phases, crisis types or clusters, and crisis communication or response strategy

(Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019). While SCCT has frequently been discussed within the context of high-risk companies and governmental public sector such as hospitals, aviation industries, and public services (Kriyantono, 2012; Putri et al., 2019), the authors believe that Whitelab, a growing local micro enterprise (MSME) has similar possibilities as other well-established business to encounter crisis, especially in the realm of cyberspace where mass cancellations can widely occur.

### *Whitelab's Crisis Chronology*

Whitelab hosted an open-to-the-public fan meetup with Oh Sehun EXO, the company's brand ambassador who is a well-known South Korean artist and a part of the international boy band EXO that is managed by SM Entertainment. He has been the Whitelab brand ambassador since the beginning of 2022. The event on Sunday, November 6, 2022 was called "One Memorable Day with Handsome Scientist - Oh Sehun" and it was held at Central Park Mall in West Jakarta, Indonesia (Cicilia, 2022). Initially, it was anticipated that Oh Sehun's presence at Central Park Mall would boost Whitelab's sales and brand recognition in Indonesia (Putri, 2022). However, instead of introducing Whitelab, the event actually brought up a problem that damaged Whitelab's reputation.

The situation began when Whitelab and the mall were unprepared for the fans' fervor and the large number of attendees. According to reports, Central Park Mall had a poor security system and was insufficiently prepared to handle tens of thousands of people, of which the majority of whom was Oh Sehun fans called EXO L. Whitelab and the mall were accused of failing to predict the event's attendance and inadequately preparing for it (Redaksi, 2022b). Even though Oh Sehun only arrived for 10 minutes to greet his fans, the Whitelab had to call an end to the event due to the mall's overflowing capacity. This chronology led Whitelab into a further crisis, which was then analyzed by the authors.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study research method. Notably, it involves a series of intensive, detailed, and in-depth scientific activities focused on a specific program, event, or activity involving individuals, groups of people, institutions, or organizations (Rahardjo, 2017). The unit of analysis in this research is the crisis communication strategies of Whitelab in dealing with the disappointment of the fans upon the Oh Sehun EXO problematic fan meeting. This crisis was chosen as it spread rapidly on Twitter with many negative feedback and the authors are interested in evaluating Whitelab's immediate strategies. The research type is descriptive, which, according to Kriyantono (2006), aims to systematically provide a factual and accurate overview in order to answer research questions. The data collection technique in this study relies on the observation of the case, news reports, social media posts, and comments during the crisis period.

We analyzed and evaluated two Twitter apology posts from Whitelab in response to the crisis and in order to reduce the clash. The posts consist of a text-based apology (Figure 1) and an apology video from Whitelab's owner (Figure 4). In addition, this study has examined two viral Twitter posts of the audience (Figure 2 and Figure 3) during the crisis. While various Twitter posts have been examined, the authors decided to include one news report from Liputan 6, considering that the news reports during the crisis were identical. On the other hand, Liputan 6 is a prominent

and reliable Indonesian news portal that covered many sides of the Whitelab's crisis. The authors underwent a rigorous analysis using a limited dataset and provide in-depth understanding to the crisis response. The research data are qualitatively analyzed through a systematic process (Sugiyono, 2015), using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory popularized by Coombs (2007).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Whitelab's Initial Apology, Public Demands, and Cancellation*

As explained in the chronology above, the crisis began when Whitelab and the Mall were caught off guard by the intense enthusiasm of the fans and the large turnout. They were criticized for failing to anticipate the number of attendees and for inadequate event preparation. Reports indicated that Central Park Mall's inadequate security system was unable to manage the large crowd of Sehun's fans (Redaksi, 2022b). Subsequently, Whitelab acknowledged in social media posts that the authorities had asked for the event to be canceled due to the massive number of audiences (Figure 1). On the contrary, the police claimed that they just made arrangements and did not disperse the event. Due to this distinction, all event attendees accused Whitelab of making misleading statements (Alfiyyah, 2022). In this case, although they have released an official statement and apology through their social media accounts (see Figure 1), they were perceived to provide clarifications that seemed to shift blame onto others rather than acknowledging their own mistakes.

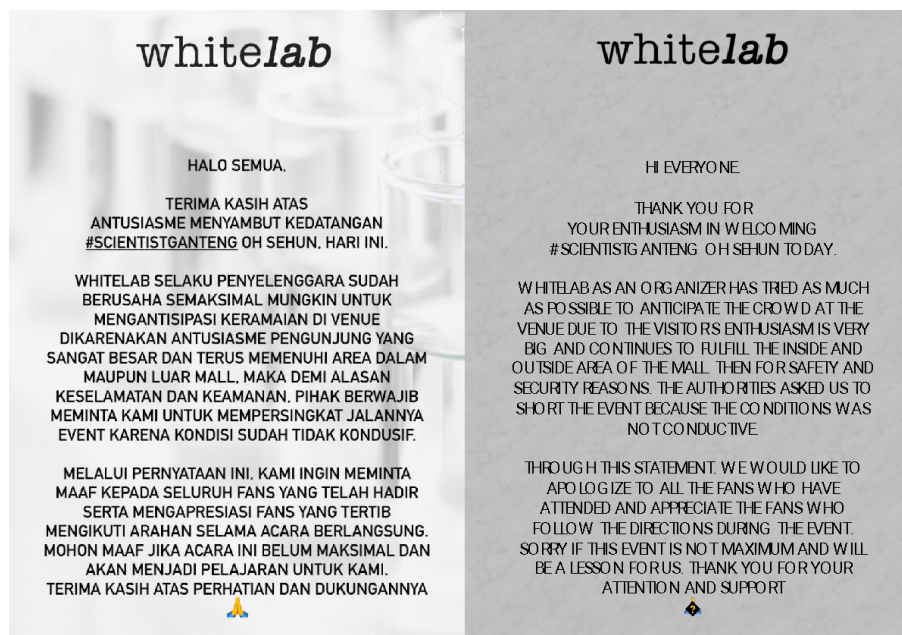
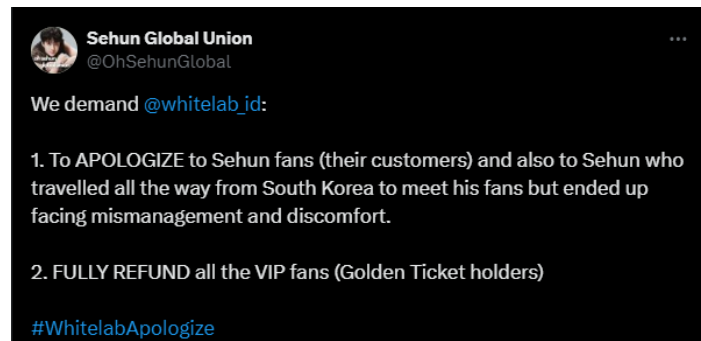


Figure 1: Whitelab's written regret for the cancellation of the event on the official Twitter account  
Source: [https://twitter.com/whitelab\\_id/status/1589263894056665091/photo/1](https://twitter.com/whitelab_id/status/1589263894056665091/photo/1)

Additionally, some of the guests were Golden Ticket lottery winners who had the most reason to meet Oh Sehun, also endured the most hardship. They not only forfeited their chance to win the Golden Ticket and some money, but the event was abruptly called off, denying them the chance to meet their idol in person. The absence of a medical team on duty at the event

location, given that this event would draw a sizable crowd, further demonstrated the lack of readiness. Therefore, several EXO fans who were volunteers arrived to assist the guests. They were being overwhelmed by the crowd's jostling. Unfortunately, it was claimed subsequently that the official event committee had mistreated these volunteers (Alfiyyah, 2022). Oh Sehun's Twitter fan account @OhSehunGlobal, then echoed the full insanity of this incident with the hashtag #WhitelabApologize and received 9,133 retweets (see Figure 2).



## WHITELAB APOLOGIZE

We would like to raise the following concerns with Whitelab on behalf of Sehun fans and fanbases:

1. The **venue** chosen **did not have adequate capacity** to host the number of fans attending (despite fans warning them about it from the start) and there was **poor crowd control** during the event.
2. The **lack of security** at the event. Not all floors had security even after fans raised their concern.
3. Neither proper control on the number of attending fans **nor any barriers on the upper floors**. This caused fans to be pushed and caused a lot of stress.
4. **No help and basic medical facility** was offered to the fans who fainted. **Xunqi\_Indonesia Volunteers were the ones who helped fans** and gave out water to those who fell ill, despite WL staff stopping them to do so. WL also asked fans for medicine and water as they had not prepared any themselves.
5. **WL staff scolded the Xunqi\_Indonesia volunteers** who were helping fans a lot (treating them as unpaid employees).
6. There was **miscommunication between security and the medical team** was very **unresponsive**. Xunqi\_Indonesia and their volunteers did their best to handle everything.
7. **VIP fans (Golden Ticket Holders)** were suddenly told to go to a **different venue**. This new venue was some distance away which gave them little time to reach the venue. **By the time VIP fans reached the venue, WL ended the event.**
8. **WL let the NON-VIP fans meet Sehun and ended the event leaving many VIP fans with no chance to meet him**, essentially robbing them of their money.

Lastly we would like to address the issues fanbases faced:

From the start there was a **lack of communication, confusing directives and rejection of already discussed fan support from Indonesian, International and Chinese fans**. This caused lots of **stress to all fanbases** and the only reason we could **solve the issues were by communicating amongst ourselves**. Fanbases also had to solve everything themselves regarding handing out of fan support after misleading information from WL.

We demand Whitelab:

1. To APOLOGIZE to Sehun fans (their customers) and also to Sehun who travelled all the way from South Korea to meet his fans but ended up facing mismanagement and discomfort.
2. FULLY REFUND all the VIP fans (Golden Ticket holders)

- Oh Sehun Global & Oh Sehun Indonesia

Figure 2: Tweets @OhSehunGlobal exposing Whitelab's mistakes and requesting the Whitelab's apology

Source: <https://twitter.com/OhSehunGlobal/status/1589290547721940993>

The @OhSehunGlobal account described all of Whitelab's oversights in one of his tweets, demanding an apology from Whitelab for any lack of preparation in holding the event, and asked for a refund for all Golden Ticket holders (see Figure 2). This tweet prompted a response from internet users, who swarmed to demand Whitelab issue an official public apology. Furthermore, it intensified after several uploads from event organizer staff were allegedly used to disparage fans and Oh Sehun personally as the brand ambassador of Whitelab by calling the fans "fanatics" and implying that he is nothing like an international idol (Putong, 2022). Netizens were also pursuing this staff account, and they demanded an apology. For instance, @kucingyabu Twitter account (see Figure 3) says that the event was very disappointing and according to him, Whitelab's apology was not clear. He was very critical for the use of Sehun EXO as brand ambassador, if Whitelab treated him and his fans so badly.



Figure 3: Public reaction on Whitelab's apology on Twitter account  
Source: <https://twitter.com/kucingyabu/status/1589395870092787712>

Even more problematic, according to Alfiyah (2022) on Liputan6.com, Whitelab was viewed as unreliable when it came to delivering fan gifts intended for Oh Sehun. Instead of being presented to Oh Sehun, the majority of the prizes were used by some members of the organizing team to take photos. The issues severely damaged Whitelab's reputation and even contributed to the subsequent fall in followers on Whitelab's Instagram account. This public disappointment also leads to the boycott and cancellation of Whitelab (Lisnawati, 2022).



*Whitelab's Crisis Communication based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory*

A company does not actually experience a crisis on its own. A crisis always starts with a few distinct signs, which can occasionally be hidden or unanticipated. According to the timeline in the preceding sub-chapter, every crisis in a company goes through different stages before becoming a crisis. According to Nova (2011, 2017), the crisis occurs in some phases. First, a pre-crisis situation happens when a crisis is not yet imminent but one already has the potential to occur. Crisis management planning and proactive measures are essential at this point to reduce the likelihood of a crisis occurring. This is a preventive strategy taken by the company as well, so that when a crisis arises, it is prepared with mitigating procedures to protect its reputation and image (Hidayat et al., 2020; Pearson, 2002). In brief, identifying early signs and taking proactive steps during the pre-crisis phase are vital for averting a major crisis. This approach helps a company protect its reputation and reduce potential harm.

Second, a warning phase is the initial appearance of a crisis. At this stage, the crisis is usually ignored or considered non-existent. This is what makes an issue into a big crisis for the company. Third, the crisis can reach an acute phase if the company ignored issue develops into a major crisis so it begins to be read by the public and the media. At this point, companies must take immediate action in response to the issue. At this juncture, the problem has grown to be a serious threat to the company and might put pressure on every department (White & Mazur, 1995). Fourth, upon the crisis, companies should conduct clean-up in which it requires employing a variety of communication techniques, entails the company taking steps to recover its reputation and image during and after the crisis (Sari, 2017). Good communication strategy allows a company to explain the crisis to its audiences, identify impacts, and give accurate information needed according to the needs and wants of the affected publics (Saleh & Yusmanizar, 2019). Last but not least is the post-crisis phase, which refers to the last phase of an ongoing crisis. At this stage, the company is required to conduct a thorough evaluation (Nova, 2011, 2017).

It is clear from the above chronology that Whitelab's failure at the pre-crisis and warning stages occurred because the company lacked a solid crisis management plan. This was making it impossible for them to identify potential hazards when planning their event. Whitelab initially disregarded the crisis and believed that the clarification (see Figure 1) they had made would not cause any issues. However, consumers who physically visited the event and internet users quickly realized that the explanation they provided regarding the event's cancellation was false. In this instance, the situation became acute quickly. Therefore, action to address this situation must be taken right away.

Crisis fundamentally occurred in every stage of a company's development. As a result, every entity should ideally be mature in its alertness and prepared to handle crises through effective crisis management (Morissan, 2010). To a certain extent, even preventive measures become increasingly crucial in order to reduce the possibility of a brand's reputation declining and the public losing faith in it. If a crisis has already occurred, as was the case with Whitelab, then crisis management must be completed as effectively as possible to prevent the loss of public confidence. In this effort, crisis communication is the most important weapon in crisis management because crises can always arise at any time (Argenti, 2009), so they have negative potential in the form of threats to the existence of a company (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Therefore, in

uncertain situations, a fast response is required to protect brand reputation (Coombs, 2007; Imran, 2017).

Every company requires a plan when dealing with a crisis. Coombs (2007) highlights the significance of communication methods in coping with crises, particularly in how to react swiftly and effectively to crisis circumstances in his theory known as situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). This idea offers a framework that separates the company's crisis clusters. It aims to establish the most effective means of implementing crisis communication and preserving reputation (Coombs, 2006). This approach places a strong emphasis on classifying crisis according to their nature and outlining the appropriate course of action to preserve the reputation of the firm. If the appropriate action is not taken right away, the public's negative perception would grow (Kriyantono, 2012). This is confirmed by social media, which has altered the environment of strategic communication due to its capacity to intensify rumors as a result of the discussions of conversations in virtual spaces.

A crisis causes people to attribute blame to companies, which can influence how people react and engage with firms (Coombs, 2010). The public typically assigns a specific blame to the issue, which affects the company's reputation (Kriyantono, 2015). In essence, attribution refers to how the general public feels about the problem. A crisis can cause a range of public emotions to become apparent. This feeling can be expressed favorably or negatively in a variety of ways, such as by keeping up with crisis developments, expressing ideas or remarks, or calling for corporate accountability (Mulki & Kurniadi, 2021). Therefore, effectively managing public perception during a crisis is crucial for maintaining a company's reputation and mitigating negative outcomes.

According to Coombs (2006), situational crisis communication theory explains the existence of three different sorts of crises. This division can assist the company in mapping the crisis's origins and effects on the company's reputation. Essentially, this category of crisis is used to analyze and identify the actual crisis scenario, which serves as the foundation for developing a communication strategy to deal with the crisis. There are three distinct types of crises (Coombs, 2007) such as: victim cluster, accidental cluster, and intentional cluster or preventive cluster. Victim cluster in which companies portray themselves as victims of crises brought on by other parties or natural disasters. Accidental cluster in which the company downplays its involvement in the issue because it was the result of an accident, like a technology fault. And then, intentional cluster or preventive cluster in which companies must accept full responsibility because internal flaws and poor management contributed to the disaster. The third sort of crisis—the intentional cluster or preventive cluster—occurred in the Whitelab case. An internal company blunder that might have been avoided led to the Whitelab catastrophe. Whitelab must assume full responsibility for handling the problem. The tweet from @OhSehunGlobal demonstrated this requirement quite well (see Figure 2). In summary, carefully identifying the type of crisis helps the company plan an effective response.

The company's reaction plan is then developed using this type of crisis as a guide within four types of response. The first type, company could use denial by assigning blame or accusations to the other party, downplaying the circumstances, or picking a victim. Second type, diminish could be used by downplaying the importance of the situation or pointing out that it is not as awful as initially thought. Third type, rebuilding can also be conducted by accepting full

responsibility for the disaster and any resulting negative attributions. And the last type, bolstering, means the practice of a company using its prior reputation to win over the public (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

Whitelab, with the intentional/preventive cluster type of crises, needed to employ a rebuilding and boosting plan to lessen any unfavourable public perceptions. They must acknowledge their errors and express regret to the parties who had been aggrieved. Whitelab should not deny the errors they made and demonstrate their commitment to the public. Compliance with these objectives could be established by the execution of rebuilding and bolstering strategies. This was required to be undertaken for the long-term sustainability of the Whitelab brand. However, the response given by Whitelab in dealing with this crisis was more towards a denial strategy because Whitelab positioned itself as a victim. Whitelab knowingly blaming the crisis on someone outside the company and did not admit that these crises rised because their bad management (see Figure 1). Whitelab's response to this crisis would be analyzed more deeply in the next subchapter.

#### *Whitelab's Responses and Official Corporate Apology*

It is important to thoroughly execute the plan for handling the Whitelab situation. This is because the crisis that hit Whitelab received a lot of media attention, particularly on Twitter, which presented its own issues for Whitelab to address. The actions taken by Whitelab to overcome and respond to these issues would have a substantial impact on how the public perceived the brand, which would eventually have a long-term impact on Whitelab's reputation (Coombs, 2007). This public perception did not only come from the public who were directly correlated with Whitelab – namely users, customers, employees, fans of Oh Sehun, but also the general public in viewing and associating Whitelab with a certain image during the crisis. Therefore, Whitelab's efforts to repress public anger and respond to the encouragements raised by EXO fans for their disappointment were crucial in determining the continuation of Whitelab itself.

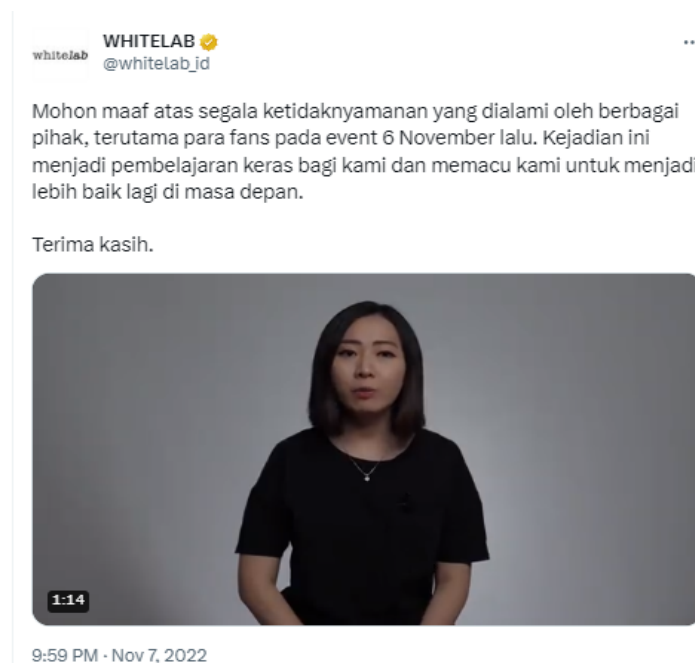


Figure 4: Whitelab owner, Jessica Lin, apologized by her Whitelab Twitter account  
Source: [https://twitter.com/whitelab\\_id/status/1589633681635041281?lang=en](https://twitter.com/whitelab_id/status/1589633681635041281?lang=en)

Whitelab expressed regret in a video posted to Twitter. Jessica Lin, the owner of Whitelab, offered her own apology. Jessica Lin apologized as follows in the video:

*"I'm Jessica Lin. I would like to express my sincere apologies on behalf of the entire Whitelab team for the inconvenience caused to all Oh Sehun fans during the memorable one-day event with the gorgeous scientist last November 6, 2022. Additionally, we are sorry to all Golden Ticket winners. We regret that only some of the winners have eventually been able to meet Oh Sehun in person, despite our best efforts to set up a meeting between the winners and Oh Sehun after the event. Thus, there is still a great deal of disappointment. We have identified our contracted team as the source of any offensive comments made on social media. We also regret the mistake and do not excuse what was done. We took swift action to take severe action against these elements after hearing from fan friends on social media. We want to express our gratitude to SM and Oh Sehun for supporting Whitelab. We apologize for any inconvenience caused to any parties, especially the fans. This experience taught us a difficult lesson and motivated us to improve further in the future. Thank you."* (Transcript of Jessica Lin's apology on Twitter, see Figure 4)

This video became one of the important points in Whitelab crisis management that deserves serious attention. It shows Whitelab's efforts to save its reputation through an apologetic crisis communication strategy or conveying an apology (Hearit, 2006). This theory has principles in common with situational crisis communication theory that places priority on the public interest by fulfilling demands and studying public attitudes towards crises (Priscilla &

Lestari, 2019). Therefore, an apology is one of the implementations of the company's response strategy, in which Whitelab tried to show sympathy, admit mistakes, and apologize for the mess that had occurred. This was complemented by various actions as a form of responsibility for the crisis. Goodwin and Ross (1992) also emphasize that an apology can protect reputation and increase public satisfaction. In addition, these efforts can form perceptions of fairness or sympathy in the midst of a company's failure to provide maximum service. Although it does not directly impact profit, Hearit (2006) states that the hegemonic effect that may arise in crisis discourse is not something that can be underestimated, so an apology and action need to be taken immediately. Hearit (2006) differentiates the concept of apology into apology and apologia, in which apology is an expression of regret and apology for an action, while apologia means an active effort to defend oneself against accusations received by a company (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

The clarification video also fulfills the typological elements of Hearit (2006)'s corporate apology that uses strategies of dissociation or separation between *opinion* and *knowledge*, *individuals-groups*, and *action-essence* (Seeger et al., 1998). This approach, aimed at controlling public perception, involves denying guilt by contesting facts and claims. Even though it did not directly deny it, Whitelab's statement made every effort so that the Golden Ticket holder could meet Oh Sehun, still didn't answer anything and seemed to defend himself. There was still a big question left according to critics: why did Whitelab choose a venue with insufficient capacity that was exacerbated by the lack of crowd control? In fact, this was the first point expressed by Oh Sehun's fans in his demands. Whitelab's statement showed that there was an attempt by Whitelab to direct opinion from what actually happened, which meant that Whitelab denied the allegations by claiming that they had tried their best.

Furthermore, by identifying the outsourced team as the core issue, Whitelab aimed to enable the public to distinguish between the actions representing the company as a whole and those of specific individuals. This scapegoating strategy represents the responsibility avoidance employed by Whitelab to ensure that the crisis occurred because of individual faults rather than of group. From the apology video, it could be understood that Whitelab avoided taking full responsibility for the demands made by Sehun's fans. This was done by differentiating the guilt or what Benoit calls (Seeger et al., 1998) by 'shifting the blame' to the outsourced team which they claimed was one of the parties that triggered Oh Sehun's fans' unrest. In its written statement, even Whitelab seemed to blame the authorities for asking it to shorten the event for safety reasons.

This also reflects victimage and scapegoating efforts Burke, 1961 (cited in Seeger et al., 1998) that finally led to a transcendent strategy by admitting that the crisis had indeed occurred, however it did not show the true essence and good intention of Whitelab. Instead of being able to accept all demands and being willing to make amends/mortification, Whitelab had positioned itself as a victim of an individual's mistakes to get out of guilt and to return guilt-free/purification. Through this effort, the hope was that the public would be able to assess what happened and be able to understand Whitelab's commitment. This was a very risky action because the public could develop further attributions. However, Whitelab's speed in responding to this crisis was commendable.

The attribution and the apologies given during a crisis greatly influence both the public's cognitive and emotional responses, and overall trust in the company. Chung and Lee (2021) explain in their study on corporate apologies in crisis management, how the attribution of causality and the types of apologies delivered during a crisis have a significant impact on the cognitive and affective reactions of the public. Both directly affected by the crisis, and public trust in general. There are two types of corporate apologies: those that emphasize accountability and those that emphasize sympathy. According to Chung and Lee (2021), sincere apologies are more effective than sympathetic ones at calming public ire, creating unfavorable impressions, and eradicating prejudice. When one of Balenciaga's advertising efforts during the 2022 Christmas season included a young child holding a teddy bear bag with characteristics that were thought to have aspects of BDSM and child abuse, this study was successfully implemented by the fashion house (TFL, 2022).

Additionally, a picture of the decision about child pornography that the company also released angered the public. Although previously consumers were made increasingly angry because Balenciaga was accused of throwing blame at a third party, the big step in the form of an apology delivered directly by Creative Director Demna and CEO Cedric Charbit, as well as Balenciaga's willingness to take responsibility, demonstrated purification efforts through apology and responsibility orientation. In addition, Balenciaga stressed the frequency of bad artistic decisions, which indicated that the fashion designer was aware of grave mistakes (Issawi, 2023) and failures in the selection and verification of photographs. Balenciaga's willingness to review and improve to avoid repeating the same errors contributed to the public's positive opinion of the company being even more positive because of this effort.

Nevertheless, categorizing forgiveness into these two types still raises ontological questions regarding the value of an apology itself in different crisis situations. In the context of legal court processes, for example, apology means a willingness to take legal responsibility for mistakes (Patel & Reinsch, 2003) Besides Balenciaga, Facebook and Coca Cola had also been faced with a dilemma when they had to respond immediately to the commotion. They responded to the crisis too late and defensively, which resulted in a decline in public trust (Schweitzer et al., 2015). Reflecting on these three well-known global brands, Whitelab, as a growing local brand, should not have taken the same step. Unfortunately, the company seemed defensive and shifted the responsibility onto a third party. Despite admitting mistakes and publicly apologizing through written statements and videos uploaded on Twitter, Whitelab seemed half-hearted in apologizing by claiming they had tried their best.

As quoted by Schweitzer et al. (2015), the crisis response dilemma in the form of an apology is indeed difficult to avoid, at least Whitelab must be prepared for all scenarios that arose during a crisis by having clear crisis communication guidelines. Company leaders and those they represent must respond to the crisis as soon as possible by admitting mistakes sincerely and being open, as well as committing to change. Thus, the public could be heartened to accept it and not make any further assumptions. Most importantly, crises do not always have a negative connotation. Ulmer et al. (2022) contends that adversity really presents a chance for growth (learning and progress) within a company, with the ability to make it stronger than it was prior to the crisis (in this case, Whitelab).

### *Whitelab Crisis Communication Evaluation*

Every company, no matter how big or little, will undoubtedly experience a crisis (Jin et al., 2018). A crisis can strike at any time for a number of reasons and may result in unfavorable public views that, in turn, may have a long-term effect on the company's reputation and image (Kriyantono, 2015; Nova, 2017). Indonesian local brands are affected by this. A well-known brand – Eiger Indonesia faced a crisis. The brand was attacked by internet users and influencers in 2021 as a result of Eiger Indonesia's trending letter of censure to Youtuber Dian Widiyanarko. Eiger's letter to Dian was received poorly by the public since it was perceived as being unappreciative of its devoted customers who freely left good product reviews. Dian expressed regret for Eiger Indonesia's actions, particularly in his tweet, and promised to stop purchasing their goods. After that, a boycott was launched in response, and everybody who saw the tweet was encouraged to do the same (Syukron, 2021).

Besides, PT. Alpen Food Industry, who owned Aice ice cream, also experienced a similar event. The stress of the job at the company, which had led to numerous incidents of miscarriages among female employees, was examined in an article on magdalene.co. The #boycottAice and #StopBeliEsKrimAice hashtags had also become popular as a result of the active discussion of this issue on social media. These hashtags, which emphasized support for the movement to end the exploitation of women workers and called on Aice to address the numerous violations committed by the company, were trending on Twitter as the public were expressing concern and statement of position (Nadila & Purworini, 2021; Redaksi, 2022a).

Two-way communication is no longer thought to be sufficient for enterprises to sustain relationships with the public as a result of the emergence of multi-way communication along with technological advancements, such as the internet and social media (Chaaban & Sezgin, 2015). Additionally, the availability of social media is crucial for the quick spread of knowledge. Similar to how positive opinions about a firm can swiftly spread and turn into a disaster (Prastya, 2011; Umar, 2022). Coombs (2017) asserts that social media and the internet allow for easy commenting and rapid information dissemination. This both raises the likelihood of crises and makes them worse when they do happen. The emergence of the crisis on the internet and in social media is currently receiving more attention. The rise of social media hastens the propagation of unfavourable remarks or opinions, both individually and collectively, and might result in a crisis for the organization (Juditha, 2017; Suryaningrum, 2019; Umar, 2022). The quick dissemination of unfavorable views is one of social media's negative effects. Utilizing social media to its fullest potential is a problem for every company, particularly in times of crisis (Kuruç & Opiyo, 2020). Twitter is a well-liked social media platform for disseminating topics.

Twitter is one of the most frequently used social media by the people of Indonesia. Quoted from the data in 2022 and 2023, Twitter is included as the most favourite social media in Indonesia (Kemp, 2022, 2023). It is stated that Indonesia is an early adopter of Twitter and has the most active users. Twitter is a social media that is often used to spread opinions and issues quickly (Carley et al., 2015). Unlike other social media, Twitter is the platform that is considered the most effective in carrying out movements or commonly known as social activism (Buente, 2017) including boycott movements using the #hashtag feature. Therefore, Twitter has a big role in crisis communication. The use of Twitter as a crisis control is quite common. Not only by brands like Whitelab, but also individuals and governments. This was revealed by a study conducted by

(Priyansyah et al., 2022), in which the government also uses Twitter to monitor and control issues that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each organization has a relatively small window of time to control problems, restore its reputation, and control its image by understanding the rapid flow of information on social media, particularly Twitter. The proper crisis communication strategy will be able to restrict the issue's dissemination, particularly on social media, allowing for a more balanced public impression. According to Wigley and Zhang (2011) research, organizations or companies who make the most of social media as a tool in their crisis management plan are better able to handle crises than those that do not. This is due to the fact that social media may assist in monitoring emerging concerns, public views, and attitudes developed during times of crisis, allowing companies to create suitable responses to the crisis.

Social media has ingrained itself into daily life and, in recent years, substantially altered corporate communication practices. Each organization must therefore adjust to its existence (Husain et al., 2014; Umar, 2022). The idea of crisis management is changing as a result of technological advancements. Therefore, even while social media can make crises worse, it can also be used to deal with newly developing situations. In the age of digital technology, this is a successful communication tactic (Lee, 2020; Verčič et al., 2015). Because both media producers and media consumers fight to be the first in curating, disseminating, and consuming information, this phenomenon demonstrates how social media as a digital platform is a new issue in public relations practice, especially in managing information in the middle of a crisis (OECD, 2021).

Because of this, it is crucial to grasp crisis management and communication in the digital age. Crisis management takes place before the crisis develops, not after it does. As a type of vigilance, every company must be able to create plans that map out potential crises that can arise and their handling. Crisis management procedures, which address what must be done when a crisis develops and how to solve it, incorporate crisis communication in their planning. According to Putri et al. (2019), crisis communication also refers to the process of responding swiftly to crises through communicating with the public, whether they are directly or indirectly impacted. Crisis avoidance is the ultimate goal of crisis management and communication. However, if the problem has already materialized. The organization can avoid a crisis with the use of crisis management and communication (Nirmalasari, 2020).

In the Whitelab scenario, it seemed that there was a lack of understanding from the outset of the significance of crisis management and communication. This was evident from the event with Oh Sehun EXO, which had virtually little planning put into it. Even after the situation had already arisen, their explanation and apologies regarding the cancellation of the event just made it worse. This was due to the fact that Whitelab claimed that other people were responsible for the issue in its official announcement. In this instance, it was claimed that the Whitelab event had been cancelled by the government. Indicating that they were not solely responsible for the problem at the time. This incident created an uproar in cyberspace due to discrepancies in the statements of the authorities, who later discovered that Whitelab lied. In addition, there were several fatal mistakes made by the Whitelab staff themselves. In its apology, Whitelab still seemed to have washed its hands by appointing individuals and defending itself that they had tried their best. This had the potential to exacerbate the crisis because Whitelab was not only dealing with consumers, but also active fans of Oh Sehun EXO, where K-Pop fans themselves were



attached to fanatical characters (Rinata & Dewi, 2019). It is not surprising that in the instance involving Whitelab, the EXO fandom was upset by harsh criticism via Twitter and decided to boycott the brand since solidarity acts between K-Pop fans were highly important in forming the reality contained in the framework of fandom (fan kingdom). High-loyalty fan groups even feel betrayed by Whitelab because of Whitelab's disregard for their devotion to and willingness to invest time, effort, and resources in support of their idol (Akalili, 2018). Choosing Oh Sehun EXO as a brand ambassador is essentially a successful fandom marketing tactic. According to Park (2023), Forbes article, fandom can aid in the development of brand communities and can help international marketing efforts.

This study focuses on assessing a national-level brand, and future researchers are advised to discuss multinational and global brands for a wider impact. While the authors have provided comprehensive findings based on extensive evaluations, methodologically, this study is limited to only observe and evaluate existing data from social media. Therefore, future research is advised to employ interviews or focus groups with the company management or with audiences to cover both sides of the crisis. In this digital era, social media provides fresh empirical potentials to be studied and the authors recommend future researchers to rely on other platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

#### CONCLUSION

Indonesian local brands have experienced rapid growth in the current digital era, particularly in the beauty industry, as exemplified by Whitelab. However, brand development is often not accompanied by a knowledge of the importance of public relations, particularly crisis management. The crisis faced by Whitelab highlights the lack of preparedness for crises as a form of crisis management implementation. Although Whitelab has responded and apologized for the crisis, criticism continues to emerge, which can further damage the brand's long-term reputation. This indicates that there is still room for improvement in the crisis communication efforts made by Whitelab. However, based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, considering the crisis communication strategies and responses of Whitelab, it can be said that Whitelab managed to overcome the crisis, despite eliciting various public responses. Shortly after the crisis occurred and the response was publicized, Whitelab continued its business as usual as if nothing had happened.

The crisis experienced by Whitelab should serve as a learning opportunity for all local brands in Indonesia, highlighting the importance of crisis management and communication for any growing brand. Moreover, considering the current trend where social media usage greatly influences a brand's sustainability, it is crucial for every brand to be capable of controlling the public perception that arises. Understanding the rapid flow of information in social media, particularly Twitter as a platform for activism, every entity has a limited time to manage issues and restore their image and reputation after a communication crisis occurs. This is aimed at ensuring that every brand maintains positive publicity and a good reputation, enabling them to compete at both national and global levels.

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