Brand Image and Consumer Trust of University Students toward AQUA in the Context of Water Source Issue Crisis Communication

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Abstract– This research aims to analyze how brand image influences university students' consumer trust in AQUA amidst the water source issue crisis, and to test the effectiveness of the company's crisis communication response based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework. A qualitative research method utilizing in-depth interviews was conducted with 12 university students who are consumers of AQUA.

The findings indicate that the crisis triggered a significant polarization of consumer trust, dividing respondents into two almost equally comparable groups. The majority group who remained trusting (70%) were successfully retained by AQUA due to the solidity of the Brand Image and long-term positive experience, which served as a Bolster strategy (SCCT). Conversely, the minority group (30%) experienced a significant decline in trust, demanding high accountability and proving that a strong Brand Image is insufficient to overcome product integrity issues.

SCCT analysis shows that although AQUA employed the appropriate crisis communication strategies (Rebuild and Bolster), its tactical implementation through digital clarification was deemed less credible by the critical group. Consumers demanded formality and the validation of evidence by third-party authorities (BPKN, experts) or a high-accountability format (press conference), indicating that the crisis was perceived as a Preventable Crisis. This study concludes that a complete restoration of trust requires the company to supplement the SCCT Rebuild strategy with transparency based on scientific evidence and formal communication tactics, aiming to bridge the credibility gap caused by the crisis.

Keywords: Brand Image, Consumer Trust, Crisis Communication, SCCT.

I. INTRODUCTION

Aqua is one of the most recognized bottled drinking water (*Air Minum Dalam Kemasan / AMDK*) brands in Indonesia. Since its presence in 1973, Aqua has built an image as a drinking water product originating from high-quality, protected mountain springs. [1] [2]. This image has been reinforced through consistent marketing communication campaigns, such as the use of slogans, narratives of natural freshness, and an emphasis on the selection and protection processes of the water sources [3] [4] [3]. Identitas

ini membuat Aqua bukan sekadar produk kebutuhan sehari-hari, tetapi juga simbol kualitas, kesehatan, dan kepercayaan bagi konsumen.

Figure 1. Aqua Branding Originating from Selected Mountain Water Sources

https://www.sehataqua.co.id/hanya-aqua-100-murni /

However, in recent times, Aqua has faced a public issue that has gone viral across social media platforms. The issue suggests that not all Aqua products originate from mountain springs, but are instead sourced from groundwater using drilling methods [5]. Although technically groundwater is not necessarily unfit for consumption, this issue touches upon the core of Aqua's brand identity: the claim of natural source water purity. The rapid spread of the issue across digital platforms such as X (Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram accelerated the formation of public opinion, thereby generating distrust that could influence consumer purchasing decisions.

In communication studies, through the perspective of Spence et al. (2007), this situation can be categorized as a communication crisis, defined as a condition where an organization's reputation is threatened due to negative information circulating in the public sphere [6]. This crisis is further complicated by occurring in the digital media era, where the dissemination of information is no longer centralized through official media, but takes place massively via internet user conversations. Amidst this situation, Aqua appears to focus its response on crisis communication and image restoration by providing information clarification, delivering technical explanations regarding water sources and quality standards, and conducting public education through the company's official channels [7]. Unlike during normal times, commercial promotional activities appear not to be a priority, making the dominant aspect of communication the effort to maintain public trust..

Figure 2 Issue of Aqua Water Sources from Drilled Wells

https://www.tempo.co/politik/heboh-sumber-air-aqua-dari-sumur-bor-usai-dedi-mulyadi-sidak-pabrik-di-subang-2082765

Figure 3 Aqua news reporting that provides a public response regarding the information crisis

https://www.detik.com/jabar/berita/d-8174358/respons-aqua-usai-viral-pabriknya-disidak-dedi-mulyadi

Public trust in this context is closely intertwined with brand image. According to Keller, brand image is formed based on consumer perceptions of the associations and experiences connected to the brand [8]. When a crisis occurs, consumers undertake a process of re-evaluation regarding that image. In other words, a communication crisis does not only impact the dissemination of negative information but also the redefinition of the brand image in the consumers' minds [9]. This makes the relationship between crisis communication and brand image a critical aspect requiring deeper study.

Previous research by Erlinda, Sulfitra, and Nuzulman (2024) indicated that brand image and social media play a vital role in influencing consumer decisions, but that study focused on the promotion of educational institutions, not a brand crisis situation [9]. Furthermore, Virginia, Nuha, and Sajidah (2025) investigated crisis communication strategies using SCCT, but their object of study was an educational institution, thus not highlighting consumer perceptions of a commercial product [10]. Meanwhile,

Salas et al. (2025) discussed government responses to viral issues, placing the context within the realm of political public opinion, rather than consumer brand image and trust [11].

To analyze this phenomenon, the research employs Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs, which explains how organizations must tailor their response strategies based on the level of responsibility the public attributes to the crisis [9]. This theory helps identify whether Aqua responded to the issue with a *denial, diminish*, or *rebuild* strategy. Additionally, the study integrates SCCT with Keller's Brand Image Theory to understand how Aqua's image is renegotiated in consumer perception following the emergence of the issue. Keller posits that brand image is formed through consumer evaluation of the value and quality of the product communicated by the company [12]. In the case of AQUA, the water source issue prompts consumers especially university students to reassess their conviction regarding the brand's purity and credibility.

Based on this context, this study holds an urgency to explain how Aqua manages its crisis communication and how that process influences brand image perception among young consumers. This understanding will contribute to the development of marketing communication and public relations strategies in the digital era, particularly in crisis situations related to brand identity aspects.

II. METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, as the study seeks to understand how university students interpret the water source issue affecting AQUA and its impact on brand image and their trust as consumers. The qualitative approach allows researchers to capture the subjects' experiences and perspectives in depth through the process of interpreting the social reality they face. This aligns with Moleong's (2017) view that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena holistically through descriptions in the form of words and language based on the natural context experienced by the research subjects. [13].

Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the consideration that they meet specific criteria supporting the research objectives: they must be active students of the Communication Science Program at Muhammadiyah University of Kotabumi, aged 19–23 years old, have consumed or are currently consuming AQUA, are aware of the water source issue circulating on social media, and are willing to provide information through interviews. Based on these criteria, the study involved 12 informants, consisting of 6 informants who still trust AQUA, 4 informants who are starting to doubt, and 2 informants who no longer trust AQUA and have switched to other brands. This composition provides a comprehensive overview of perception differences based on shifts in consumer conviction.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured question guide, supported by social media observation and documentation in the form of news coverage, public clarifications, and company communication materials. These three techniques were used concurrently to obtain rich and contextual data relevant to the ongoing social situation.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model by Miles and Huberman as cited in Kriyantono's (2020) book, *Practical Techniques for Communication Research*. This analysis model comprises three continuous stages throughout the research process: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This model was chosen for its flexibility, allowing researchers to process data iteratively while developing interpretative meanings. The process was completed with source and technique triangulation to maintain data validity, by comparing interview results across informants, matching findings with social media observations, and confirming data with supporting documents.

[14].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

University Students' Consumer Trust in AQUA's Brand Image Post-Water Source Crisis

An in-depth interview analysis of 12 university students as AQUA consumers indicates that the recent water source crisis issue has triggered significant polarization, dividing consumer attitudes into two nearly equal groups. This finding underscores that even though AQUA possesses a strong brand image, the crisis issue fundamentally tested the resilience of consumer loyalty,

revealing a group that remained loyal and another group that experienced decreased trust. The first group, consisting of Renata Safirta, Septa Fauziah Azzahra, Wulan Aprilia, Nisa Rahayu, Chintia Sari Dewi, and Elsa Maulia, demonstrated high resistance to the negative issue. Their conviction aligns with Keller's Brand Image theory (2013), where long-term experience and product quality perception act as a defense mechanism [10]. For this group, positive experience outweighed crisis information, as expressed by Wulan, who stated:

"I was surprised at first, but gradually I got used to it and I still trust consuming the brand." ("Pertama kaget, tapi lama kelamaan terbiasa dan saya masih percaya mengkonsumsi brand tersebut".)

Similarly, Septa F.A. asserted that:

"I still trust Aqua. Because Aqua water, in my opinion, is fresher and does not cause a sore throat." ("Masih percaya dengan Aqua. Karena air Aqua menurut saya lebih segar, dan tidak membuat sakit tenggorokan".)

However, this loyalty is not absolute, as expressed by Chintia S.D.:

"AQUA must provide clearer explanations to the public so that consumers are more convinced, even though the product is still being consumed." ("AQUA harus memberikan penjelasan lebih jelas kepada publik agar konsumen lebih yakin, walaupun produk tetap di konsumsi".)

This indicates that even the loyal group demands verbal confirmation and increased transparency from the company. Conversely, the issue successfully eroded the trust of the comparable group, namely Ahmad Anis, Mirna, Hawa, Qonita W., Atika S.D, and Dela. For this group, the crisis information had a tremendous destructive power over their perception and triggered changes in consumption behavior. Ahmad Anis expressed deep disappointment:

"as a consumer, I feel let down by a brand, the relationship between the producer and the consumer is indeed true. If using a percentage, my level of trust in the AQUA brand, especially for bottled drinking water, is now 20%." ("saya sebagai konsumen merasa dikecewakan oleh sebuah brand, hubungan antara produsen dan konsumen itu benar adanya. jika menggunakan persentase, tingkat kepercayaan saya terhadap brand AQUA khususnya untuk air minum kemasan menjadi 20%".)

This doubt was immediately manifested in behavioral changes, where Mirna admitted:

"Yes (it influenced), I temporarily switched to boiling my own water," ("Iya (mempengaruhi), sempat beralih merebus air sendiri,")

and Dela switched to a competitor brand, demonstrating that for sensitive consumers, quality issues can rapidly erode loyalty. Furthermore, Hawa's case highlights the effect of an overlapping crisis, where the water source issue did not stand alone but functioned as a catalyst validating the consumer's decision already influenced by previous sensitive issues (the boycott issue). She stated:

"I had heard various issues about Aqua water before this water source issue, such as Aqua supporting Israel. The existence of this issue makes me even more convinced not to consume Aqua water." ("Saya telah mendengar berbagai isu tentang air Aqua sebelum isu sumber air ini, seperti Aqua yang mendukung Israel. Adanya isu ini saya semakin yakin untuk tidak mengonsumsi air Aqua".)

This condition illustrates that brand image vulnerability increases exponentially when a company faces interconnected crisis issues. Despite the polarization, the assessment of AQUA's official communication reveals that 70% of respondents felt the clarification efforts made were good or clear enough. For instance, Septa stated:

"It is clear enough, because there has been clarification and transparency in several media." ("Cukup jelas, karena sudah ada klarifikasi dan transparansi di beberapa media".)

However, the unsatisfied group (30%) demanded more substantial transparency, representing the biggest gap the company must address. Qonita demanded evidence by stating:

"It has slightly decreased because the information provided is still limited. There is a need for deep clarification and real evidence." ("Sedikit menurun karena informasi yang disampaikan masih terbatas. Perlu adanya klarifikasi mendalam dan bukti-bukti nyata".)

This demand was reinforced by Chintia, who suggested:

"It is not clear enough; if there is an issue, there should be a press conference inviting relevant people. Even now, no press conference related to this issue has been seen." ("Kurang jelas, seharusnya jika ada isu harus ada konferensi pers yang mengundang orang-orang terkait. Bahkan sampai saat ini belum terlihat konferensi pers terkait isu ini".)

This perception indicates that communication through digital channels alone is considered less authoritative. Modern consumers demand empirical evidence and expert involvement (such as press conferences) to restore credibility. Therefore, a strong Brand Image must be supported by a credible communication strategy, one of which is Transparency Based on Real Evidence. Atika Sari Devi supported this by suggesting:

"Provide real evidence related to the water source they use. Maybe they could collaborate with the authorized parties to issue a statement." ("Memberikan bukti yang nyata terkait sumber air yang mereka gunakan. Mungkin bisa bekerja sama dengan pihak yang berwenang untuk memberikan pernyataan".)

AQUA's reputation recovery relies on the company's ability to combine proven product quality with a credible, transparent communication strategy that utilizes third-party authorities, to mitigate negative narratives on social media and reassure consumers.

Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Demand for Credibility in the AQUA Water Source Crisis

The analysis of AQUA's crisis response regarding the water source issue is guided by a robust theoretical foundation: the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Timothy Coombs (2007). SCCT emphasizes that the effectiveness of crisis communication is highly determined by the strategy's appropriateness to the type of crisis and the level of responsibility the public attributes to the organization [9]. The issue alleging that AQUA's water source comes from ordinary drilled wells, rather than mountain springs as claimed in its advertisements, directly attacks brand integrity and generates the perception of dishonesty [5]. Within the SCCT matrix, this issue, triggered by an external inspection finding that went viral, potentially places AQUA in a high-responsibility crisis category, moving from an *Accidental Crisis* to a *Preventable Crisis*. This perception automatically demands the strongest response: a Rebuild strategy (restoring trust through corrective action and apology) supported by a Bolster strategy (reminding stakeholders of past positive image).

Documentation data gathered through AQUA's official website, *aqua.co.id*, and mass media indicates that AQUA did adopt both SCCT-recommended strategies. The Bolster strategy proved highly effective in leveraging AQUA's strong Brand Image. By promptly releasing clarifications referencing scientific facts, research from Univeritas Gajah Mada and Universitas Padjajaran (*Universitas Gajah Mada and Universitas Padjajaran*), and regulatory compliance, AQUA successfully reminded its loyal consumers that product quality remains superior and guaranteed [15] [16].

Figure 4. Reporting of AQUA's Clarification in the Tempo.co Mass Media

https://www.tempo.co/ekonomi/poin-poin-sanggahan-aqua-soal-sumber-air-yang-dipersoalkan-dedi-mulyadi-2083279

Figure 5 AQUA Clarification Report via Official Website

https://www.aqua.co.id/fakta-di-balik-sumber-air-aqua-klarifikasi-atas-disinformasi-di-media-sosial

This Bolster strategy created a trust buffer, which successfully retained 70% of respondents in the trusting consumer group. These consumers viewed the company's response as confirmation, not justification, as articulated by Wulan Aprilia:

"I see AQUA responding quickly to this issue on social media, explaining the water source and the steps they are taking. So I still feel safe consuming it." (*"Saya melihat AQUA cepat menanggapi isu ini di media sosial, menjelaskan sumber air dan langkah yang mereka ambil. Jadi saya tetap merasa aman mengonsumsinya."*)

And Septa Fauziah Azzahra stating: "They also made clarifications on their official website and in advertisements, so even though the issue arose, I still trust this product. The product's reputation is indeed good." (*"Mereka juga membuat klarifikasi di website resmi dan iklan, jadi meski isu muncul, saya tetap percaya produk ini. Reputasi produk memang sudah bagus."*)

The speed of response and the massive use of digital channels were appropriate tactics for mitigating the spread of misinformation on the platforms that served as the primary source of crisis information (Social Media).

Although the *Bolster* strategy was successful, this discussion reveals a fatal gap in the full implementation of the Rebuild strategy. In SCCT, an effective *Rebuild* strategy must include *Corrective Action* and *Mortification*. Amidst an issue involving product integrity, public demand is no longer just for written statements but for credible and formal validation. Interview data shows that 30% of respondents experiencing decreased trust demanded a format of communication with higher authority, indicating dissatisfaction with AQUA's chosen clarification tactic.

This critical group explicitly asked for evidence and third-party verification. This demand suggests they perceived the crisis to be at a serious *Preventable* level, leading them to view clarification on the website or social media as an insufficient *self-claim*. This is supported by the quotes:

"It has slightly decreased because the information provided is still limited. There is a need for deep clarification and real evidence." (*"Sedikit menurun karena informasi yang disampaikan masih terbatas. Perlu adanya klarifikasi mendalam dan bukti-bukti nyata"* (Qonita) and,

"It is not clear enough; if there is an issue, there should be a press conference inviting relevant people. Even now, no press conference related to this issue has been seen." (*"Kurang jelas, seharusnya jika ada isu harus ada konferensi pers yang mengundang orang-orang terkait. Bahkan sampai saat ini belum terlihat konferensi pers terkait isu ini."* (Chintia).

The demand for a press conference and real evidence is highly relevant given external data showing that BPKN (National Consumer Protection Agency) and DPR RI (House of Representatives) members also highlighted this issue [17]. The presence of formal authorities in this crisis automatically elevates the standard demanded by consumers. When the Consumer Protection Agency and legislative bodies are involved, consumers are no longer satisfied merely with clarification from the company's *Corporate Communication*, but demand the presence of an Independent Third-Party Authority to verify the company's claims, which is a key component of a strong *Rebuild* strategy. AQUA's failure to promptly present a communication format involving such authorities (or at least its failure to be identified by respondents) created room for doubt to persist, resulting in a 30% decline in consumer trust and even changes in their consumption behavior.

This AQUA crisis offers an important lesson regarding tactical adaptation within the SCCT framework. Although the *Rebuild-Bolster* strategy choice was theoretically sound, the failure in the formality and credibility of its tactics led to a failure in the total restoration of trust. A strong brand image served as AQUA's *life raft* to survive, but the key to total recovery lies in continuous transparency that extends beyond social media.

To achieve full SCCT effectiveness and restore the hesitant consumer group, AQUA is recommended to strengthen its *Rebuild* strategy with two main focuses. First, Enhancing Credibility Through External Authority. The company must immediately integrate official statements from independent institutions (such as BPKN or hydrogeology experts) into their communication, as suggested by Atika Sari Devi:

"Provide real evidence related to the water source they use. Maybe they could collaborate with the authorized parties to issue a statement." (*"Memberikan bukti yang nyata terkait sumber air yang mereka gunakan. Mungkin bisa bekerja sama dengan pihak yang berwenang untuk memberikan pernyataan."*)

Second, High-Accountability Communication Format. Organizing formal and interactive communication forums, such as a press conference or open Q&A sessions involving experts, will meet the respondents' demand for direct accountability. This step will also address the decline in trust among Chintia and Qonita, and restore the opportunity for reputation recovery, as respondents believe that Aqua's reputation can recover by fixing its image and convincing consumers that Aqua has made improvements, by holding a press conference and assuring consumers that Aqua can fix its brand." (*"reputasi Aqua bisa saja pulih kembali dengan memperbaiki citra dan meyakini konsumen bahwa aqua sudah memperbaikinya, dengan mengadakan konferensi pers dan meyakini konsumen bahwa aqua bisa memperbaiki brandnya."*).

This discussion affirms that SCCT remains relevant, but tactical implementation must be sensitive to the nature of the crisis and consumer demands in the digital age. In a crisis affecting product integrity, only a Rebuild strategy supported by formal transparency, highest accountability, and third-party verification will succeed in closing the credibility gap and fully restoring the brand image.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with university students as consumers, this research, titled "Brand Image and Consumer Trust of University Students toward AQUA in the Context of Water Source Issue Crisis Communication," concludes that a strong Brand Image is no longer an absolute defense barrier amidst a product integrity crisis.

First, the water source issue crisis triggered a significant polarization of consumer trust, dividing respondents into two nearly comparable groups. AQUA's solid Brand Image proved effective as a Bolster strategy (strengthening image), successfully maintaining the loyalty and trust of 70% of respondents through long-term positive experience. However, this polarization indicates the presence of a 30% critical group experiencing a decline in trust and demanding high accountability, confirming that a strong Brand Image only functions as a foundation, not a complete solution to the crisis.

Second, within the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework, AQUA chose the correct strategies (*Rebuild* and *Bolster*), but failed in their tactical implementation. Rapid digital clarification proved effective in mitigating initial speculation, but it was unable to meet the credibility demands of critical consumers. The doubtful group explicitly demanded real evidence, verification by a third-party authority (BPKN, hydrogeology experts), and a formal communication format (press conference), which suggests that the high-potential crisis (*Preventable Crisis*) cannot be resolved solely through statements on social media.

Therefore, as a managerial implication, the total restoration of trust for AQUA must focus on strengthening the Rebuild strategy through enhanced tactical credibility. The primary recommendation is that the company must supplement digital clarification with external authority validation and adopt a high-accountability format (such as a press conference or open forum with experts) to present scientific evidence. Only by combining the strength of the Brand Image with formal and evidence-based transparency can the divided consumer trust be sustainably unified.

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