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Crisis Communication Strategy of PT SGMW Sales Indonesia in Managing Protests from the Wuling Binguo EV Early Adopter Community

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Abstract:
The rapid growth of digital media and the increasingly competitive electric-vehicle (EV) market require companies to respond to communication crises quickly, accurately, and transparently. This study examines the crisis communication strategy employed by PT SGMW Sales Indonesia (Wuling) in responding to protests from the Wuling Binguo EV early-adopter community after the vehicle's price fell by roughly Rp 180 million (about 43%) within approximately seven months of launch, a change that triggered an online petition, negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and user-generated content (UGC) across social media. Using a qualitative case-study approach grounded in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), data were collected through semi-structured interviews with company representatives and early-adopter informants, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model with source triangulation for validity. The findings show that Wuling carried out issue monitoring, cross-divisional strategy formulation, multi-channel implementation, and post-crisis evaluation, applying instructing information, adjusting information, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering strategies. However, the company's response in the early phase of the crisis was perceived as insufficiently fast, which allowed negative public perception to form before official clarification was issued. eWOM, UGC, and the early-adopter community functioned as key drivers of public opinion during the crisis. The study recommends that the company strengthen its issue-monitoring system, accelerate its communication response, and deepen community engagement to protect its reputation and rebuild consumer trust.

Keywords:
Crisis Communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Wuling Binguo EV, Early Adopters, Corporate Reputation, eWOM, User-Generated Content

BACKGROUND

Wuling Binguo EV was launched in Indonesia in December 2023 at an on-the-road price of roughly Rp 409–415 million and was well received by the market, recording 4,633 units sold in its first year. Within about seven months, however, the price fell to around Rp 235–250 million a drop of roughly Rp 180 million, or about 43% driven by a combination of government EV incentives, promotional programs, and dealer pricing policy. Early-adopter buyers who had paid the original price perceived this as unfair treatment rather than a simple pricing matter, since it also touched on ownership value, resale value, and a sense of being appreciated for having taken the risk of buying a new, unproven product first.

Dissatisfaction escalated into collective action through an online petition on Change.org titled "Kami Dirugikan! Harga Wuling Binguo EV Turun Rp 180 Juta dalam 7 Bulan!" ("We Are

Harmed! The Price of the Wuling Binguo EV Dropped Rp 180 Million in 7 Months!"), which drew more than a thousand supporters and attracted coverage from national media such as ANTARA News. The issue moved from an individual complaint to a matter of public concern, and the company later met directly with community representatives to explain its pricing policy and hear consumer aspirations, shifting its approach from one-way clarification toward two-way dialogue. Reactions to that dialogue remained mixed: some consumers appreciated the opening of a dialogue space, while others felt the company's response came too late to fully address their expectations.

Viewed through SCCT, the Binguo EV issue could initially be classified within the accidental cluster as a pricing and market-dynamics matter, but risked shifting toward the preventable cluster if the public judged that the company should have anticipated the impact of its pricing decisions on early buyers. This shift meant that a purely explanatory response was not enough, and more accommodative responses dialogue, corrective action, or proportionate compensation needed to be considered. The study is grounded in the observation that, in the EV industry, product success depends not only on technology and price but also on a company's ability to manage early-adopter trust when policies are perceived as harmful, and there is limited prior research on crisis communication in Indonesia's EV sector triggered specifically by price change and shaped by an early-adopter community acting as a public-opinion driver on social media.

Based on this background, the study addresses four research questions: (1) how did Wuling's crisis communication strategy respond to early-adopter protests over the price decrease and demands for compensation; (2) how can Wuling's crisis response be characterized using the SCCT framework, particularly instructing information, adjusting information, deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering; (3) what internal and external barriers did the company face in executing its crisis communication strategy amid social-media and online-petition escalation; and (4) how did the early-adopter community respond to Wuling's crisis communication through the dynamics of eWOM and UGC.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Crisis communication is understood as the planned, strategic transmission of information when an organization faces a threat to its operations, reputation, or stakeholder trust, spanning the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. Drawing on Coombs and Tachkova (2024) and Coombs (2022b), the study frames crisis communication as a strategic, adaptive process that must track shifting public attributions of responsibility rather than treat a crisis as a fixed "snapshot" a view reinforced by Jong (2025), who notes that public attribution can change as new information and stakeholder interactions emerge over the course of a crisis. Effective crisis communication is expected to satisfy the principles of being first, being right, and being credible (following the CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication framework), and, per Frandsen and Johansen (2022), digital media has shifted crisis communication from an organization-centered, one-way model toward a participatory, dialogic one.

The study's central theoretical lens is Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which holds that the strategy an organization should adopt depends on how much responsibility the public attributes to it for the crisis: the greater the perceived responsibility,

the more accommodative the response needs to be (e.g., acknowledgment, apology, compensation, corrective action). SCCT groups crises into three clusters victim, accidental, and intentional/preventable associated with increasing levels of attributed responsibility, and prescribes response strategies ranging from deny and diminish to rebuild and bolstering, always preceded by the ethical base response of instructing information (practical safety/factual information) and adjusting information (psychological/emotional support and explanation).

Complementing SCCT, the framework draws on: (1) the concept of crisis-communication stages — pre-crisis (issue monitoring, social listening, crisis-team formation), crisis response (ethical base response plus SCCT strategy selection), and post-crisis (evaluation and relationship rebuilding); (2) e-WOM and UGC as increasingly credible, hard-to-control sources of public opinion in social-media environments; (3) Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations, under which early adopters function as opinion leaders whose experiences shape the adoption decisions of the early majority; and (4) corporate reputation theory, which in the EV sector is closely tied to perceived transparency, accountability, and responsiveness during a crisis (Kim et al., 2023; Xiong & Deng, 2023). Together these strands position the Binguo EV case as a price-driven reputational crisis rather than one caused by product failure or a safety defect.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a single case-study design, focused on the crisis communication surrounding early-adopter protests over the Binguo EV price decrease and demands for compensation. The study was conducted over ten months (October 2025–July 2026) at PT SGMW Sales Indonesia, with research sites spanning the company's internal communication units as well as digital spaces the Change.org petition, community and official YouTube channels, and social-media platforms using hashtags such as #BinguoEV and #WulingMotorsID.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling guided by the principle of data saturation, targeting a minimum of eight informants: five from Wuling (spanning Brand Communication/Marketing Communication, Network Development, and Customer Service) and three from the early-adopter community, plus an optional automotive journalist for an external perspective. In practice, ten informants were interviewed seven internal (including a department head/manager, two Marketing Communication staff, two Network Development staff, and two Customer Service staff) and three early adopters. Primary data came from semi-structured in-depth interviews and researcher observation of community and digital-platform interactions; secondary data included online news coverage, social-media and YouTube content, and government EV-incentive policy documents.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising data reduction (coding key themes such as Wuling's response strategies, community perception/emotion, media narratives, and UGC/eWOM dynamics), data display (matrices linking crisis type, response strategy, and community reaction, plus a crisis timeline), and conclusion drawing/verification (iterative interpretation checked against SCCT). Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility through source and method triangulation (comparing Wuling's account against community, media, and documentary evidence) and member checking; transferability through thick description of the case context; dependability through an audit trail of research decisions; and confirmability through reflexivity and evidence-anchored claims.

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RESULT

PT SGMW Sales Indonesia is a joint venture involving SAIC Motor, General Motors, and Liuzhou Wuling Motors, operating in Indonesia since 2017 with a manufacturing base in Cikarang, West Java, and an EV line that includes the Air EV, Binguo EV, and Cloud EV. The Binguo EV, launched in December 2023, is positioned as an affordable, retro-modern urban EV. Documented pricing moved from Rp 409–415 million (December 2023) to around Rp 315 million (April 2025 purchases), then discounts of up to Rp 80 million (June 2025), settling at roughly Rp 235–250 million (July 2025) a total decline of about Rp 180 million (≈43%) within roughly seven months, which became the direct trigger of the crisis as complaints migrated from individual social-media posts to an organized Change.org petition and national media coverage.

The study's ten informants comprised seven Wuling representatives (a department manager, two Marketing Communication staff, two Network Development staff, and two Customer Service staff) and three early-adopter consumers. Findings show the company's crisis-response process unfolded across four stages: (1) identification and monitoring Wuling detected the escalating issue through Customer Service and Marketing Communication reports and social-listening activity, though monitoring was not matched by an equally fast public response, allowing negative narratives to form first; (2) strategy formulation cross-divisional coordination among management, Marketing Communication, Network Development, and Customer Service produced consistent messaging and a dealer communication guide; (3) implementation the company combined official clarification (citing incentives, market dynamics, and promotions as causes of the price change) with multiple channels (social media, official website, mass media, and direct dialogue forums with the community), moving over time from one-way clarification to two-way dialogue; and (4) evaluation the company viewed dialogue and clarification as having reduced escalation, while several consumers still perceived the response as too slow and insufficiently compensatory.

Analyzed through SCCT, Wuling applied instructing information (explaining the causes of the price adjustment) and adjusting information (empathetic communication and dialogue) as an ethical base response, followed predominantly by a diminish strategy (attributing the price change to government incentives, market dynamics, and dealer promotions to reduce attributed responsibility), reinforced by a rebuild strategy (community dialogue forums) and a bolstering strategy (reaffirming commitment to product quality and service). The diminish strategy's effectiveness was limited because part of the community attributed the issue to fairness and recognition rather than purely economic causes.

The company faced internal barriers the time required for cross-divisional coordination and approval before issuing official statements, limited authority of customer-facing frontliners to resolve complaints on the spot, and differing views between the company and consumers on what an adequate resolution would look like and external barriers, chiefly the speed of information spread on social media and the volume of negative eWOM and UGC (comments, videos, reviews, and the petition itself), which the company could not directly control and which often outpaced official clarification.

Community response was mixed: most early-adopter informants reported disappointment, framing the issue as one of fairness and recognition of early risk-taking rather than price alone; some appreciated the dialogue forums Wuling opened, while others felt the response came only after negative sentiment had already spread widely. Early adopters were also found to function as opinion leaders, whose shared experiences shaped the perceptions of prospective EV buyers, and whose collective narrative contributed to a lasting "crisis memory." Trust in the Wuling

brand was not entirely lost, but several informants said they would be more cautious about future purchases, particularly regarding pricing policy.

Overall, five key findings emerged: crisis strategy was dominated by diminish and rebuild approaches; social media substantially accelerated the crisis through eWOM and UGC, outpacing the company's response capacity; early adopters had significant influence on EV brand reputation as opinion leaders; the company's communication was reasonably open but perceived by some as delayed; and dissatisfaction stemmed as much from perceived fairness and recognition as from the price change itself.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that perceived unfairness, rather than the price decrease per se, was the primary driver of the reputational crisis consistent with Adamovic (2023) on fairness perception as a key determinant of stakeholder evaluation, and with Coombs (2024), who argues that a crisis can arise from a perceived failure to meet expectations or demonstrate adequate responsibility even without a product defect. Wuling's social-listening activity reflects an application of a core modern crisis-communication principle, since SCCT holds that early monitoring allows an organization to detect rising attributions of responsibility and respond more quickly.

The company's application of instructing and adjusting information as an ethical base response aligns with SCCT's prescriptions, but its practical effectiveness was constrained by timing: because the clarification arrived after the issue had already spread widely, it was less able to shape public perception at the formative stage a pattern consistent with Garcia-Collart (2024), who found that an organization's early-stage responsiveness significantly influences how public perception is formed. This supports Kronewald and Rademacher's (2026) view that SCCT remains a relevant, though not sufficient on its own, framework, since its explanatory strength depends on how quickly and transparently instructing/adjusting information, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering are executed.

The significant role of eWOM and UGC in the case supports Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations, in which early adopters act as opinion leaders whose experiences influence not only their own decisions but also those of the early majority; the study extends this by showing that when early adopters voice dissatisfaction publicly, the effect can extend beyond the individual brand to slow broader EV adoption in the market. Taken together, the discussion suggests that in price-driven crises (as distinct from product-failure or safety crises), managing consumer fairness perception and emotional relationships is at least as important as delivering accurate factual information, and that SCCT's application in the Indonesian EV context needs to be understood as an adaptive, digitally mediated process rather than a one-time strategic choice.

CONCLUSION

PT SGMW Sales Indonesia's crisis communication strategy proceeded through issue identification and monitoring, cross-divisional strategy formulation, multi-channel implementation, and evaluation of public response, moving from one-way clarification toward two-way dialogue with the early-adopter community. Analyzed through SCCT, the company's dominant strategy was diminish (attributing the price change to government incentives, market dynamics, and dealer promotion policy), supported by rebuild (community dialogue forums) and bolstering (reaffirming commitment to quality and service); while conceptually consistent

with SCCT, the strategy's real-world effectiveness was shaped by public perceptions of response speed, transparency, and recognition of early-buyer loyalty.

The company's crisis response faced internal barriers (time-consuming cross-divisional coordination and limited frontliner authority) and external barriers (the speed of social-media information spread and the volume of eWOM/UGC it could not directly control), which together limited its ability to fully shape public perception even after clarification and dialogue were offered. Community response showed that the price decrease was perceived as an issue of fairness and recognition, not merely economics; effectiveness of the company's communication was judged not only by message content but by timeliness, consistency, and the ability to sustain stakeholder relationships.

Theoretically, the study extends SCCT by showing that strategy selection in a digitally mediated crisis must also account for the dynamics of eWOM and UGC, since public perception can shift rapidly on social media. Practically, it suggests Wuling — and EV manufacturers more broadly — should strengthen social-listening capability for earlier detection, accelerate cross-divisional coordination to enable faster responses, and build continuous (not only crisis-triggered) relationships with early-adopter communities. The study is limited by its single-case design, its informant pool (internal staff and organized community members rather than the general consumer base), and its qualitative-descriptive approach; future research could apply mixed-methods or quantitative designs to measure the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies more precisely, and the company is advised to keep speeding up internal coordination and sustain community engagement beyond the acute crisis period.

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