

The TikTok Judgment: Examining Brands' Crisis Response Through Public Discourses in Social Media

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Abstract

This study examines how public discourse on TikTok shapes brand reputational outcomes during crises, focusing on two Indonesian skincare brands accused of overclaiming product ingredients. Using a qualitative approach supported by Discourse Network Analysis (DNA), this research analyzes user-generated comments and official brand statements to identify and visualize how narratives of trust, responsibility, and credibility emerge and interact. The findings show that TikTok users do not merely react to brand crises but actively participate in constructing and contesting crisis narratives. Differences in crisis response strategies produced contrasting discursive dynamics. A prompt apology and corrective response enabled more balanced interpretations and moderated negative evaluations, allowing space for partial trust recovery. In contrast, a delayed and confrontational response intensified negative sentiment and consolidated distrust within public discourse. These findings highlight the importance of responsiveness and accountability in digital crisis communication and demonstrate how TikTok functions as a participatory arena where crisis meanings are negotiated collectively, rather than determined solely by organizational messaging.

Keywords: Brand, Crisis Communication, Discourse Network Analysis, Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Introduction

In recent years, the Indonesian cosmetic Industry has experienced rapid growth, driven by an increasing consumer awareness regarding of self-care practices and prevailing beauty standards (Nawiyah et al., 2023). This development has been further supported by the public's tendency to choose and consume products from local brands over imported products (Pahlevi, 2022). Moreover, consumers are highly selective; they will consider good quality, familiarity, or being supported by a positive brand image (Chandra et al., 2024). As competition tightened, local brands are required to

innovate and strengthen their branding and promotional strategy to maintain visibility and consumer trust.

Brands often emphasize their product attributes in order to captivate consumer attention and cultivate the perception of high quality (Efawati & Hermawan, 2020; Naseri et al., 2025). Therefore, cosmetic brands often include claims related to the amount of specific chemical ingredients in their product branding and advertising. However, the accuracy of these claims is crucial, as false information can lead to consumer distrust and brand reputation damage (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023). Customers are very susceptible to this kind of false information or claims (Xie & Boush, 2011) and this can harm the consumers by causing financial losses, disappointment with products, and decline of trust (Ahmed et al., 2023).

In 2024, several Indonesian cosmetic brands were accused of making false claims regarding their ingredients. The rise of digital watchdogs and Indonesian social media influencer such as the pseudonymous "Dokter Detektif" (Doktif) on TikTok, then exposed these potential false claims by two popular cosmetic brands, A & D. Through a distinctive visual persona and direct communication style, Doktif's content quickly gained viral traction, generating widespread public reactions and placing both brands under intense reputational scrutiny. Consequently, both brands were reacting in different approaches. While Brand A responded within two days, Brand D delayed its response and initially resorted to denial and attacking Doktif as the accuser before finally releasing an apology statement. Each brand then published an official statement through a TikTok post due to the nature of the crisis that originated from TikTok. Brand A got 897 comments on their TikTok post, and Brand D received more than 2400 comments, highlighting the contrasting TikTok users' reactions to their respective approach.

TikTok has become a popular social media platform worldwide, particularly in Indonesia. It has secured the second position as the platform with the highest aggregate time spent, surpassing both Instagram and YouTube (We Are Social, 2025). In Indonesia itself, TikTok users have reached 165.1 million, this number makes Indonesia the country with the largest TikTok users in the world (Winter, 2025). Understanding crisis discourse on TikTok becomes critical for brands operating in Southeast Asia's largest digital consumer market. The richness of features available on TikTok makes it easier for users to create what is known as User Generated Content (UGC) which

becomes increasingly significant in shaping public perception and discourse. It is often seen as reliable and informative, helping build trust and influence consumer decisions in digital media (Shyni, 2022). During a crisis, UGC play a crucial role in rebuilding trust and demonstrating transparency, and shaping consumer brand perceptions (Kumar, 2024; Soekotjo et al., 2025). However, if UGC contains negative sentiment, it can actually threaten the brand's reputation (Mishra & Sharma, 2019). This shows that UGC can be a double-edged sword when brands face a crisis. Therefore, brands need to be extremely careful in responding to crises on TikTok to prevent the emergence of UGC with negative sentiment toward the brand's crisis response.

Effective crisis communication strategies are essential for brands and should be planned to navigate public perception and maintain trust during unforeseen events (Evans et al., 2001; Kádárová et al., 2015), especially in the fast-paced digital landscape. In this era of the internet, the presence of social media can either be a tool for crisis management or a catalyst for crisis escalation (Cheng, 2018; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Crisis communication scholarship has long emphasized the role of organizational response strategies in shaping public perceptions of responsibility, trust, and credibility. The SCCT (Coombs, 2007), serves as a foundational framework for understanding how organizations can effectively communicate in crises. SCCT suggests that crisis managers should act to protect an organization's reputation during a crisis. This theory categorizes the way organizations can respond to crises into different strategies, such as denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering (Coombs, 2013). Prior studies have demonstrated that effective crisis responses can influence consumer trust, brand equity, and loyalty (Yannopoulou et al., 2011; Hegner et al., 2014).

However, SCCT was largely developed in contexts characterized by relatively controlled and linear communication flows. In the context of social media, SCCT's principles remain relevant but require adaptation to highly interactive and emotionally charged environments. Platforms such as TikTok introduce participatory and networked communication dynamics that complicate several of SCCT's assumptions. Digital publics expect rapid responses, conversational engagement, and evidence of accountability (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2013). Scholars such as Ki and Nekmat (2014) argue that SCCT becomes more complex in social media spaces because publics actively engage in dialogue, produce and circulate interpretations of crisis events,

reducing an organization's control over narrative framing (Zhaldak & Kozii, 2024; Austin et al., 2017). On TikTok, publics do not merely receive organizational messages but actively respond, reinterpret, and collectively negotiate crisis meanings through comments and interactions that are visible to a broad audience.

Despite the increasing significance of proper crisis response strategies especially in the context of social media, most existing studies primarily focus on individual attitudes or aggregated sentiment (Hegner et al., 2014; Yannopoulou et al., 2011; De Blasio & Veale, 2009; Mattila, 2009; Zamani et al., 2015), often overlooking the nuanced dynamics of consumer discourse. Limited attention has been given to the specific implications of this discourse on perception of the brand among different types of publics, including customers, non-customers, and observers. As a result, the ways in which discourse itself shapes brand reputation, beyond individual evaluations, remain underexplored. While SCCT offers valuable insights into response selection, it does not fully account for how crisis meanings are co-constructed through interconnected public discourse.

To address this limitation, this study employs Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) as a methodological approach. Unlike traditional content analysis that treats user comments as independent units, DNA enables researchers to examine how discourses cluster, connect, and compete within interactive communication environments. This approach is particularly suitable for TikTok, where crisis communication unfolds through dense comment networks shaped by agreement, contestation, and moral evaluation. By mapping discursive relationships among actors and themes, DNA allows this study to move beyond sentiment classification and instead capture the relational structure of public discourse. This provides a more nuanced understanding of how crisis narratives are formed and stabilized within participatory digital spaces. Rather than testing SCCT as a predictive model, this study uses it as a heuristic lens to examine how crisis response strategies are interpreted and contested within TikTok's participatory discourse.

The phenomena of Brand A and Brand D are empirical cases due to their contrasting crisis response strategies following similar allegations of ingredient overclaiming. Both brands communicated their responses through official TikTok posts, reflecting the platform's central role in the crisis. However, public reactions differed significantly. Hence, this study aims to explore how crisis response strategies

influence the formation and interaction of public discourses on TikTok. The core research questions are: (1) How do different crisis response strategies shape the structure of public discourse on TikTok? and (2) How are these discourses related to brand trust, perceived quality, and loyalty interrelated within these crisis contexts?

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design and Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) as the primary analytical approach. DNA is a methodological approach that combines network analysis and qualitative content analysis to explore actors and the discourses that develop among them through text sources (Leifeld, 2017; Leifeld & Haunss, 2012). DNA is particularly suitable for TikTok crisis communication because the platform facilitates dialogic and participatory interactions, where comments respond not only to brands but also implicitly to one another. Through network mapping, DNA allows the identification of dominant discourses, marginalized interpretations, and clustering effects that resemble echo chambers within crisis discussions. Rather than measuring attitudes or sentiment frequencies, the study focuses on how meanings, evaluations, and moral judgments emerge relationally through interaction.

Two Indonesian cosmetic brands namely Brand A and D, were selected through purposive sampling due to their comparable crisis triggers and contrasting crisis response strategies. The analysis focuses on TikTok posts from the official account of Brand A on October 18, 2024, and the account of Brand D's owner on November 4, 2024, containing statements from both brands. These posts were selected because they constituted official statements of each brand regarding the ongoing crisis and provide an analytically useful basis for examining how different response strategies shape public discourse.

Data consisted of user comments responding to the official TikTok crisis statements posted by each brand. Comments were manually recorded and stored in a structured dataset due to the absence of publicly accessible TikTok APIs suitable for data extraction. Manual collection allowed for close engagement with the data while minimizing automated misclassification. The reduced irrelevant comments for analysis, including: (1) comments containing advertisements or other product promotions, and (2) comments that only included emojis due to their ambiguity and limited interpretive

clarity in relation to specific discursive claims. This decision prioritizes analytical depth over affective quantification and aligns with the study's focus on discourse rather than emotion detection.

The coding process followed a deductive–inductive approach. Initial coding categories were derived from established literature on brand trust, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and perceived risk (Kotler & Keller, 2009; Marakanon & Panjakajornsak, 2017; Pandiangan et al., 2023; Tsiotsou, 2006). These categories were refined inductively during iterative engagement with the data. This processes aim to identify: (1) actors—who delivered the discourse; (2) discourse—what themes developed; and (3) the network of congruence between actors, concepts, and discourses.

The data was analyzed using Discourse Network Analyzer and the analysis results were visualized using Visone. The visualization consist of: two kind of nodes, black square indicates the concept, black dot indicates the actor; and edges that indicate the relationships between nodes. Here it represents the connection between actor–concept relationships. The edges were in two colors: red indicates negative sentiment; and green indicates positive sentiment. Data was coded as evaluative orientation (positive and negative) rather than numerical polarity, acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative discourse analysis.

Data validation was ensured through qualitative validity criteria adapted from Creswell & Poth (2018) involving a combination of strategies. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field. Dependability was enhanced through transparent documentation of coding decisions. Reflexive memoing was used to monitor analytical assumptions and interpretive choices. Then, thick description were utilized to ensure transferability.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that crisis communication on TikTok unfolds as a participatory and relational process, in which public discourse actively shapes brand reputational outcomes. Rather than merely responding to organizational statements, TikTok users were actively contributing evaluative statements, emotional reactions, and moral judgments that collectively formed narrative frames about trust, quality, loyalty, and risk (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015). The findings show that different crisis

response strategies generate distinct discursive structures, influencing how trust, quality, loyalty, and risk are negotiated in public discourse.

Contrasting Discursive Patterns in Brand A and Brand D

The discourse network for Brand A shows three central thematic clusters: brand trust, brand loyalty, and perceived quality. The discourses indicating consumer loyalty to Brand A and positive support for the crisis response efforts undertaken. However, some users showed dissatisfaction and the possibility of switching to other brands. This indicates the existence of consumer groups who remain loyal to the brand and those who are likely to switch, demonstrating the dynamics of brand loyalty during a crisis. Meanwhile, the discourse related to perceived quality indicating that some users still have positive sentiments about the product quality. However, there are also critical responses regarding the perceived quality and reliability of Brand A's product.

The comparative analysis reveals that Brand A's rebuilding-oriented response fostered a more balanced discursive environment, while Brand D's denial-oriented response intensified negative discourse. For Brand A, apology functioned not merely as a symbolic gesture but as a discursive trigger that enabled users to reinterpret the crisis. The effectiveness of Brand A's response can be attributed to three interrelated mechanisms: the timeliness of the apology, the acknowledgment of responsibility, and the articulation of corrective actions. These elements reduced ambiguity and provided discursive resources for users to justify continued trust and loyalty.

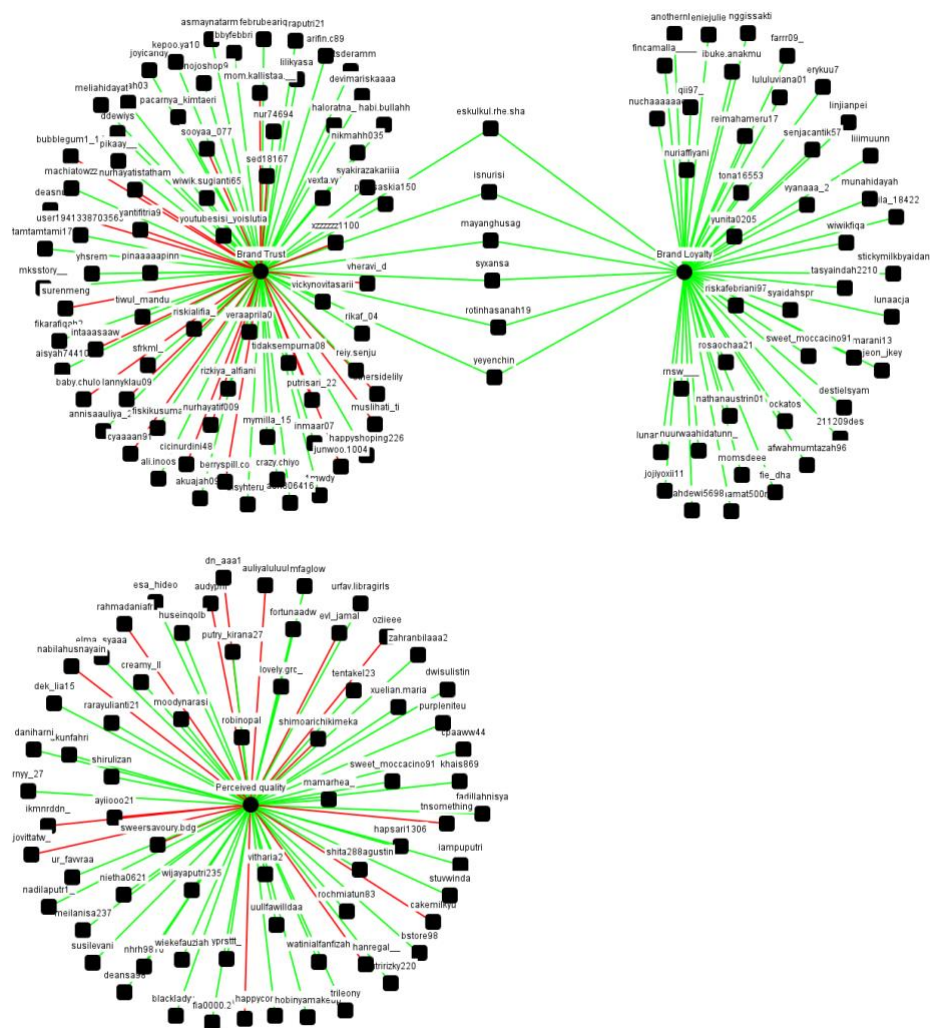


Figure 1. Discourse Mapping in Brand A's Crisis Response

In contrast, the most dominant discourse about Brand D is related to brand trust (the center nodes). This shows that user trust in brand D has been damaged because, besides the crisis that occurred due to brand errors, the brand also did not show integrity because from the beginning, brand D did not show remorse and apology regarding the crisis, and instead denied it. As one comment from @hi****, "actually, if the owner of Brand D had known from the beginning that she was wrong and apologized and fixed the product, maybe we could still oh well, that's it, but what makes it annoying is that he is always stubborn, always feeling like she is right." The rest discourses are related to brand loyalty (upper left nodes), perceived quality (lower left nodes) and perceived risk (upper right nodes).

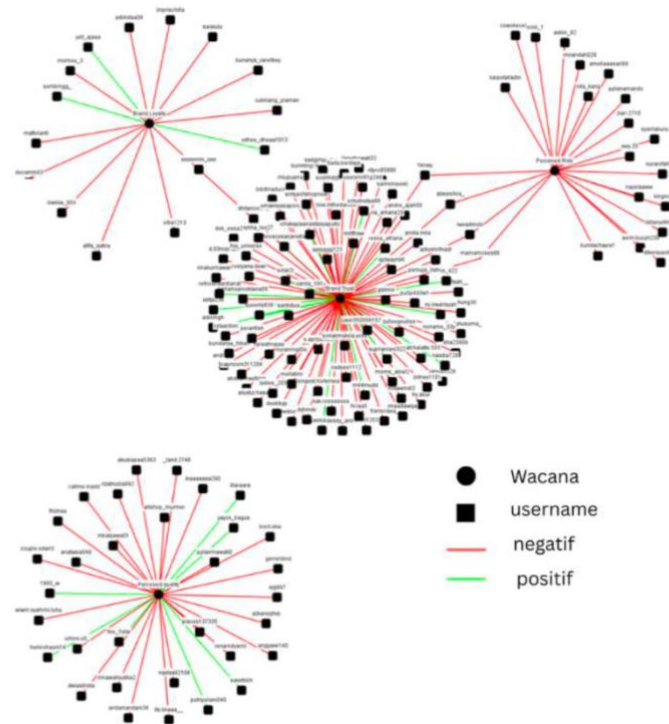


Figure 5. Discourse Mapping in Brand D's Crisis Response

Brand D's initial denial and confrontational communication disrupted trust-building mechanisms. By challenging the accuser before acknowledging consumer concerns, Brand D limited the availability of legitimizing narratives within the discourse. As a result, negative interpretations clustered and reinforced one another, particularly around perceived risk and integrity. This finding aligns with prior studies suggesting that denial strategies are vulnerable in crises where evidence is publicly accessible and easily scrutinized (Coombs, 2013; Coombs, 2016).

Discourse Networks of Brand Evaluation Across Crisis Responses

The discourse networks show that TikTok users articulated evaluations of brand trust, perceived quality, loyalty, and perceived risk during the crisis. The analysis reveals clear structural and discursive contrasts between Brand A and Brand D, demonstrating how different crisis response strategies were reflected in distinct network configurations.

Brand Trust Discourse Networks

The discourse network related to brand trust demonstrates markedly different configurations across the two cases. The discourse on brand trust from the crisis

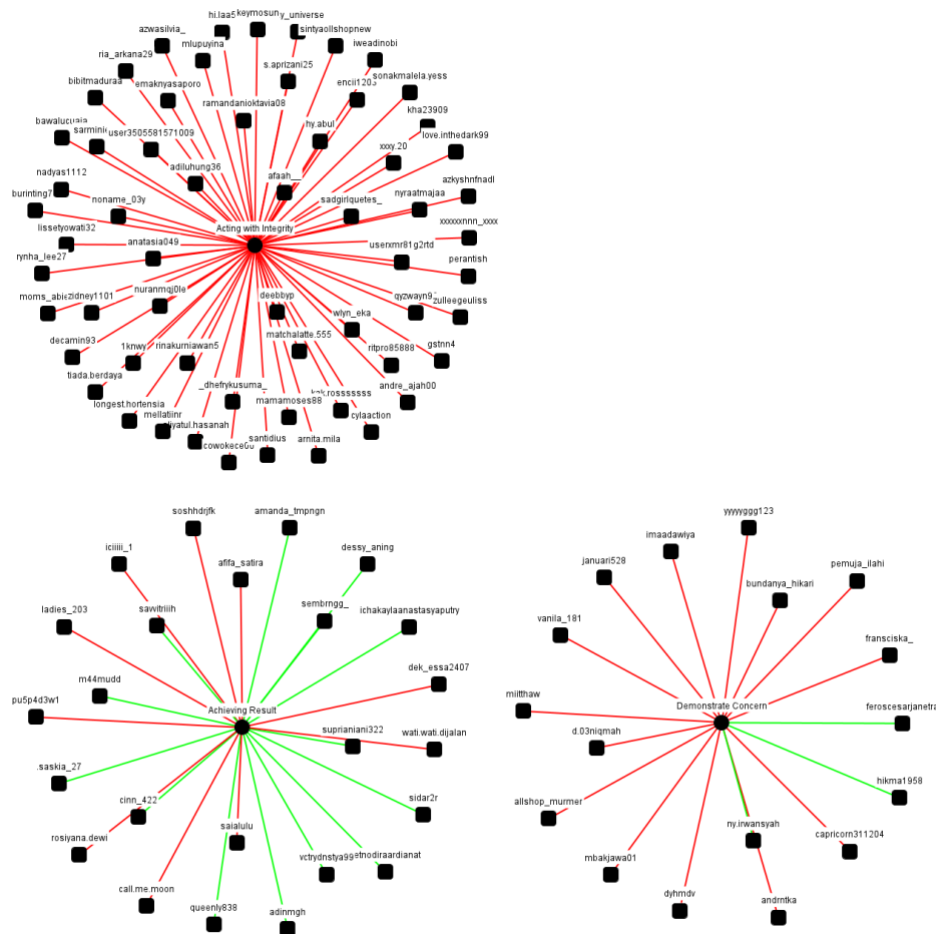


Figure 2. Discourse Mapping Related to Brand Trust on Brand A

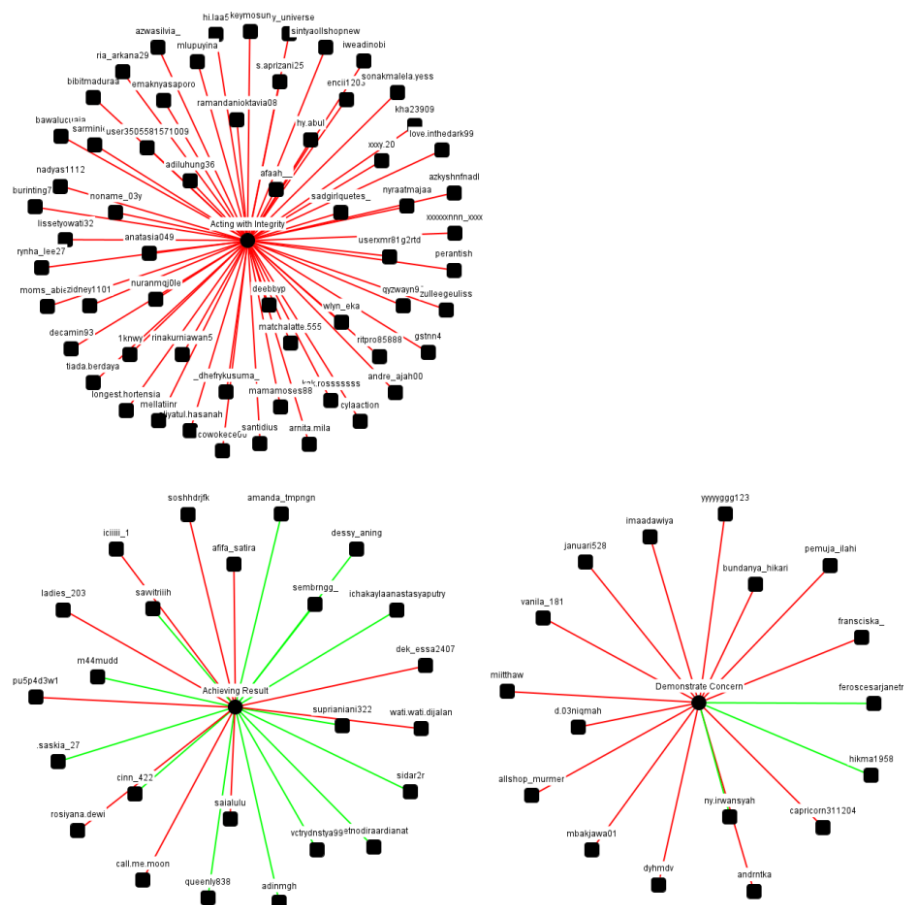


Figure 6. Discourse Mapping Related to Brand Trust on Brand D

In contrast, Brand D's brand trust network was dominated by densely clustered nodes expressing skepticism, betrayal, and perceived dishonesty. Trust-related discourse was less diversified and showed limited connection to restorative narratives. Instead, distrust circulated repeatedly through reinforcing comment chains, indicating a consolidation of negative interpretations. The network structure suggests that trust was framed as fundamentally compromised, with few discursive bridges allowing alternative evaluations to gain visibility. The discourse network maps for brand trust visually reflect these differences, with Brand A's network displaying greater thematic overlap and relational continuity, while Brand D's network exhibits tighter clustering around distrust-oriented discourse.

Perceived Quality Discourse Networks

Discourse surrounding perceived quality revealed how users translated the crisis into evaluations of product efficacy and safety. The sub-themes that emerged in the

discourse on perceived quality are in line with (Tsotsou, 2006), namely good quality, security, and a sense of accomplishment.

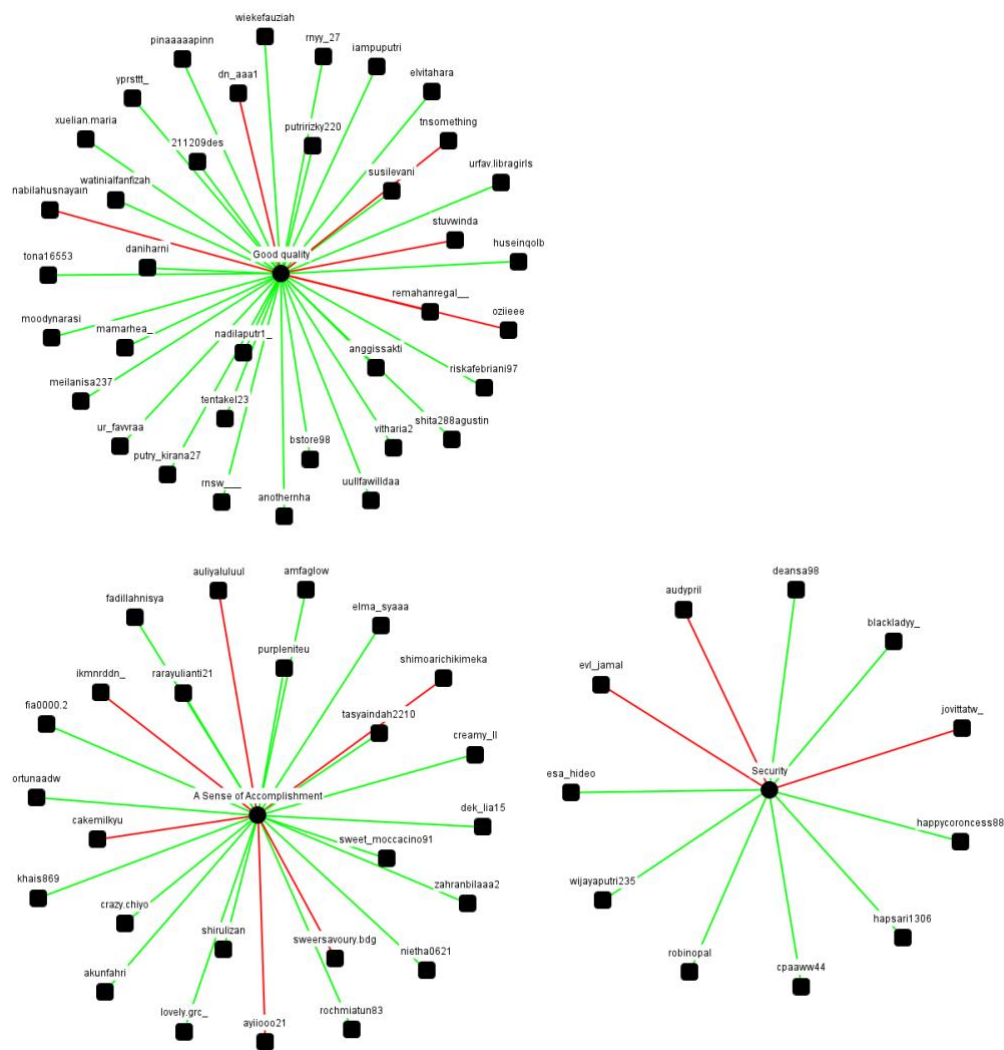


Figure 4. Discourse Mapping Related to Perceived Quality of Brand A

In Brand A's case, perceived quality discourse was distributed across nodes that juxtaposed product performance with ethical responsibility. Users frequently linked past satisfactory experiences to reassessments of quality, indicating that perceived quality remained negotiable despite the crisis. Users perceived Brand A to be committed to improving product quality due to the crisis that occurred. This discourse arises in relation to past experiences that users have had with Brand A. Users have a sense of confidence that Brand A has a tendency to have good quality, even though in this crisis, users believe that the mistakes made by the brand were unintentional.

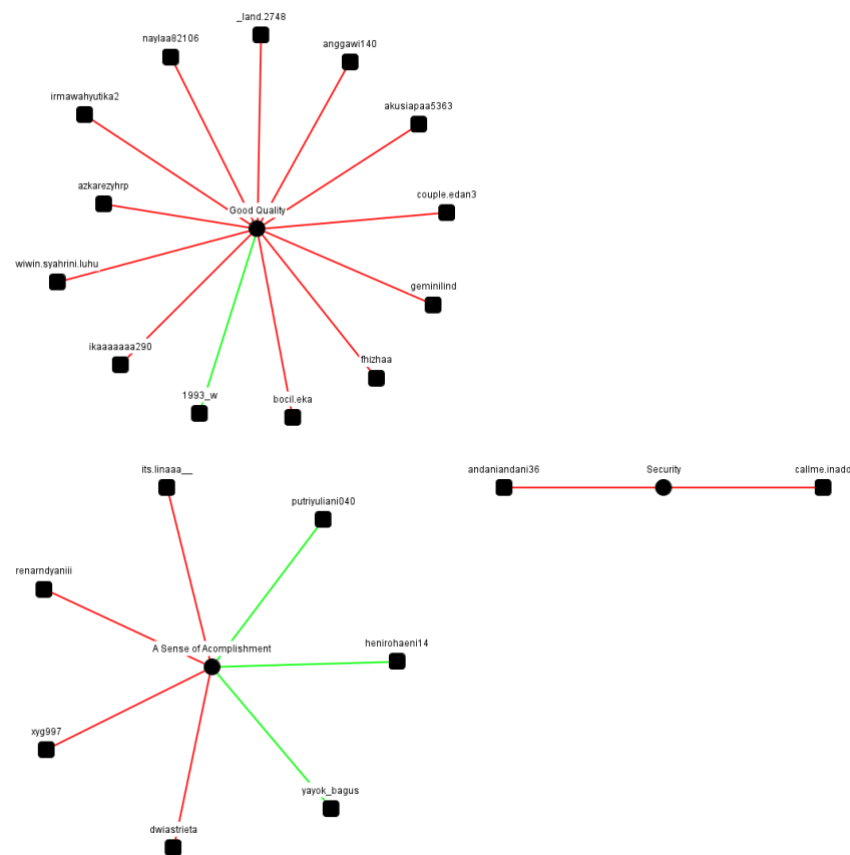


Figure 7. Discourse Mapping Related to Perceived Quality of Brand D

Conversely, Brand D's perceived quality network showed a sharper concentration of negative assessments. Quality was framed as unreliable or unsafe, with limited counter-discourse challenging this interpretation. Nodes expressing concern over ingredient claims were closely linked to narratives of consumer deception, reinforcing perceptions of compromised quality. The network visualization highlights a narrower discursive range, where quality discourse converged rapidly toward a negative consensus.

Brand Loyalty Discourse Networks

Brand loyalty follows three sub-themes in line with (Kotler & Keller, 2009): word of mouth (WOM), repeat purchasing, and rejecting another. The discourse further accentuated the contrast between the two cases. In Brand A's network, loyalty was articulated as conditional and reflexive. Users expressed hesitation but also articulated reasons for continued consideration, such as prior satisfaction, perceived sincerity of the response, and openness to corrective measures.

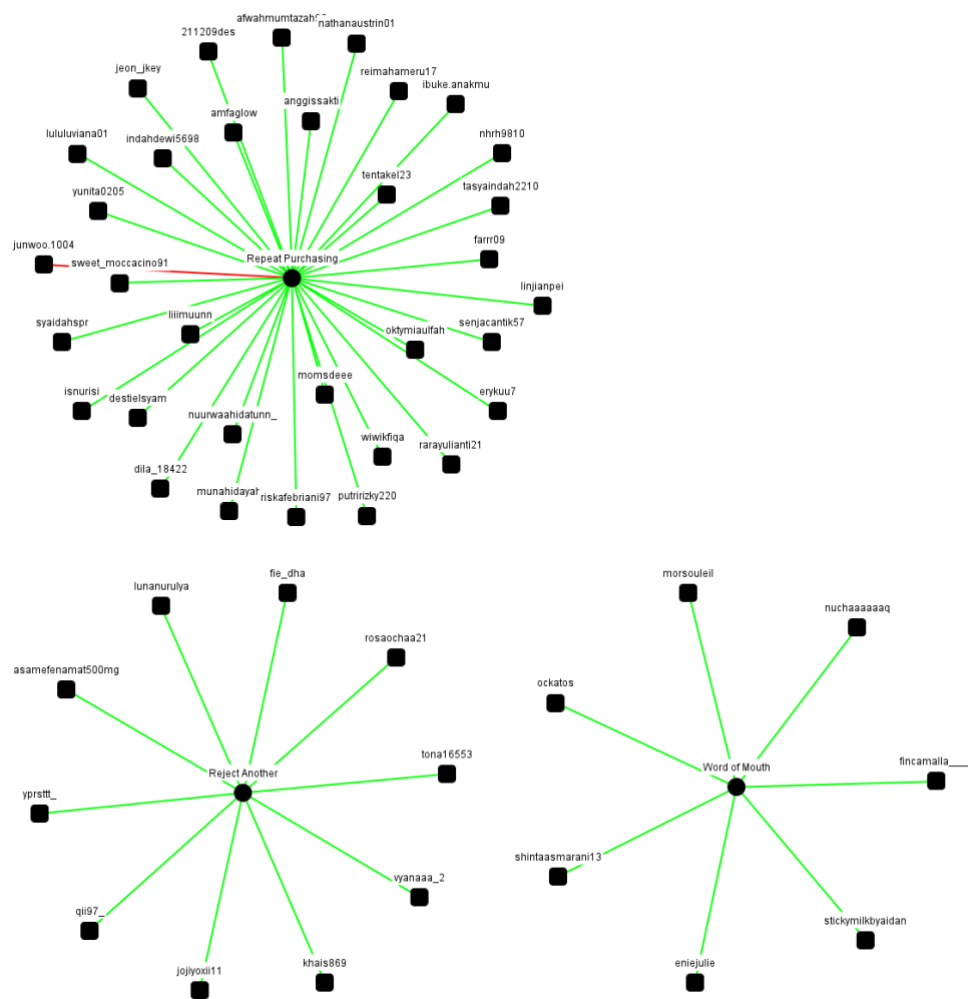


Figure 3. Discourse Mapping Related to Brand Loyalty on Brand A

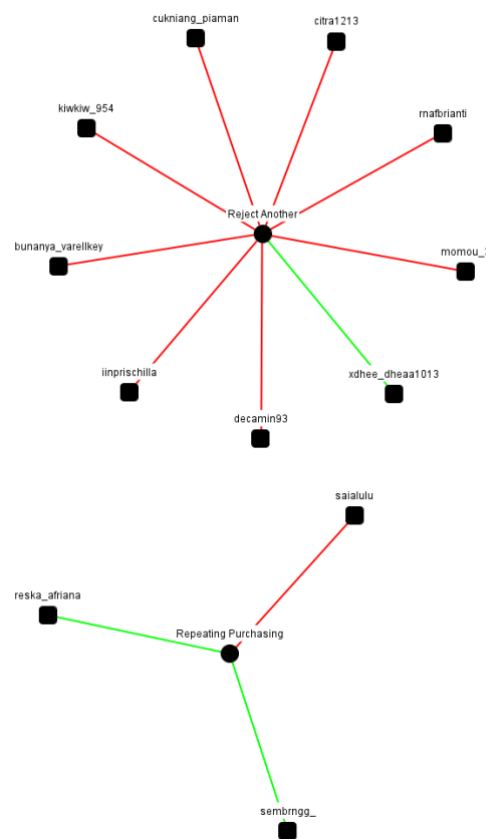


Figure 8. Discourse Mapping Related to Brand Loyalty of Brand D

In Brand D's case, loyalty discourse was framed in terms of withdrawal and rejection. Statements indicating intentions to disengage or avoid the brand clustered tightly with distrust and risk narratives. Loyalty was not renegotiated but rather positioned as no longer justifiable. The network map reflects this rigidity, with limited discursive pathways linking loyalty to rehabilitative interpretations.

Perceived Risk Discourse Networks

One discourse that only appeared in the case of brand D was the discourse on perceived risk, which, according to Marakanon & Panjakajornsak (2017), can be financial risk, performance risk, physical risk, and psychological risk. Risk discourse extended beyond product concerns to encompass ethical, financial, and health-related anxieties. These nodes were densely interconnected, amplifying perceptions of threat and uncertainty. However, users were less concerned about the physical impact of the product's ingredients, but more concerned about the psychological and financial impacts.

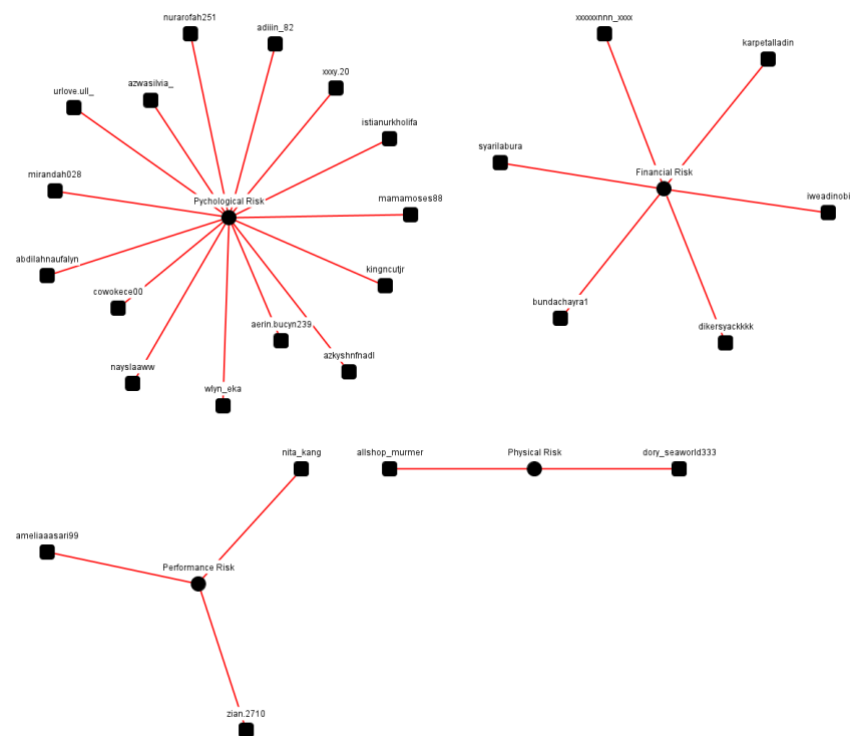


Figure 10. Discourse Mapping Related to Perceived Risk of Brand D

The Role of Different Actors in Shaping Crisis Discourse

The findings demonstrate that crisis discourse on TikTok is shaped through the interaction of heterogeneous actor groups, particularly customers and non-customers, rather than by a unified public. This supports prior studies suggesting that brand trust and reputation are not held exclusively by customers but also by broader publics who may never have directly consumed the product (Yannopoulou et al., 2011). In the discourse networks of both Brand A and Brand D, non-customers actively participated in evaluating brand credibility, moral responsibility, and perceived risk, indicating that reputational judgment on TikTok extends beyond transactional relationships.

An examination of the discourse dynamics among customers, non-customers, and unidentified individuals shows that customers tended to articulate more ambivalent and experience-based evaluations. In brand D's crisis responses, consumers who express contentment with the product are inclined to maintain allegiance and offer affirmative endorsement. Conversely, customers who are disappointed with this brand's crisis communication tend to doubt the product's quality and show a tendency to switch to other brands (Liu et al., 2013; Yannopoulou et al., 2011). In Brand A's case, customers who reported prior satisfaction often combined disappointment with

conditional forgiveness, reflecting what Kim and Jin (2016) describe as emotionally invested responses shaped by existing brand relationships. These actors occupied intermediary positions in the discourse network, connecting critical narratives with discourses emphasizing brand trust repair and continued loyalty. This pattern aligns with prior findings that satisfied customers are more likely to remain loyal during crises, even when dissatisfaction emerges (Park & Lee, 2013; Yannopoulou et al., 2011)

Non-customers, in contrast, played a more central role in amplifying reputational risk, particularly for Brand D. Their discourse involved cross-brand comparisons, accusations of unethical conduct, and expressions of perceived risk, reinforcing prior research showing that non-customers do evaluate brands through competitive framing and moral judgment rather than product experience (Park & Lee, 2013). Within the discourse network, these actors contributed to the consolidation of negative clusters, intensifying reputational damage and reducing discursive diversity. This actor-based differentiation demonstrates that crisis discourse on TikTok is not only emotional but structurally shaped by varying degrees of attachment and stake in the brand.

The response to a brand's crisis communication can significantly differ between customers and non-customers, primarily influenced by their varying levels of investment in the brand and its products. Customers often exhibit a more emotional response to a brand's crisis communication due to their established relationship with the brand. They have previously engaged with the brand's products and, as a result, may feel a sense of betrayal or disappointment when faced with negative information (Kim & Jin, 2016; Park & Lee, 2013). However, this study indicates that existing customer may have a strong attachment towards a brand, so that even if the brand is in crisis or has made a communication blunder, they have a tendency to keep their loyalty. While non-customers lack this emotional connection and are more likely to respond critically or skeptically, evaluating the brand based on its crisis communication without the bias of prior experience. Their responses may be shaped by comparisons to competitors or general perceptions of the brand's reputation. This is aligned with several prior findings on different brand crises (Park & Lee, 2013; Racer & Johnson, 2001; Yannopoulou et al., 2011).

Revisiting SCCT Through Social Media-Formed Networked Discourse

The findings both affirm and complicate the core propositions of SCCT. Consistent with SCCT, Brand A's rebuilding strategy which characterized by apology and acknowledgment, was associated with more diversified and less polarized discourse, while Brand D's defensive stance corresponded with intensified negative evaluations. However, the TikTok context reveals that the effectiveness of crisis response strategies cannot be understood solely through message–audience alignment, as originally conceptualized in SCCT (Coombs, 2013; Coombs, 2007; W. T. Coombs et al., 2016). Discourse surrounding a brand's crisis are not solely influenced by the brand's official post-crisis statements. It is confirmed that in managing a crisis, not only is a well-thought-out response strategy required but also an understanding of the company's pre-existing relationship with its consumers, also diagnosticity and novelty of the crisis response are pivotal in determining consumer reactions (Tao & Song, 2020).

This evidence also confirmed that consumers prefer responses where the company acknowledges its role or fault in the crisis. As (Coombs et al., 2016) argues that the organization's reputation was significantly more favorable when the positive action strategy, such as apology and compensation, was used, compared to denial and no response at all. SCCT recommends denial strategies only when responsibility is minimal (Coombs, 2013); however, in social media crises, where evidence spreads quickly, and users actively fact-check claims, denial can backfire and escalate negative sentiment. Rebuild strategies, such as apology and corrective action, tend to be more effective when publics perceive a clear organizational fault (Coombs et al., 2016). As seen in the contrasting responses of these two brands, brands must not only prioritize transparency and accountability but also engage in proactive reputation management strategies that resonate with their audience's values and expectations. The fragmented and overwhelmingly critical discourse surrounding Brand D underscores the risks of antagonistic communication, particularly when evidence is publicly accessible and verifiable.

On TikTok, crisis responses are filtered through networked public discourse where meanings are co-produced by multiple actors. In this context, SCCT remains relevant but insufficient for explaining crisis communication dynamics on participatory platforms. SCCT emphasis on organizational messaging assumes relatively linear

reception, whereas this study demonstrates that responses are continually reinterpreted, contested, and reframed within comment networks. Apologies, for instance, gained discursive traction not simply because they aligned with stakeholder expectations, but because they enabled relational bridges between competing narratives within the network.

This study contributes to SCCT development by introducing discourse structure as a critical explanatory layer. While SCCT addresses attribution of responsibility and reputational threat, it does not theorize how crisis meanings circulate, stabilize, or fragment within networked publics. The discourse networks identified in this study indicate that crisis outcomes are shaped by the relational configuration of discourses about how trust, risk, and loyalty narratives cluster or isolate rather than by message content alone.

The Role of Strategy in Brand Crisis Communication on Social Media

Strategies are increasingly crucial in social media era where consumer sentiment can shift rapidly, underscoring the importance of timely, empathetic communication in mitigating reputational damage and fostering brand resilience in the face of crises (Suteja et al., 2024). However, The findings indicate that crisis outcomes are shaped not only by strategy selection but also by how discourses cluster, overlap, or become isolated within participatory environments. While (Setiawan, 2022) view the use of TikTok by Indonesian users as merely a platform for expressing creativity and seeking entertainment, this study actually shows that TikTok users in Indonesia, more than that, also become "judges" who produce discourse in the midst of a brand crisis, and determine whether or not a brand's reputation on social media falls.

This finding also shows that discourses related to brand trust are prevalent and related to discourses related to brand loyalty. This is further supported by that stated that brand trust have relations with brand loyalty (Dirgantari et al., 2020; Gogoi & Shillong, 2021). Besides, (Riski et al., 2021) also mentioned that good service quality contributed to loyalty. Research has shown that effective crisis management, particularly through sincere engagement and accountability, can bolster brand trust and loyalty, as evidenced by the positive correlation between brand trust and consumer loyalty in the Indonesian cosmetics sector (Dirgantari et al., 2020; Kabayadi & Alan, 2012). Furthermore, as consumers increasingly rely on social media for information,

brands must recognize the role of user-generated content in shaping narratives, as negative sentiments can quickly escalate and lead to reputational damage if not addressed promptly and effectively (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2024). Underscores the necessity for brands to not only develop robust crisis communication plans but also to foster ongoing relationships with their audiences, ensuring that their messaging aligns with communication ethics in the digital age. These findings also enriched the prior study of (Arlini & Ekaputri, 2024) that marketing practices that are considered unethical, especially dishonesty and exaggerated claims can damage consumer trust. Especially for customers nowadays, ethics in marketing a brand is the biggest determinant of brand selection (Dahlquist & Garver, 2022).

DNA enables the analysis of relational patterns among actors and discourses, moving beyond thematic frequency toward understanding how narratives interact and compete (Leifeld, 2017; Leifeld & Haunss, 2012). This is particularly relevant for TikTok, where crisis discourse emerges through dialogic interactions rather than isolated expressions. By visualizing discourse clusters and actor positions, DNA captures dynamics such as echo chambers, discursive dominance, and relational bridging. This methodological contribution aligns with calls to examine social media crises as networked phenomena rather than linear communication processes.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on discourse within comment sections of official brand posts, excluding other participatory formats such as duets and stitches. While this allows for focused analysis of immediate crisis responses, future research could extend DNA to broader content ecosystems to examine the longitudinal evolution of crisis narratives. Additionally, as this study examines two brands within a single industry, further comparative research across sectors would strengthen the generalizability of these findings.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that public perception of brand crises on TikTok are not shaped solely by official statements but are co-produced through networked public discourse involving both customers and non-customers. The comparison between Brand A and Brand D illustrates how rebuilding strategies can stabilize trust and

moderate negative discourse, while denial-oriented responses tend to intensify distrust, perceived risk, and calls for brand switching. TikTok's participatory environment amplifies these dynamics, allowing crisis narratives to quickly consolidate through interaction, repetition, and collective evaluation.

Beyond confirming existing crisis communication assumptions, this study highlights the limits of traditional frameworks in capturing how crisis meanings emerge within dialogic and networked platforms. By applying DNA, the research demonstrates how discourses cluster, compete, and gain dominance through user interactions rather than through corporate messaging alone. Practically, the findings underscore the need for ethical marketing and empathetic crisis responses in social media environments where reputational judgments are publicly negotiated and rapidly solidified.

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