

Thrifting Crisis Communication: A Smart Response to Import Bans and Sluggish Sales

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Article history

Submitted: 2026/03/11; Revised: 2026/04/16; Accepted: 2026/05/14

Abstract

The increase in thrift product prices at Cimol Gedebage Market in Bandung has created a negative perception among consumers, which has then developed into negative Word of Mouth (WOM) both on social media and in person. This situation has forced thrift merchants to respond strategically to maintain the sustainability of their businesses. This study aims to analyze the crisis communication strategies employed by thrift merchants at Cimol Gedebage Market in responding to perceptions of high prices. The study uses a qualitative method with data collection techniques including observation, in-depth interviews with merchants, buyers, and market managers. The results show that vendors implement crisis communication strategies aligned with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), including excuse and justification strategies. Additionally, persuasive approaches such as offering discounts, explaining product value, and engaging in bargaining interactions with customers contribute to the creation of positive word-of-mouth (WOM) as a form of perception recovery. This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of crisis communication literature in the informal sector, particularly in the thrifting business, and serve as a practical reference for business operators and policymakers in formulating effective communication strategies to address crisis-based challenges in the informal sector.

Keywords

cimol gedebage market; crisis communication; persuasive approach; thrifting; word of mouth.



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INTRODUCTION

The rising prices of thrift products at Cimol Gedebage Market in Bandung have become a serious concern in recent times, especially since the thrifting trend has surged again following the COVID-19 pandemic through social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Cimol Gedebage Market is one of the largest thrifting centers in Bandung. Thrifting is the practice of shopping for secondhand goods. This market

has become a favorite destination for people from all walks of life seeking quality imported secondhand clothing at affordable prices.

Based on field observations and price surveys conducted by researchers, it was found that the prices of thrift products have shifted from their initial image as cheap goods. As reported in a CNN Indonesia article titled "Says They're Used Clothes, But Why Are They Expensive?", the high prices are influenced by the ability of vendors to recognize branded products, leading them to charge high prices (Makkl, 2023). Meanwhile, Fidayah (2023) in Kompasiana also stated that the price increase occurred in line with the increasing popularity of the thrifting trend itself.

This phenomenon then triggered negative word of mouth (WOM), both through direct conversations and comments on social media. Consumer disappointment arose from the mismatch between expectations of low prices and the reality of the prices offered. Traders also acknowledged that price spikes did occur, triggered by a combination of internal and external factors. One of the most influential external factors was the government's policy banning the import of used clothing, implemented in the revised Minister of Trade Regulation No. 40 of 2022 as an effort to protect the domestic textile industry.

This policy drew protests from thrift businesses, who considered the regulation unfair to the lower-middle class. This was reflected in demonstrations held by traders and activists in opposition to the policy (Subekti, 2023). In addition to impacting changes in price structures, traders also felt pressure to maintain consumer trust. They faced a dilemma between maintaining business continuity and responding to complaints from customers who felt disadvantaged.



Figure 1. Demonstration by the Indonesian Imported Clothing Traders Association (HPPII) with representatives of thrifting clothing traders throughout Indonesia.

Source: Kompas.co, (2023)

This situation reflects a communication crisis that needs to be addressed strategically. The perception crisis arises from an imbalance between expectations and the reality of prices on the ground, resulting in decreased purchasing interest, fewer customer visits, and the potential loss of customers. Initial findings from researchers' observations indicate that many vendors attempt to mitigate this crisis through persuasive approaches, such as explaining product advantages (e.g., limited editions or brand originality), offering discounts, and establishing closer emotional connections with consumers. These strategies then contribute to the creation of positive WOM. In this context, persuasion is understood as a communication process aimed at influencing a person's attitude or behavior through verbal and nonverbal communication that incorporates elements of information, emotion, and logic (Maulana & Gumelar, 2013).

It is fitting that MSME management should be oriented towards adequate business planning to avoid business risks that can lead MSMEs to business deadlock or the risk of loss (Chairil et al., 2018). As a traditional market inhabited by micro and small businesses, Cimol Gedebage Market does not have a formal crisis communication system like those employed by large companies. Most crisis responses are direct and informal. His book, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, explains the process of conveying information to stakeholders, particularly the public, with the aim of avoiding or preventing a crisis (or negative event), facilitating recovery from a crisis, and maintaining or even enhancing an organization's reputation (Fearn-Banks, 2007:1). In this context, crisis communications rooted in a persuasive approach is crucial for thrifting businesses to manage.

This phenomenon has created a perception crisis, especially due to the discrepancy between consumer expectations of low prices associated with thrifting and the reality of high prices in the market. This situation has forced thrift merchants to respond strategically to maintain the sustainability of their businesses. This study aims to analyze the crisis communication strategies employed by thrift merchants at Cimol Gedebage Market in responding to perceptions of high prices.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to examine the crisis communication strategies employed by thrift vendors at Cimol Gedebage Market in response to consumer perceptions of high prices. A qualitative approach allows researchers to deeply understand social realities within a natural and complex context (Murdiyanto, 2020). According to Hancock and Algozzine

(2006:15), case studies were chosen because they allow for intensive analysis of a single system unit within a specific space and time span, such as an individual, event, or group, thus enabling a comprehensive contextual understanding. This research also combines various data collection techniques, such as interviews, observation, and documentation, to obtain a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study (Nurlimah, 2024).

This research employs a constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as being shaped through interactions and communication between individuals. Consumer perceptions of high prices and vendor responses in the form of crisis communication strategies are understood as social constructions influenced by the cultural context, experiences, and expectations of the surrounding community (Kurnia, 2021). Thus, the price and crisis phenomena are not viewed as purely objective entities, but rather as the result of negotiations of meaning within the social dynamics of the Cimol Gedebage Market environment.

This study utilized two types of data sources: primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly through semi-structured interviews and participant observation at Cimol Gedebage Market, with informants who met criteria such as length of trading or shopping experience within a specific timeframe. Interviews were conducted using open-ended guidelines to allow informants to express their views freely, while observations included systematic field notes to capture the dynamics of social interactions and communication patterns occurring in the field. Furthermore, the researcher verified the informants' backgrounds and used a recording device to document the interviews. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from relevant documents, articles, and literature discussing verbal communication, pricing issues in thrifting, and communication theories underlying the research conceptual framework (Nurlimah, 2024).

The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis methods with the stages of data reduction, data presentation (display), and drawing conclusions, as explained by (Murdiyanto, 2020). Data reduction was carried out to filter and organize raw data to focus on relevant information. The display stage was used to present data in a structured narrative form to facilitate interpretation, while drawing conclusions aimed to link the findings to theory and practice in the field in a comprehensive manner. To maintain data validity, the researcher applied triangulation techniques as proposed by Rahardjo, (2010) by verifying information through various sources and methods to increase the validity, reliability, and credibility of the research results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews at Cimol Market, Gedebage, Bandung, the researchers obtained various relevant findings to address the research questions. The data were then presented in narrative and thematic form to illustrate the dynamics of crisis communication employed by thrift vendors in responding to consumer perceptions of high prices.

Table 1. Factors Triggering Negative Word of Mouth

Statement	Informant
Negative WOM: Comments about high prices	PD1, PD2, PD3, PD4, PD5, PD6, PD7, PB1, PB2, PB3
Internal Factors: Bal prices, scarcity of goods, warehouse raids	PD1, PD2, PD3, PD5, PD7, PB2, PB3, D
External Factors: Economic crisis, online competition	PD2, PD6
Impact: Decrease in buyers, slow business	All Key Informants

Nearly all vendors are aware of the negative word of mouth (WOM) generated both on social media and in the field. Thrift vendors in Cimol Gedebage frequently receive negative WOM in the form of negative comments from buyers regarding the high prices of thrift goods after they are reported as being expensive, according to one vendor informant.

"Often, I eat it every day, it's something I'm used to. So when the news about the high price came out, a lot of people started to complain, 'Why is it this expensive?' There are always complaints, sometimes there are complaints, sometimes there aren't; it depends on the buyer." (Interview with Informant PD3, 04/05/2025).

Almost all thrift traders acknowledge that the public perception of thrift products as currently considered expensive stems from buyers' lack of understanding of the characteristics of thrift goods, especially imported branded goods. They believe this is also based on various factors that are not necessarily the fault of the traders.

"Regarding the high price of travel goods, it's the same because they're becoming increasingly scarce. They're said to be thrown here and there, and they have to go up. So, because the cost of throwing goods away increases, the price will continue to rise. It's better to go between Rp100,000 and Rp200,000, but this time it's up to Rp1,000,000." (Interview with Informant PD4)

(04/05/2025).

Table 2. Crisis Communication Strategies Through Persuasion, Negotiation, and Bargaining Approaches

Statement	Informant
Price Clarification: Explaining the situation, condition, origin, and quality of the product	All Key Informants
Persuasive: Friendly, humorous	PD1, PD3, PD4, PD6, PD7, PB1, PB3
Emotional: Relaxed, not tense, angry	PD2, PD5
Lobbying and Negotiation: Bargaining tactics	PD5, PD6, PB1, PB2, PB3, D

In the face of a public perception crisis related to high prices, thrift vendors at Cimol Gedebage Market adaptively implemented crisis communication strategies, albeit informally. These strategies were reflected in price clarification, persuasion, emotional management, and negotiation practices. This approach was implemented to maintain consumer trust while ensuring business continuity amidst economic pressures and digital competition. Within the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs (2007), the strategies implemented by vendors can be classified into two main categories: diminish and rebuild. The diminish strategy is seen in the form of price clarification as an effort to reduce negative perceptions by explaining that price increases are the result of external conditions such as high bales, stock shortages, and distribution disruptions. This clarification also strengthens the image that vendors are not solely seeking excess profits, but rather are adapting to market conditions.

Table 3. Forms of Implementation of Strategies Used by Thrift Traders

Statement	Informant
Offline: direct communication, refusing to compete online	PD2, PD5
Offline and Online: implementing both	PD1, PD3, PD4, PD7
Conditional Discounts: bonus items, bundling	All key informants
Needs System Support: promotional media, market participants	PD6, PB1, PB2, PB3, D

The implementation of crisis communication strategies by thrift vendors at Cimol Gedebage Market is reflected in practices that prioritize direct, face-to-face communication. Most vendors still rely on personal interactions at their stalls as the

primary channel for clarifying prices, explaining product origins, and establishing emotional bonds with consumers. This interaction allows for two-way communication and direct feedback. As explained by (Fazri et al., 2022), face-to-face communication offers the advantage of a quick and authentic response from the recipient, allowing messages to be tailored to the psychological state of the recipient. This approach is considered more effective in maintaining consumer loyalty than digital-based strategies that lack interpersonal connections.

Table 4. Consumer Reactions to the Applied Communication Strategy

Statement	Informant
Return/recommend to friends	All key informants
or family	PD2, PD3, PD4, PD5, PD6, P7, PB1
Transparency and solutions	PB2, PB3
Unique shopping experience	D

The implementation of a crisis communication strategy by thrift vendors at Cimol Gedebage Market not only responded to the decline in customer traffic due to high prices but also successfully transformed consumer perceptions in a more constructive manner. Through a persuasive approach, open negotiations, and rational explanations of prices, vendors were able to mitigate potential conflicts and rekindle emotional connections with customers. Consistent with the thinking of Schiffman and Kanuk (Putri Nugraha et al., 2021), consumer behavior is influenced not only by economic value but also by the overall experience they experience during the purchasing process. Consumers who are satisfied with communicative and transparent service begin to recommend certain vendors to friends and family.

Merchants' consistent service, friendliness, and responsiveness to complaints contribute significantly to consumer loyalty. As emphasized by (Septauli Manurung & Chalil, 2025), consistent service builds trust and encourages repeat purchases. Even when consumers are initially skeptical of price increases, merchants' communicative and solution-oriented attitudes shift this perception to a more appreciative one. Previously negative word-of-mouth (WOM) is beginning to be replaced by positive stories about friendly and flexible shopping experiences. This demonstrates that a well-executed crisis communication strategy can restore reputation and create a stronger foundation for future business resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the primary crisis faced by thrift merchants at Cimol Gedebage Market is a crisis in consumer perception of product prices, which are perceived as no longer in line with the "cheap" image associated with thrifted goods. This crisis is exacerbated by the spread of negative word-of-mouth (WOM), both through social media and direct communication within the market environment. The causes of this crisis stem from a combination of internal factors, such as rising bale prices, shortages, and warehouse raids, as well as external factors such as intense competition from online platforms and declining purchasing power due to the post-pandemic economic situation.

In response to the crisis, thrift vendors intuitively implemented crisis communication strategies using persuasive approaches and direct negotiations. The dominant strategies included price clarification through explanations of the origin of goods and justification for price increases, the use of emotional approaches such as friendliness and humor, and flexibility in bargaining. These strategies demonstrated the vendors' adaptive ability to build two-way communication that brought them closer to consumers.

The implementation of these strategies is ongoing in daily practice, primarily through face-to-face communication, which remains the mainstay for most vendors. However, some vendors have begun adopting a hybrid approach by utilizing social media for promotions while maintaining offline transactions. Tactics such as conditional discounts and bundling systems are also implemented as concrete forms of solution-oriented crisis communication. However, the uneven use of social media and the lack of structural support from market managers or the government hinder the overall effectiveness of these strategies.

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