TWO SIDES OF A COIN: EXPLICATING THE PLACE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become the most used and most active mode of communication; however, studies on the use of social media and crisis management are in its embryonic stage. Therefore, this research contributes and extends to the body of knowledge by looking at the place of social media in crisis management. This study adopts a narrative review method. The narrative review was undertaken between October 2017 to January 2018 which entails sourcing and retrieving materials from an electronic database. This study found that the emergence of social media has changed the crisis communication landscape because it allows more interactivity. However, some crisis is catalysed by social media because of its nature. This means that crisis can be created in social media, distributed by social media, or both. Nevertheless, the potency of social media as a crisis resolution tool is undisputable.

Keywords: Crisis; crisis management; crisis communication; information; social media.

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that over the past years social media use has exploded in the world of communication, with Twitter and Facebook being the most used platforms (Dunbar, Arnaboldi, Conti, & Passarella, 2015). According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2010), Twitter was one of the fastest growing social media platforms in 2009. As such, as indicated in prior research the use and handling of social media in a lot of communities have become important (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010). This is consistent with a research which found that organizations have gained mileage by using the internet to communicate in a much more effective and fast way with their customers about their businesses as well as responding to queries and questions (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

However, as much as the advent of social media has brought in the advantage of fast effective communication, it has also given room for fast spread of negative communication (Wright & Hinson, 2008). As such, González-Herrero and Smith (2010) argue that the fact that public relations customers can freely speak of the disservice of

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any organization openly on Facebook or Twitter has brought a rise in a corporate crisis. In concurrence with this notion, a growing body of research contends that response done will determine the outcome of the crisis. A crisis causes damage to the stability of an organization as well as affects interaction with its public and stakeholders. However, with the growth of social media, a plethora of investigations have risen in recent times to understand how social media has given a new face to crisis management (Alpaslan, Green & Mitroff, 2009; Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Pearson & Clair, 1998).

In addition, documented research evidenced affirmed that a company depends on its reputation, it is an intangible asset that directly translates to the organization's financial success (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever 2000; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Therefore, with everything an organization does, it is sensitive to its reputation. As such, evidence has been documented which suggest that with the advent of social media, a crisis will rise and spread faster than it can ever do on any other traditional forms of communication (González-Herrero & Smith, 2010; Jones et al., 2009). Similarly, Carroll and Buchholtz (2014) reiterated that social media has changed not only the way people in a society interact with one another but the way a company interacts with its public and its stakeholders. To concretize this notion, Jones et al. (2009) contend that a company does not only depend on management for its reputation; it also must take serious note of what is being said about it on social media.

According to Benoit (1997), part of the success of any organization is highly dependent on what an organization says or the effort it makes after a crisis hit. This is called crisis management and being able to address issues that threaten organizational reputation will go a long way. A study done by Grunig and Hunt (1984) reveals that the first crisis management was carried out by Ivy Lee Bernay. His first clients were the Pennsylvania Railroad, in 1906, for which he wrote the “press release” which he communicated an accident that has occurred, making it a point to communicate it before anyone else had received the news. However, Stephens and Malone (2010) argue that in recent decades, instead of the old way of press releases the society has taken up to using social media in crisis through following, commenting and listening to information related to an on-going crisis.

It is, therefore, paramount that organizations understand fully how to manage different kinds of crisis via social media. Evidence from a study established that a lot of organizations are skeptical about the credibility and reliability of social media (Wrights and Hinson, 2009). Nevertheless, other research has shown that part of most people’s everyday life has become connected to social media (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) and along that, organizations have taken up the use of social as a communication outlet not only for marketing and PR message but also for crisis communication which is also known as crisis management. This is so because social media has been seen to be useful during crises as it is a faster and easier way of informing the public and having their responses. The use of social media and its effects on interpersonal communication and self-expression is a topic that has been widely wildly looked into. It is, however, the use and effects of social media on relationship building and company use that has been only descriptive (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012).

According to Dunbar, Arnaboldi, Conti, and Passarella (2015), social media works for the society by portraying them to the virtual world; it is this virtual world that society will use to express their feeling on certain issues. Thus, the growth of social media as a communication platform has drawn a lot of interest from researchers in the public relations field. A study has already been done on the role of social media in an
organization’s public relations strategy (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011), but studies on the use of social media and crisis management are in its embryonic stage. Therefore, this research contributes and extends to the body of knowledge by looking into the impact that social media has had on crisis management through synthesizing literature done on the effect of social media on crisis management.

**Theoretical Framework: Uses and Gratification**

With the aim to move from theories that only focus on the effects of the media and the media messages, Katz & Blumler (1974) coined the Uses and Gratification theory (UGT). The UGT states that the audience is intentional media consumers who turn to certain mediums and messages to fulfil their needs. Lin (1996) postulate that the term ‘gratification sought’ has been used in literature interchangeably with motive, which means the consumption of media messages by the audience is agenda driven. Gratification sought means the exact thing that audience are looking for when they approach the media. Therefore, in line with this research the uses and gratification theory help to understand the effects that social media has had on crisis management as people use the social media as a platform to gratify their need to understand a crisis and air out their opinions on resolutions (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

In the world today, research evidence has established that the most used media are social media (Dunbar 2005) and people are using social media for their different activities because it gives them room to view, read, seek, and share anything they like at any time in whatever location (Vicen & Cavus, 2010; Papoola, 2014). The things that different people use social media for is not obvious and this form the foundation of the UGT (Whiting & Williams, 2013). A lot of scholars argue that the emergence of social media has brought in a lot of diversification to media and it is this diversity that promotes UGT. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to look into how social media has been used by organizations as a platform for crisis management. Moreover, the way in which the society uses the social media to engage in crisis.

Studies have shown that the line between new and traditional media is blurred (Ruggiero, 2000; LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001). This is so because instead of watching national television or listening to the ordinary radio, people turn to the internet for such. In concurrence with this notion, a growing body of evidence noted that when society uses social media they are looking for different gratifications which include entertainment and information (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). It is therefore solely up to the individual approaching it to decide how they wish to use it either for entertainment or information.

As such, researchers suggest that the anticipation of psychological and social advantages gives the drive to media use choices (Bantz, 1982; Katz & Blumler 1974; Lull 1980). These scholars argue that these are two of the highest drives for the different uses of media, and the benefits one gets will determine their use. Thus, because social media has become a widely used and much faster communication platform, organizations have resorted to using it to communicate in crisis time. This is so because they anticipate a certain Psychological and social advantage over a crisis they might be facing. As such, the society affected by a crisis turn to social media to share their opinions and communicate with other participants in search of a psychological or social advantage.
Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that the internet was mainly for entertainment and for information seeking and interaction. A more recent research by Roche, Pickett, and Gertz, (2016) argues that the increase of the use of social media has changed both the interaction of the society and the way in which marketers and companies communicate to their customers. This means there is need to look at how crisis management has been influenced or affected by the increase in the use of social media. It cannot be overemphasized that organization and states need to understand the reason why people use certain media to decide and establish which media to communicate with and how to communicate, just as in crisis management. In a different conviction, McQuail and Windhall (1981) argue that the uses and gratification are also motivated by an audience’s previous experience. This means an individual is likely to use a media that they have had good experiences with. Indeed, public relations practitioners make decisions on the most suitable social media adopted for crisis communication.

**Aim and Article Structure**

The aim of this study is to explicate the impact of social media on crisis management. As set out in (Fig. 1), this paper is divided into four main sections describing the introduction and background, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion.

![Figure 1: Article Structure](image)

**METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a narrative review method. The narrative review was undertaken between October 2017 to January 2018 which entails sourcing and retrieving peer review journals from ISI web of knowledge and Google Scholar to include Taylor and Francis, Emerald, Springer and Elsevier. Additionally, Scopus were also used. However, depending on only electronic database was difficult, therefore, other sources (e.g., books/book chapters and proceedings) were searched by hand to identify other studies of related interest. There was no article publication range, thus, prior studies were also consulted. The key search phrases that were used to access the articles included; Crisis
communication, crisis management and social media, crisis management, public relations on social media, uses and gratification theory, public relations on tweeter, public relations on Facebook, effects of social media on public relations.

With the search phrases, 680 articles were found related to the study on a closer look. However, with an in-depth examination that entails scanning through each article’s abstract, methodology, text and conclusion, 76 articles were then found more relevant to the subject matter. The basic criteria for inclusion and exclusion were that studies that focus on the social media and crisis management were included, while studies that examined other aspects of public relations and social media were excluded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As at October 2017, 680 references were consulted and found usable for this research. However, after a thorough screening which involves speed reading the title, the abstract, methodology and conclusion of each article, 76 were found to be more relevant to the subject matter. Therefore, the relevant included references were thoroughly read, analyzed, synthesized and categorized into themes. These themes comprised of Crisis management and social media, and social media and crisis response. The final data search was conducted and completed in January 2018.

Crisis Management and Social Media

In recent decades, social media has received a plethora of definitions. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a collective of applications that are internet based and are built on the technology and ideology of web 2.0. In addition, Beer (2008) defines it as an online service that gives people an opportunity to create public or semi-public profiles and be able to talk to other users. Furthermore, Eisenlauer (2013) describes social media as a social website whose sole function is to create and sustain online communities. Accordingly, research has shown that the advent of social media has changed the lives of individuals as much as it has changed that of corporations (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2014; Dellarocas, 2006). Khang, Ki, and Ye (2012) argue that social media has had an influence on both individuals and the society. Wang (2015) notes that social media has been used for public relations since its advent in 2004. This means that public relation has used social media as a tool of operation and along with it a tool to manage the crisis.

A study affirmed that social media have a paramount and growing part to play in the social construction of crises as they act in the deconstruction of crises through protests and the creation of virtual communities (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010). In concurrence with this notion, Watkins (2014) remarked that social media are most often interactive and dialogic which means it is an easier platform to create communities and bring around protests. In addition, Stenger (2014) argues that social media has different categories, and one of them are content sharing cites from which different players can share and exchange information. This means if a crisis occurs it will spread faster on social media as they are more dialogic and allow faster and easier content sharing. In harmony with the above arguments, research has shown that use of social media by the public increases during public crises, and with this observation, statements have been made noting that public participation has become the new norm in crisis management (Baron, 2010).
Furthermore, studies have concretized this notion by arguing that the public individuals that are active on social media during crises give a higher level of credibility to social media over traditional media (Kaye 2005; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Indeed, social media has brought a new face to crises communication. Thus, evidence from documented studies postulates that during a crisis, public have taken to social media for emotional support by bundling up virtually to share information and demand resolutions (Choi & Lin, 2009; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). However, Dutta-Bergman (2006) argues that it is this online participation that is then replicated offline to resolve the crisis which means for public relation practitioners their mandate is to follow social media activity and act on it. Coombs and Holladay (2008) solidify these arguments by noting that the fact that new media is rapidly evolving has put it way ahead of research when a crisis strikes. This is so because with all the participation that the society is involved in when a crisis strikes it gives room for any organization to see what is being talked about and how they can resolve the issue as being raised by the public. Coombs, however, gives a disclaimer for this notion and goes further to say that despite social media being ahead of research there is still need for research in the professional world of public relation so that action can be done based on credible findings. Utz, Schultz and Glocka (2013) concur with this notion by remarking that in our digital world today social media acts a negotiation platform of the dynamics of crises, it is the platform that different organizations and their public communicate on crises despite their distances.

Prior studies found that organization depends on its image and reputation and it is an only corporate crisis that could threaten it (Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). In concurrence with this notion, a body of research postulation revealed that during a crisis the highest threat is the reputation of the organization (Benoit, 1997; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Kliatchko, 2008). Therefore, the knowledge and the execution of crisis management is paramount for any organization, (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). A crisis receives a lot of media attention (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Weick, 1988); hence it is associated with high consequences. Coombs (2008) concretes this notion by reiterating that when a crisis occurs it gets a lot of media attention, however, he further argues that the rapid evolution of different types of social media makes a crisis more difficult to manage because there are vast spectrums for public opinion. Nevertheless, Benoit (1997) and Coombs (2008) submit that the effect of any crisis will rest on the organization responses after its occurrence.

Social Media as a Tool for Crisis Responses

In recent decades, evidence from the research into social media and crisis management highlighted that there is a higher number of the public using social media during a crisis and it is important for organizations to master and optimize the social media tools to respond and act (Jin, Fisher Liu & Austin, 2014). Accordingly, Coombs (2008) argues that issues that emerge on social media can be very unpredictable on how they move and how the public reacts to it, therefore, the organization should be wary of information that involves them and what their public say online. This notion is consistent with Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) postulation which indicate that Twitter messages are much fast moving, and a crisis can spread faster via twitter as tweets can be read, commented and shared by the numerous followers. As such, research has also documented evidence which shows that social media has been guilty of being a social constructor of crisis through its much liberal and open platforms, however, it has fast become a good tool for reputation rebuilding and repair (e.g., Kent, Taylor, & White,
Roberts and Dowling (2002) postulate that a crisis disturbs order in society, it destroys interaction between stakeholders and organizations and threatens company image. Patriotta, Schultz, and Gond (2008) concur with this notion as they indicate that social media has become a threat to organizations most valued possession which is an image.

To concretize this notion, Coombs and Holladay (2007) raise the issue of the electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) as an aspect that causes the rapid spreading of a crisis. It’s through the rapid messages that word of mouth spread, therefore, social media falls under the electronic word of mouth which builds a series and cycle of communication that spreads from one end to the other. It is through the interactions of society and social media that electronic word of mouth goes viral through retweeting and sharing social media messages. In addition, Coombs and Holladay (2007) postulate that WOM can be referred to as comments made by stakeholders about an organization. The spreading of these comments and having other people talk or chat about them is WOM and if they are negative they can hurt the image and reputation of an organization (Tucker & Melewar, 2005).

Studies have shown that any crisis demands information, it asks for explanations or responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, 2008), but the responses made influence the results of a crisis. Bradford and Garrett (1995) remarked that accepting responsibility and approaching a crisis apologetically can guarantee a positive result from a crisis. Research has advocated that social media is more interactive and has a higher chance of dialogue and interactivity, an apology or a well thought out positive response to the crisis is most likely to make a positive effect when shared to another online participator (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007).

Therefore, good evidence from a prior literature suggested that as social media platform usage continues to advance, public relations practitioners ought to understand how to use these tools for their practices and the impact they have on their operations (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Thus, Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) argue that blogs and twitter are effective publishing tool that public relations practitioners should take advantage of and use for crisis response. They are of the notion that these platforms allow a frequent form of communication with the feel of a human voice and they are regarded as rather more authentic than Facebook. This is consistent with a result from a survey done by the American Red Cross which shows that 69% of adults are convinced that emergency responders should have media monitoring policies to quickly send help when it is needed (Palen, Vieweg, Sutton, Liu, & Hughes, 2007). As such, there is research postulation which suggests that members of the community have always been volunteers in crisis response and participation (Quarantelli, 1998), thus, social media has an advanced characteristic of incorporating the community and making them part of the crisis (; Lamberti, 2016).

Research has shown that social media has fast become the biggest and sometimes the first port of news telling of world events (Shirky, 2009). Yang and Lim (2009) argue that although communication through conventional newspapers establishes organization’s credibility, nevertheless, communicating through social media sites has created higher credibility for organizations. Therefore, it means if an organization goes through a crisis, apologies and information can be provided via social media which work well in managing and responding to a crisis. Supporting this notion, Kelleher (2009) posits that blogs are perceived to have a conversational human voice and if public
relations personnel communicate on blogs they can receive outcomes such as trust, satisfaction and commitment. Therefore, social media have given positive impact to the public relations arena when it comes to crisis responses.

As such, most scholars argue that the best responses and best fastest feedback are usually through twitter because it allows immediate and fast responses. Thus, communication via social media is shared with just the click of a mouse; it defies the laws of distance and time (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). This means crisis response have become easier instead of doing it via newspapers or print material, just one post, one message is enough to deliver the message. Public relations can also depend on other people in the social web to share information with other users at their own efforts (Kelleher 2009). Thus, Lu and Weber (2007) argue that organization would be thoroughly ignorant not to notice the fact that the communication world has become saturated by digital communication. It is, therefore, necessary to understand how to use it to communicate effectively to stay relevant.

In addition, a growing body of research evidence has advocated that as communication technology diversifies and proliferates, social media are increasingly used to convey information during crises to send warnings, to conduct situational awareness, and even to catalyze action and sustain dialogs and feedback loops among public authorities, volunteer groups, the business sector and citizens (Wendling, Radisch, & Jacobzone, 2013). Thus, research remarked that the emergence of social media has changed the crisis communication landscape because it allows more interactivity leading to the creation, sharing and exchange of information, ideas, pictures/videos in split seconds (Apuke, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 61). This notion is consistent with a body of evidence which assert that social media is such a great tool for public relations practitioners and companies (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013), because it helps companies to communicate with customers directly as well as engage with their publics in a more interactive manner (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Romenti et al., 2014). In other words, social media enables an organization to deliver messages rapidly, directly communicate with its stakeholders, discover their concerns, detect misperceptions that need to be corrected, and potentially diminishing the negative effects if the organization employs appropriate crisis communication strategies. Through responses from its public, organization assesses if stakeholders accept its crisis strategy and message which is reflected in its public attitudes and feelings toward the organization’s crisis management.

Thus, as argued by Wright and Hinson (2008) social media demands that you know the social platform that your key audience is using and how they are sharing their information. Social media is faster and much effective and the most used in our society today, therefore thorough knowledge of it is important to public relations practitioners.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The aim of this research was to qualitatively analyses the impacts of social media on crisis management. As demonstrated in this paper, the emergence of social media has changed the crisis communication landscape because it allows more interactivity leading to the creation, sharing and exchange of information, ideas, and pictures/videos in split seconds. Indeed, social media has had a major impact on the activities of public relations particularly crisis management. Therefore, the public uses social media for emotional support during crises, they no longer look to television or radio they opt for social media where they will receive faster responses and interactions. Indeed, social media has been used to communicate crisis and to manage the crisis. It has become evident that some
crisis is catalyzed by social media because of its nature. This means that crisis can be created in social media, distributed by social media, or both.

However, the potency of social media as a crisis resolution tool is undisputable. It has the potential to prove a statement, to dispel untrue rumours or just to show the fact social media is a free platform that allows an ideal type of public sphere. Therefore, practitioners have taken to social media for crisis management and communication. In the same vein, individuals have depended on social media to inform them of a crisis and to air their views and concerns; they have used it as a platform for emotional support and crisis discussion. Practitioners, however, ought to know thoroughly how social media works and the best way to manipulate it to communicate with their stakeholders.

This study also establishes that social media has both negative and positive impact on crisis management. Public relations practitioners have taken to social media as a social platform to communicate with the target audience and as a platform to communicate and manage the crisis. However, social media propels the movement of a crisis because messages are instantly communicated and responded to. It has created a Modern public sphere, but it has all at the same time allowed the public to ruin the image of an organization because without censorship audience post their points of view on certain issues which could be damaging to an organization.

Conclusively, it can be deduced that social media has changed how the interactions of both the society and the way in which marketers and companies communicate with their customer. Thus, social media, unlike traditional media, makes the public part of the crisis, it allows interaction and negotiation. Moreover, as demonstrated in this study, Twitter and blogs are the most trusted social platforms for public relations as they are regarded more authentic and fastest medium for spreading news and receivers of instant feedback. As such, a crisis demands information and these platforms have been shown to give quicker and authentic information.
REFERENCES


