

Chapter 8

Evaluation of Research Trends in Social Media Crisis Communication

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ABSTRACT

An organization's survival during a crisis often depends on its speed of response. The introduction of social media into crisis communication discourse has meant that organizations must revisit their crisis communication strategies. This chapter explores a content analysis of the integration of social media platforms into crisis communication based on a comprehensive review of eight purposively selected crisis studies conducted globally. Findings revealed that Facebook and Twitter are increasingly employed as platforms for crisis communication. It was also discovered that responding to crises promptly, and engaging with the publics before, during, and after crises are crucial to managing organizational reputation. Social media platforms are also capable of spreading mis(information) about crises. Thus, organizations are advised to fully integrate and adopt social media into their crisis communication plans. This chapter extends our understanding of how social media platforms contribute to crisis communication discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of social media into crisis communication discourse calls for concerted organisational efforts in militating against its effects. This call becomes necessary as social media has the potential to spread (mis)information about crises within a short time and placing organisations at higher risks of exposure to crises. Also, the organisational reputation – described as intangible assets - are at stake and could be damaged during crises. As Veil, Sellnow & Petrun (2012) posit, social media are channels for stories to go viral within a short period. With the *share* option on Facebook and *retweet* option on Twitter, citizens can disseminate (mis)information, while organisational activities could be closely monitored

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online. Thus, to avoid misinformation during crises, organisations need to fully optimise their abilities to handle crises in the social media era.

Social media crises are a common organisational phenomenon that keeps evolving. As Coombs, Claeys & Holladay (2017) observed, the application of social media to crisis communication is the most dramatic evolution of the practice in need of greater understanding. Hence, researchers have sought to understand the use of social media during airline crises (e.g., Adebayo, 2017; Benoit, 2018; Brataas, 2018), social media's use during natural disasters (Cho, Jung & Park, 2013), university crisis on social media (Snoeijers, Poels and Nicolay, 2014), food crisis discussions on social media (Shan, Regan, Brun, Barnett, van der Sanden, Wall & McConnon, 2013), health crises on social media (Lawrence, 2016), brand crisis communication through social media (Wang, 2016), among other studies. Findings from these studies revealed several dynamics in social media crises. These studies also revealed the growing interests and involvement of the publics in social media crisis discourse. Considering the increasing amount of crisis research, it becomes necessary to comprehensively present an analysis of the incorporation of social media by crisis managers to manage social media crises.

Therefore, this chapter explores a content analysis of the integration of social media platforms into crisis communication. The objective of this study is to understand how crisis managers employed social media platforms in responding to crises through an analysis of eight (8) purposively selected social media crises conducted globally and published from 2006 to 2019. Thus, this chapter aims to understand the strategies, trends, and paradigms that have characterised social media crisis studies. For instance, the chapter will analyse social media crisis strategies, theoretical explanations, and an investigation (if any) of new approaches that have emerged from the discourse. Findings from this study will highlight the relevance of digitalisation and its significance on different crisis types. Furthermore, it will also be useful to crisis communication and social media students as it would be a reference point for crisis communication studies.

BACKGROUND

What is Crisis?

Several definitions have been given to the word 'crisis' by various scholars and practitioners. These diverse definitions arose since there has not been any universally accepted definition of crisis. More so, these scholars and practitioners come from various disciplines, research backgrounds, with diverse experiences. While these definitions are diverse, they are yet similar. An attempt is made to provide some definitions of crisis, deduce similar crisis characteristics, and provide a working description for this study.

The word crisis originated from 'krisis,' a Greek word which suggests a moment of decision. These decisions could represent turning points where the choices made could have fundamental impacts in the future (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). Crises present moments where critical decisions that would affect an organisation or country (positively and/or negatively) are made, which in return, could make or mar their future. It is quite true as, during crises, public relations practitioners and crisis managers seek the best possible alternatives in dealing with crises such that there is minimal or reduced reputational damage. Also, crises could be turning points or opportunities for organisations. On the one hand, when organisations poorly manage crises, it could signal the end of such organisations while on the other hand,

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