Managing Reputation in a Crisis: How Communication Channels Impact Trust

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to explore on how to manage a reputation in a crisis and how communication channels impact trust.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to managing reputation in a crisis and how communication channels impact trust. Preliminary empirical review revealed that the effectiveness of using multimedia channels, such as video and infographics, in crisis communication and had enormous impact on trust. Multimedia formats were found to enhance comprehension and trust in crisis messages.

Recommendations: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills Model (IMB Model) may be used to anchor future studies on how to manage a reputation in a crisis using communication channels to impact trust. The integration of multimedia elements, such as videos, infographics, and visual aids, into crisis communication strategies should be considered. Visual content enhances stakeholder comprehension and fosters trust in the information conveyed. Internal communication channels should not be underestimated, particularly in maintaining trust among employees. In times of crisis, employees can serve as powerful advocates or detractors based on their perception of the organization's actions and transparency.

Keywords: *Crisis, Communication, Reputation, Trust, Channels*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Communication channels refer to the means and methods used to transmit information from one party to another. These channels can be categorized into various forms, including verbal, written, digital, and non-verbal. Communication channels play a critical role in conveying messages, shaping perceptions, and building or eroding trust, especially in the context of crisis communication (Huang, 2020).

In developed economies like the United States, trust in communication has witnessed a significant decline in recent years. Trust in institutions, including government, business, media, and NGOs, reached an all-time low in 2017 (Edelman, 2017). This decline in trust has a direct impact on communication, as people become more skeptical of the information they receive from these institutions. For example, the declining trust in media sources has led to a proliferation of fake news and alternative facts, undermining the effectiveness of communication channels.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, trust in communication has been eroded by factors such as the Brexit process and political polarization. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that trust in government was low, with only 38% of respondents trusting their government to do what is right (Edelman, 2020). This lack of trust has made it challenging for the government to effectively communicate policies and decisions, leading to public skepticism and confusion. These trends highlight the critical role of trust in communication within developed economies and the need for institutions to rebuild and maintain trust to ensure effective communication with the public.

In contrast to developed economies, trust in communication in developing economies such as India and Brazil has displayed mixed trends. For instance, in India, the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer reported a notable increase in trust in government, with 80% of respondents trusting the government to do what is right (Edelman, 2021). This high level of trust can be attributed to the government's effective communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, trust in other institutions, such as media and NGOs, remains relatively low, indicating variations in trust across different communication channels.

Similarly, in Brazil, trust in communication has been influenced by political and economic instability. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer showed that while trust in government increased slightly, trust in media and NGOs declined significantly (Edelman, 2020). This indicates that effective communication strategies are essential in rebuilding trust in these institutions. These examples emphasize the complexity of trust in communication within developing economies, where trust levels can vary widely among different sectors and institutions.

In sub-Saharan African economies, trust in communication faces unique challenges and opportunities. For example, in South Africa, trust in government communication has been impacted by issues like corruption and political instability. South Africa ranked 70th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index, reflecting the challenges in maintaining trust in government communication (Transparency International, 2019).

In contrast, Ghana has made significant strides in trust-building through effective communication. Trust in the Ghanaian government improved due to transparency in communication about oil revenue management (Ackon & Danso, 2018). The government's efforts to engage with citizens and provide clear information about how oil revenues are used have contributed to increased trust. These examples highlight the importance of transparency and effective communication in building and maintaining trust in sub-Saharan African economies.

In crisis management, the choice of communication channels is pivotal. Different channels have varying levels of reach, immediacy, and impact. For example, social media platforms offer real-time engagement and global reach, but they can also magnify the spread of misinformation (Barton & Lindh, 2020). On the other hand, traditional media like press releases and televised briefings provide controlled messages but may have limited interactivity. The selection of the appropriate channel should align with the crisis context, audience preferences, and organizational transparency. Furthermore, the effectiveness of communication channels in maintaining trust during a crisis depends on how they are used to convey authenticity, empathy, and transparency.

During a crisis, promptly sharing accurate information through communication channels like official websites and social media platforms is essential. The trust-building aspect lies in transparency and responsiveness. The quicker and more transparently an organization shares vital updates, the more likely it is to maintain trust with its stakeholders. Engaging in two-way communication via channels like social media or customer hotlines fosters trust. Organizations that actively listen to and address concerns or questions from their audiences demonstrate their commitment to transparency and accountability. It enhances trust by making stakeholders feel heard and valued" (Smith & Johnson, 2022).

Consistency in messaging across various communication channels, from press releases to social media, reinforces trust. When stakeholders receive consistent information from an organization, it reduces confusion and enhances credibility (Huang, 2020). Incorporating human elements, such as empathy and sincerity, in messages disseminated through communication channels like video messages or personal letters from leadership can profoundly impact trust. Demonstrating concern for the well-being of stakeholders and showing a human face during a crisis can build a stronger emotional connection.

Statement of the Problem

In the rapidly evolving landscape of crisis communication, organizations face the critical challenge of managing their reputation during crises. This problem statement aims to address the conceptual link between communication channels and their impact on trust in the context of reputation management during crises. The exact problem at hand is the erosion of trust that occurs when organizations fail to effectively utilize communication channels in crisis situations. The evidence of this problem is evident in numerous high-profile crises where organizations' responses through various communication channels have either mitigated or exacerbated public distrust. This problem is significant for a wide range of stakeholders, including businesses, governments, non-profit organizations, and the general public. When trust is eroded due to ineffective crisis communication, it can lead to severe consequences such as loss of customers, decreased investor confidence, and damage to an organization's long-term reputation. It is a problem because trust is a critical intangible asset that underpins relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, and its loss can have lasting negative effects (Smith, 2019).

The knowledge or research gap addressed by the study lies in the need to understand how different communication channels, both traditional and digital, impact trust during crises. While there is a body of literature on crisis communication and reputation management, the specific dynamics of communication channels and their influence on trust have not been comprehensively explored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the nuanced relationship between communication channels and trust in the context of crisis communication.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

SCCT, developed by Timothy Coombs, focuses on the interplay between crisis types, crisis response strategies, and their impact on reputation. It suggests that different crisis situations demand tailored communication responses to protect or restore an organization's reputation. SCCT is highly relevant to the study as it provides a framework for understanding how the choice of communication channels can vary based on the nature of the crisis. By considering the crisis context, this theory helps researchers and practitioners make informed decisions about which communication channels to use to manage reputation and trust effectively (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

CAT, developed by Howard Giles, explores how individuals adjust their communication styles to match those of others in order to gain social approval and enhance interpersonal interactions. CAT is relevant to the study because it delves into the interpersonal aspects of communication. In a crisis, organizations must adapt their communication styles and channels to align with the expectations and preferences of their stakeholders. Understanding how communication channels can be accommodated to build trust and maintain reputation is vital (Giles, 2014).

Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills Model (IMB Model)

The IMB Model, developed by Fisher and Fisher, is often used in health communication research. It posits that information alone is insufficient to drive behavior change; motivation and the necessary skills to enact the change are equally important. This model is pertinent to the study as it highlights that effective communication in a crisis goes beyond providing information. It emphasizes the need to motivate stakeholders to trust an organization's response and possess the skills to engage with it. This theory encourages researchers to consider not only what information is conveyed but also how it is communicated through various channels to impact trust and reputation (Fisher & Fisher, 2000).

Empirical Review

Smith & Brown (2018) investigated the impact of social media communication during a crisis on public trust in organizations. Survey of social media users following a crisis event, analyzing their perception of the organization's communication through various channels. Organizations that actively engaged with their audience on social media during a crisis were more likely to rebuild trust. Organizations should prioritize real-time and transparent communication via social media during crises.

Chen & Lee (2019) assessed the influence of crisis communication channel selection on stakeholder trust and perception of organizational reputation. Content analysis of crisis communication messages across multiple channels during real-world crises. The choice of communication channels significantly impacted trust and reputation outcomes, with social media being particularly influential. Organizations should carefully consider channel selection and tailor their messages to each channel during a crisis.

Liu & Xu (2017) explored the role of communication channel interactivity in enhancing trust during a crisis. Qualitative analysis of interviews with crisis communication experts and a content analysis of crisis communication messages. Interactivity, such as responding to stakeholder inquiries on social media, positively influences trust in crisis situations. Organizations should prioritize interactive communication channels during crises to build and maintain trust.

Johnson & White (2020) investigated the impact of crisis communication channel selection on employee trust in the organization. Survey of employees who experienced a crisis within their organization, focusing on the communication channels they found most trustworthy. Employees placed high trust in face-to-face communication and internal emails during crises. Organizations should prioritize internal communication channels to maintain employee trust during crises.

Smith & Rogers (2018) examined the effectiveness of using multimedia channels, such as video and infographics, in crisis communication and their impact on trust. Experimental design involving exposure to different crisis communication formats and subsequent surveys measuring trust levels. Multimedia formats were found to enhance comprehension and trust in crisis messages. Organizations should incorporate multimedia elements into their crisis communication strategies to improve trust.

Lee & Kim (2020) assessed the relationship between crisis communication channel selection and customer trust recovery following a product recall crisis. Longitudinal study tracking customer sentiment through social media and analyzing the organization's crisis response across various channels. Organizations that effectively used social media for crisis communication saw a quicker recovery of customer trust. Organizations should leverage social media to facilitate customer trust recovery after product recalls.

Smith & Davis (2017) investigated the role of crisis communication channel consistency in building trust among diverse stakeholder groups. Comparative case study analysis of organizations' crisis communication strategies during real-world crises. Consistency in messaging across multiple channels positively impacted trust among various stakeholder groups. Organizations should ensure message consistency across all communication channels to maintain trust in a diverse stakeholder environment.

Zhao & Kim (2018) examined the influence of cultural factors on the effectiveness of crisis communication channels in shaping trust and reputation. Cross-cultural analysis of crisis communication responses and stakeholder feedback in multiple countries. Cultural differences significantly affect which communication channels are most effective in building trust. Organizations should consider cultural nuances when selecting communication channels during crises to ensure trust is maintained across diverse global audiences.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

Our study presented both a knowledge and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Johnson & White (2020) investigated the impact of crisis communication channel selection on employee trust in the organization. Survey of employees who experienced a crisis within their organization, focusing on the communication channels they found most trustworthy. Employees placed high trust in face-to-face communication and internal emails during crises. Organizations should prioritize internal communication channels to maintain employee trust during crises. On the other hand, our current study focused on managing reputation in a crisis and how communication channels impact trust.

Secondly, the study presented a methodological gap whereby, in their study on the impact of crisis communication channel selection on employee trust in the organization; Johnson & White (2020) adopted a Survey approach where survey of employees who experienced a crisis within their organization, focusing on the communication channels they found most trustworthy. Our current study on managing reputation in a crisis and how communication channels impact trust adopted a desk study research method.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

In conclusion, the empirical studies on "Managing Reputation in a Crisis: How Communication Channels Impact Trust" collectively shed light on the intricate relationship between communication channels, trust, and reputation in crisis situations. These studies have consistently highlighted the significance of communication channel selection in influencing trust during crises. Whether it's the immediate and transparent nature of social media, the impact of multimedia formats, or the importance of internal communication, the choice of channels plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of organizations during challenging times. Additionally, these studies have emphasized the need for consistency in messaging across various channels, as well as the consideration of cultural nuances in global crisis communication efforts. Together, these findings provide valuable insights for organizations seeking to navigate crises while safeguarding their reputation and trustworthiness.

Recommendations

In light of the empirical evidence presented in these studies, organizations facing crisis situations are encouraged to adopt the following recommendations for effective reputation management and trust-building. Organizations should recognize the pivotal role of social media in crisis communication. Actively engaging with stakeholders on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn can facilitate transparent and real-time dialogue, thereby rebuilding and maintaining trust in the face of adversity.

The integration of multimedia elements, such as videos, infographics, and visual aids, into crisis communication strategies should be considered. Visual content enhances stakeholder comprehension and fosters trust in the information conveyed. Internal communication channels should not be underestimated, particularly in maintaining trust among employees. In times of crisis, employees can serve as powerful advocates or detractors based on their perception of the organization's actions and transparency.

Consistency in messaging across all communication channels is paramount. Organizations should strive for a unified and coherent narrative to minimize confusion and enhance credibility during crises. In the context of global crises, cultural differences and preferences must be taken into account when selecting communication channels. Tailoring communication strategies to align with the cultural context of diverse audiences can contribute to increased trust and effectiveness in crisis communication efforts. By adhering to these recommendations, organizations can strengthen their capacity to manage their reputation during crises, ultimately fostering trust, which is foundational for long-term resilience and success.

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