

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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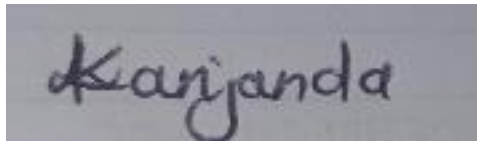
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An assessment of the use of social media in crisis communication

DECLARATION

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A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in dark ink. The signature appears to be 'Kanjanda'.

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media has revolutionized crisis communication, facilitating direct and bidirectional interactions with stakeholders. In October 2022, the Nyaradzo Group a diversified financial and insurance services company headquartered in Zimbabwe was embroiled in controversy when discussions about its funeral policies erupted on Twitter, causing widespread dissatisfaction among its customers. This discourse persisted for approximately three weeks, drawing attention to the company's challenges in handling the escalating crisis. This study was conducted to evaluate Nyaradzo Group's deployment of social media as a tool for crisis communication management. Specifically, the research aimed to analyze the strategies Nyaradzo Group employed to engage stakeholders during the crisis, investigate the crisis management techniques utilized on social media, and identify the challenges the organization faced in managing public grievances online. Premised on situational crisis communication, image repair theory, and the two-way symmetrical communication model the study assessed the strategic use of social media in crisis contexts. Data collection methods included content analysis of relevant tweets and Facebook comments. The findings indicate that Nyaradzo faces a significant gap in utilizing social media to effectively engage with stakeholders during times of crisis. Findings show that Nyaradzo Group's use of social media during the crisis reflected a limited dialogue. They were following the traditional way of crisis communication where communication was one way. Despite maintaining a social media presence, the organisation persisted in employing a one-way symmetrical communication model which ultimately precipitated public reaction and backlash. Nyaradzo Group was not transparent during the crisis, especially regarding the financial structure of the policies, cash backs, and lapsing periods. Nyaradzo also used a denial strategy which exacerbated the crisis. They also tried to initial response strategy. The initial statement did not address the stakeholders' concerns it intensified the crisis. The CEO made a direct intervention in trying to address the issue, but the stakeholders started to question the role of the public relations practitioners.

The study underscores the need for organizations to refine their social media crisis management strategy and highlights the evolving responsibilities of PR practitioners in the digital era, including the imperative for targeted online training to equip them with the necessary skills for managing digital crises effectively.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my late undergraduate tutor, Mr Chivige, and my sister, Linda Kanjanda. May your souls rest in peace.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
|------|---|
| CEO | Chief Executive Officer |
| PR | Public relations officer |
| SCCT | Situational Crisis Communication Theory |
| IR | Image Repair Theory |
| x | Twitter |

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Social media has emerged as a dominant, interactive channel of communication that significantly empowers users and revolutionizes conventional public relations tactics (Smith & Taylor, 2020). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have drastically altered the way organizations communicate with their stakeholders during crises, facilitating the swift spread of both positive and negative information (Jones, 2019). This shift in communication paradigms is marked by the immediate and extensive sharing of information, which not only fosters community building but also drives the mobilization of public opinion (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012; Apuke & Tunca, 2018). Consequently, these dynamics have compelled public relations professionals to rethink their strategies, now incorporating social media as a central element in crisis management (Wright & Hinson, 2017). Contrary to traditional approaches that rely heavily on thorough investigation and analysis, the immediacy of social media allows for real-time interaction and responses, significantly enhancing stakeholder engagement and precipitating swift collective actions (Fearn-Banks, 2016).

According to Komodros (2014) in Cyprus public relations is now more specialised with the coming in of social media. It has changed how P.R practitioners communicate with different stakeholders. Social media's introduction has changed crisis communication, posing both possibilities and difficulties for organizations.. Komodros (2014) is of the view that organisations in Cyprus are now increasingly adopting new communication strategies. Organisations are now incorporating social media tools in their communication strategies. Traditionally, public relations practice manages organisational information in-house without being spread over social media platforms. The emergence of social media has changed public relations practices because of the organisational crises now emanating from social media. If a crisis originates from social media, public relations practitioners must use social media to solve the crisis. This has pushed many organisations from traditional crisis management to social media crisis management. In the past, communication could be examined, studied, and evaluated from every perspective; but, with social media, information spreads quickly, and interested parties

may react right away.. The advent of social media has revolutionised crisis communication, shifting the paradigm from traditional communication, where messages could be carefully crafted, researched, and analysed, social media's instantaneity and widespread reach have created a new challenge Apuke and Tunca(2018). News spreads rapidly and stakeholders can respond in real time, making crisis communication more complex. Similarly, a study by Taylor and Perry (2024) revealed that social media enables rapid information dissemination and greater public engagement. They argue that social media platforms significantly accelerate the spread of information during a crisis this is because of instantaneous posting and sharing capabilities.

The dissemination of information has been significantly impacted by the dynamic nature of social media platforms, which has also altered the expectations of stakeholders during crises. Stakeholders now demand transparency, immediacy, and a two-way communication flow that allows their concerns to be heard and addressed promptly (Distaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011). This evolution has created both opportunities and challenges for organizations like Nyaradzo Group. In October 2022 ,Nyaradzo Group came under fire after its funeral policies were discussed on Twitter and were found ridiculously unjust. Nyaradzo Group is a dynamic group of companies that provides financial, risk, and event management solutions. In several tweets by Alistar Nyamarai Chibaya, Nyaradzo Group is accused of ripping off its clients. The issue trended for about 3 weeks on twitter and Facebook. The Nyaradzo Group funeral policy crisis revitalized the use of social media for crisis communication. Social media offers an unparalleled opportunity to build trust and foster loyalty through proactive engagement. On the other hand, its immediacy and the potential for misinformation require organisations to develop agile and well-structured communication strategies (Coombs, 2015). Thus, a key factor in determining an organization's capacity to preserve its image and sustain stakeholder confidence is the efficient use of social media for crisis communication.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Social media's introduction has changed crisis communication, posing both possibilities and difficulties for organizations. While social media enables real-time crisis management

and greater transparency, it also introduces complexities in public relations due to the immediacy and interactivity of communication (Hunt et al., 2012). Unlike traditional media's controlled, one-way communication, social media facilitates rapid dissemination of both positive and negative information, which can significantly impact brand reputation (Baruah, 2012). Given the ease with which adverse reports spread online, organizations must develop robust online communication strategies to navigate crises effectively. Failure to do so can result in significant reputational damage, as seen in cases where companies have faced public backlash due to poor crisis communication on social media platforms. Organisations must embrace social media, as crises now often originate from these platforms and can significantly impact an organisations reputation within moments. Consequently, organisations need well-defined online communication strategy to navigate crises effectively. Nyaradzo Group faced severe criticism on Twitter and Facebook after its funeral policies were deemed outrageously unfair. Alistar Nyamarai Chibaya highlighted the alleged exploitation of clients by Nyaradzo in several tweets, accusing the organisation of prioritising its benefits.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- i. To examine how the Nyaradzo Group employed social media to engage with stakeholders during the funeral policy crisis.
- ii. To assess the crisis communication strategies employed by Nyaradzo Group to handle the funeral policy crisis
- iii. To understand the challenges faced by the Nyaradzo Group in managing the funeral policy crisis.

1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. How did Nyaradzo Group use social media to engage stakeholders during the funeral policy crisis?

- ii. What social media crisis communication strategy was employed by the Nyaradzo Group?
- iii. What challenges did the Nyaradzo Group encounter in handling the funeral policy crisis?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study significantly enhances the academic understanding of crisis management and communication within the context of social media. By exploring how organizations utilize social media platforms during crises, the study contributes empirical data and theoretical insights into the strategic communication practices employed during turbulent times. It adds to the literature on digital crisis management by documenting effective and ineffective communication strategies and examining their impact on stakeholder perceptions and organizational reputation. This exploration aids in bridging the gap between traditional public relations tactics and modern digital communication

The study also has profound implications for various stakeholders, including public relations practitioners, organizational leaders, and policymakers. Public relations professionals, the study offers evidence-based strategies for utilizing social media effectively to manage crises, thereby enhancing their ability to protect and rehabilitate organizational reputation in real-time. Organizational executives can utilize the findings to build a culture that supports proactive and responsive communication plans, acknowledging the central role of open and timely communication in crisis. Policymakers might also benefit from the findings to frame guidelines that will support open and ethical forms of communication on the internet.

This study will give practitioners a more comprehensive understanding of the problems of social media use during crises, providing a blueprint for how to utilize online communities successfully and public discourse management. This study demonstrates

the need for a successful online communication strategy for crisis prevention and mitigation by continuously monitoring and engaging with social media. By doing this, it places public relations practitioners in the optimum position to manage the problems of online communication, converting would-be crises to chances for stakeholder loyalty and trust. Apart from crisis management in the short term, this study assists in making long-term crisis management strategies with social media at its centre. It calls for organizations not only to respond to crises but also to anticipate and predict potential crises by following online conversations and trends. By doing so, organizations are in greater control of their narratives and are in a better position to avert potential damages

1.6 CHAPTERS OUTLINE

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter gives a thorough explanation of the study's background and introduction. It describes the goals, research questions, and the research problem. The chapter articulates the significance of the study for the field of public relations and practitioners. It also provides an overview of the chapters in the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The chapter provides a summary of the body of research on social media use and crisis communication, with a focus on the change in public relations practice brought about by the emergence of social media. Among other topics, the chapter looks at how crisis communication has changed over time, how social media might be used during emergencies, and how online engagement affects an organization's reputation. The study's theoretical foundation and any gaps in the literature are also mentioned in the overview.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces and details the theoretical underpinnings that guide the study. It discusses relevant theories such as disruption theory situational crisis communication theory and image repair theory explaining how these frameworks provide insights into the effectiveness of social media strategies in crises. The chapter elaborates on how these theories assist in understanding the dynamics between organizations and their stakeholders in the digital age.

Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter, the research design and methodologies employed to explore how Nyaradzo Group utilized social media for crisis management during their funeral policy crisis are detailed. A qualitative research approach was chosen to gain deep insights into the interactive processes and perceptions involved in the company's social media communications. Additionally, the chapter outlines and discusses the data analysis process, ensuring a thorough examination of the gathered information, and addresses the ethical considerations made to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the study.

Chapter Five: Data Presentation and discussions of findings

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected during the study and discusses the findings in depth. It links these findings back to the literature reviewed and the theoretical constructs outlined in earlier chapters, critically examining how social media is utilized for crisis communication and management within the context defined by the conceptual framework.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter synthesizes the insights gained from the research, providing a cohesive conclusion drawn from the data analyzed. It also outlines practical recommendations for public relations practitioners and suggests areas for further research, aiming to contribute to the ongoing development of crisis communication strategies in the digital era.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of the research on social media's function in crisis management and communication, examining how digital platforms have revolutionized public relations techniques. The review aims to establish a foundational understanding of how organizations employ social media to manage crises effectively. It critically examines scholarly research and practical applications, focusing on the evolution of crisis communication strategies, the strategic utilization of social media during crises, and the resultant challenges and opportunities. By synthesizing these themes, the literature review identifies gaps in existing research and sets the stage for a detailed exploration of social media's strategic application in maintaining or restoring organizational reputation during crises, providing a contextual framework for the subsequent theoretical and empirical analyses in this study.

2.2 DEFINING A CRISIS

A crisis is typically understood as a significant, unforeseen event that poses profound threats to an organization and its stakeholders, leading potentially to destabilizing consequences. Coombs (2007) describes a crisis as an unpredictable event that undermines an organization, necessitating swift and effective management strategies. Extending this definition, Pearson and Clair (1998) characterize a crisis as a low-probability, high-impact event marked by ambiguity regarding its causes, effects, and solutions, and which requires urgent decision-making.

Fink (1986) expands on the types of crises organizations might face—sudden, smoldering, perceptual, and business—each demanding tailored management approaches. Mitroff (2005) advocates for a systemic approach to crisis management, emphasizing the necessity to address the physical, informational, reputational, and emotional dimensions of a crisis comprehensively.

2.2.1 Defining Crisis Communication

Crisis communication is essential for mitigating the impact of a crisis on an organization's reputation and maintaining stakeholder trust. Coombs (2014) highlights that effective crisis communication can shape stakeholders' perceptions, which plays a crucial role in the organization's recovery. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for assessing the crisis situation and determining the most suitable communication strategies to protect the public reputation of the organization. Sellnow and Seeger (2013) highlight the strategic importance of crisis communication in information management and crisis response to misinformation. They recommend open, honest, and timely communication to reduce uncertainty and manage the crisis story efficiently. In addition, Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2017) stress the need for pre-crisis communication planning in the shape of training spokesmen, the structuring of effective channels of communication, and designing adaptable messages for crises. Frandsen and Johansen (2011) recommend the application of dialogic communication during crises, meaning that engaging with stakeholders through dialogue instead of one-sided dissemination of information could potentially manage a crisis. This method supports two-way communication, which enables stakeholder feedback critical in real-time strategy adjustment and relationship development between the organization and its public.

2.2.2 Traditional Crisis Communication

Traditional crisis communication is the formalized and sometimes reactive process that existed prior to the new media that organizations employed to manage public relations in the event of a crisis. It is a process that depends on centralized message management, formalized approaches, and on the priority of managing media relations to steer an organization through crises.

2.2.2.1 Key Characteristics of Traditional Crisis Communication:

Centralized Messaging: Information distribution in conventional crisis communication is highly centralized. The information comes from a single origin, likely to be the public relations department or the organizational crisis team. The aim is to maintain the

consistency and accuracy of the message. Wright (1995) finds that centralized messaging ensures the message is controlled but results in delayed response times that prove ineffective in the fast information era.

Media-Centric Strategies: Traditional crisis communication heavily relies on mainstream media channels such as newspapers, television, and radio to communicate with the public. According to Fearn-Banks (2007), organizations would prepare press releases and hold press conferences to reach their audiences, relying on journalists to convey their messages to the broader public.

Formalized Response Protocols: Organizations often developed and relied on pre-written response protocols and holding statements. Coombs (2007) describes how these protocols include predetermined scripts to be used in various scenarios, ensuring readiness and a quick initial response to manage the public's immediate concerns.

Stakeholder Communication: Communication with stakeholders in traditional crisis communication is generally formal and somewhat limited in scope. As Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) note, this approach tends to prioritize communication with investors, board members, and regulators over a dialogue with the wider community or less direct stakeholders.

Post-Crisis Evaluation: After addressing the immediate crisis, traditional methods include a post-crisis phase where communication efforts are reviewed to assess their effectiveness and to prepare for future crises. According to Pauchant and Mitroff (1992), this often involves an internal review of actions and communications to refine crisis plans.

2.2.2.3 Limitations of traditional crisis communication in the Digital Age:

Traditional crisis communication, though formalized and practiced, do not hold water in today's fast-paced digital era. Social media and real-time online communication reveal the vulnerability of such a process, such as the time it takes to respond and that they are unidirectional. As Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) would posit, the digital world requires more dynamic and open communicational processes, which respond to the public and other stakeholders in real-time, making the traditional ones ineffective. As Taylor and Perry 2014 posit, traditional means of communication lack reach and access to remote or

diversified communities. This complicates the crisis since stakeholders may not access important information. Stakeholders cannot respond critically to organisations due to the lack of feedback, which may escalate the crisis.

Traditional to modern crisis communication, the call is for more active, two-way communication with the aid of digital technology. Modern practice encompasses the use of social media, direct stakeholder participation, and real-time information, stretching beyond the limits of traditional practice to fit the needs of instant messaging and public examination. Social media-based stakeholder feedback's impact is immense. Kent and Taylor (2010) explain the process of a dialogic loop, whereby not only do organizations listen to stakeholder comments but also respond to them. Such practice gives rise to an active and positive community, of immense value to the organization during and post-crisis. As discussed by Fearn-Banks (2017), the integration of the feedback of stakeholders into the crisis communication planning process fortifies the efficacy of the plans and leads to enhanced resolution of the crisis.

2.3 IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION

According to Valentini (2015), among various digital technologies, social media has gained relevance in public relations as the new channel for communication with the public and stakeholders and nourishing relationships with them. Public relations serve as the voice of the organisations that help to keep relationships and maintain trust. Public relations professionals are now responsible for managing the brand and protecting the organisation's online reputation. However, this has placed public relations practitioners in a critical position. Veil et al. (2016) believe that the duty of public relations is devoted to creating and sustaining relationships. This is also the purpose of social media. PR practitioners must use social media to achieve their communication goals. This also means that PR practitioners need to have a deeper understanding of how to use social media for crisis communication. According to Civelek et al. (2016:113), any organization's PR practitioner should generally understand emerging crisis issues and have a

preventative crisis communication strategy on hand for “immediate intervention, ” which will assist with preventing and managing negative effects on the organisation.

The “communications landscape has changed thanks to social media, especially during times of crisis” (Baruah, 2012:9). It has also significantly influenced the traditional role of PR practitioners. Olayinka & Ewuola (2019) found that social media platforms substantially impact public relations practitioners' communication. Social media has revolutionized the role of PR practitioners. Wright & Hinson (2009) believe that social media has had a staggering impact on public relations since the first web logs or blogs appeared more than a dozen years ago. Wright & Hinson (2009) conducted an annual global trend study for years examining the impact of social media on PR. They found out that it is bringing dramatic changes to many aspects of the field. Mathee (2011) believes that social media has changed the media landscape and presents public relations practitioners with new possibilities and opportunities to promote their companies. Social media has enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives by impacting public relations knowledge. Social media allows PR practitioners to analyse and devise new strategies. PR practitioners also use social listening tools to understand their stakeholders. Neill & Lee 2016 believe that social listening assists organisations with analytics and monitoring their brand, product, stakeholders, and social engagements. However, According to Veil et al. (2011), the advancement of technology concerning social media has triggered problems for PR practitioners in discovering information and stories, as well as how stakeholders learn about it. Traditionally, PR practitioners used to manage organisational information in-house without it being spread all over social media platforms.

Impact of social media on crisis communication

Bridgen (2011) highlights that social media has captured the attention of academics and organizations due to its potential to create new communication opportunities, thereby altering the dissemination and reception of information. Social media has transformed the crisis communication landscape by enabling greater interactivity. However, due to its nature, it also possesses the potential to catalyze crises. The rise of social media has profoundly impacted both individuals and corporations, as even a few users' contacts can

be exposed to messages concerning a particular crisis. Apuka and Tunca (2019) note that social media can facilitate the rapid emergence and spread of crises compared to traditional forms of communication.

Consequently, businesses have been compelled to adopt new communication methods to engage with their stakeholders, departing from traditional crisis communication approaches. Apuke and Tunca (2018) contend that social media has revolutionized crisis communication, providing advantages such as fast and effective communication but also giving rise to the rapid spread of negative information. Therefore, organizations must effectively manage their communication on social media platforms. Corporate communication practitioners need to engage with stakeholders actively using social media. Veil et al. (2011) and Wang (2016) share this perspective, emphasizing that managing crisis communication on social media has become more critical than ever due to the vast amount of information available to the public. Public relations practitioners must utilize social media platforms to communicate with stakeholders. Apuke and Tunca (2018) assert that research indicates using Facebook as a plausible tool to alleviate crisis tension.

Social media is now recognized as a novel phenomenon in crisis communication. In light of this, this research aims to evaluate the use of social media for crisis communication, as scholars consider it a recent development. How organizations handle crises on social media significantly influences their reputation. Aula (2010) argues that organizations should always ensure that their actions align with their ethics and communication efforts, considering audience expectations rather than solely focusing on business goals. Building a positive reputation necessitates transparency, trust, and engaging communication. s

Before 2011, the management often overlooked the value of social media in crisis management, as stated by Watson and Rodrigues (2017). The organizational culture hesitated to embrace social media as a crisis management tool. In his thesis, Vistbacka (2017) states that crises can escalate swiftly due to the rapidity of social media, potentially causing harm to an organization's reputation within minutes. While organizations may

spend significant time building their reputation, it can be swiftly tarnished through poor crisis management. For instance, Nyaradzo Group experienced reputational damage within seconds despite having a substantial following on their platform. Vistbacka (2017) suggests that reputational harm can be mitigated with effective communication and crisis management.

2.3.1 THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Social media application in crisis communication also proved to be effective on an international level. Its effectiveness in providing situational awareness in the event of a disaster was revealed in research studies (Reuters et al., 2018). Social media use by public relations professionals to provide awareness of the occurrence of natural disasters internationally remains scarce in spite of social media being used extensively to raise awareness of such disasters internationally (Komodros, 2014). Global and local perspectives of the application of social media for crisis communication have been shown above.

Global Perspective of social media in crisis communication.

Komodros (2014) affirms that the coming of social media into the Cyprus life transformed the operations of public relation departments since it enables one to talk to the audience personally and convey information with ease. While social media is becoming more important in the management of crises across the world (Reuters et al., 2018), its use in times of emergencies and crises remains in its initial development. Public relations experts ought to remain engaged and paying attention to social media since it could function as a bargaining tool in the case of a crisis.

Vistbacka (2017) notes that social media are commonly applied in crisis communication behaviors such as "justification" and "full apology" by organizations, whereby organizations attempt to justify the crisis or issue full apologies to seek the support of the public. This approach demonstrates the potential of social media to reach out to

stakeholders and shape public opinion during a crisis. Wright & Hinson (2009) Twitter has been cited as the first medium to inform news seekers about the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, India.

Local and regional perspectives on crisis communication.

In Zimbabwe, scholars have yet to extensively explore the role of social media in crisis management, with existing studies often focusing on the negative impacts or political dimensions of social media usage. Mugari's work delves into the adverse effects of social media, particularly its role in spreading misinformation and inciting unrest, while Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2013) discuss its influence on political engagement and the democratization of information dissemination. However, there is a clear gap in research focusing on the practical use of social media in corporate or organizational crisis communication within Zimbabwe. This highlights the need for more studies that examine how companies, such as Nyaradzo Group, can effectively use social media platforms for crisis management, and to understand the strategies that are most effective in the local context.

Similarly, in South Africa, while there has been some research into the impact of social media, most notably within the sporting industry (Hussain, 2015), little attention has been given to its use in organizational crisis communication. Hussain's research highlights how social media has transformed fan engagement and brand management within sports, but this leaves an open area for further investigation into how the lessons from this industry can be applied to corporate crisis communication. Both countries would benefit from research that identifies the best practices for using social media during crises, particularly in industries outside of politics and sports, to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media's role in crisis management across different sectors.

2.3.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY ORGANISATIONS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA.

Public administrations' approach to strategic communication has been altered by social media to the extent that social media networks are now thought to be even more useful

tools for risk or crisis management than traditional media. According to Veil et al. (2011), many public crisis communication practitioners already use social media as a push tool for organizing messages, including risk messages. The power and effectiveness of social media on business and consumers force businesses to think carefully and strategically more than ever crisis management starts before the occurrence of an actual crisis environment, and good crisis management continues with being distant to a crisis (Civelek et al. 2016)

Zamora and Losada (2016) qualitatively analyzed how the Madrid city government faced the Madrid Arena tragedy. Zamora and Losada (2016) believe that organisations prefer to use traditional media in managing crises, which causes more harm to the organisation. According to Zamora and Losada (2016), the broad social conversation generated on Twitter around the Madrid crisis is that when public institutions are silent, people talk, especially on social networks, but mainly in a more belligerent way. Also, without an official release, people built their version of the story by exchanging messages on Twitter. Organisations are facing a lot of challenges in trying to manage crises online.

According to Cornelissen (2017), the recent information technology age has created a challenging work environment for various organisations. However, new communication technologies enabled people to be conversant with the issues and risks related to organisations. Crises can damage an organization's reputation and relationship with its stakeholders. The PR department should be able to tell their side of the story during crisis. Their key messages should reflect their understanding of the crisis.. Civelek et al. (2016) recommend that PR practitioners investigate "where, when, how and in what way a crisis" occurs, as well as consider "where, when and how" stakeholders gather information.

Baruah (2012) argues that social media can be used to assist organisational communication because it can impact the relationship between brand and the public. The rapid digitisation of media has changed the public relations industry. PR professionals who want to maximize the effectiveness of their campaign strategies should be willing to embrace new media. Hegner et al. (2016) believe crises can negatively affect

organisational reputation and sales. The organization's action before the crisis and its crisis response to customers is important as it affects its reputation. Organisations are sustained by the strength of their reputations, especially in crisis management when the reputations of such organisations are threatened. Thus, effective crisis management is indispensable to every organisation to maintain its reputation. According to Wright and Hinson (2009), PR professionals drive change from traditional to digital/social media engagement. They constantly try to think out of the box to develop creative and innovative technologies.

2.3.3 MODERN CRISIS COMMUNICATION USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Technological advancement has led to the creation of social media platforms. According to Hunt et al. (2012), the advancement of Web 2.0 has assisted application developers in creating a social environment online through social media. Stakeholders can communicate instantly in this more recent and distant social media setting. Social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok were developed as a result of the internet. Social media's ability to keep the people interested and amazed through its sharing networks has quickly made it the most successful communication tool in the world. Mathee (2011) believes that social media has changed the media landscape and presents public relations practitioners with new possibilities and opportunities to promote their companies. However, according to Civelek et al. (2016), the negative aspect of social media is that individuals can express themselves freely and uncontrollably and spread false information, which can cause harm to the organisation's reputation.

Civelek et al. (2016) argue that the differences between conventional and contemporary communication channels are essential. In the past, media houses' top management, editors, and journalists served as the main formal bodies and communicators in charge of content. All of these systems have been altered by social media and are no longer essential. Any stakeholder can use social media channels to exchange information and create content. When it comes to crisis communication, social media differs from traditional media in that it can be utilized at every stage. Traditional media frequently only

covers the crisis response phase of a crisis and shifts their focus to other topics when the crisis is over.

In contrast, social media is also in the pre-crisis and post-crisis stages. Wigley and Zhang (2011:2) further argue that social media impacts the traditional media's "two-step flow theory, the conceptual model, agenda-setting theory, spiral of silence theory and excellence theory". They emphasize that PR practitioners must be on the front foot and "stay on the message" by controlling the information flow, disseminating information, and developing critical messages for prompt circulation to stakeholders and the media.

Sherman 2010 expressed that three main uses of social media in crisis communication are.

- Monitor social posts and conversations about a company to discover stakeholders' insights.
- Anticipate possible threats.
- Communicate with stakeholders during the crisis phase.

The first two of Sherman's uses are embedded in the early pre-crisis stage of crisis communication. At this stage, social media allows an organisation to scan for warning signs in real-time using different social listening tools to monitor online conversations and mention brands closely. Monitoring is essential in the current social media age when negative mentions of an organisation can quickly accumulate and emerge.

According to Zamora & Losada (2016), social media has changed how public administrators face their strategic communications. Social media networks are considered even more effective than traditional media for managing risk or crises. According to Weber (2009), as stated by Wright & Hinson (2009). Communications are moving in a digital World direction, and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not. Social media allows brands and consumers to engage across various channels in real-time, leading to increased demand for brands to address consumer inquiries quickly and effectively. Social media paved the way for two-way symmetrical communication. Social media has made communications to be more open. Veil et al. (2016) believe new media technology allows

question-and-answer reciprocity. The mortgage crisis website launched by the St. Louis public broadcasting station helped the public deal with foreclosures and invited people to ask questions. The reciprocal nature allowed citizens to receive expert answers and professional advice regarding the crisis. Dialogue and transparency are essential for public relations practitioners to succeed in crisis communication.

Eriksson (2018) believes that online visibility and building stakeholder relationships prior According to Valentini (2015), digital technologies, social media, and the environment, in general, have been praised for democratizing societal influence, seemingly allowing anyone to participate and freely contribute to the online environment. Tewes (2016) concurs that an excellent study recommended forming a relationship through a two-way symmetrical communication of public relations, creating an open dialogue that is at the core of relationship theory and organisational public relations.

Effective crisis management increasingly involves engaging with stakeholders directly on social media platforms. The interactive nature of these platforms allows for real-time communication, making them ideal for managing stakeholder relationships during crises. As Coombs (2015) argues, the immediate exchange of information helps to reduce uncertainty and manage stakeholders' expectations during crises. Moreover, Schultz et al. (2011) emphasize the role of social media in transforming passive audiences into active participants. This two-way communication not only allows for the exchange of information but also the collection of feedback, which could prove invaluable if response efforts need to be dynamic in real-time.

The two-way nature of social media communication plays a critical role in shaping the attitude of the stakeholders toward an organization in times of crisis. Veil et al. (2011) posit that an organization needs to respond rapidly to queries and comments in a way that safeguards a positive public image. Austin et al. (2012) also note the significance of transparency in communication. Openness in communication fosters trust and the capacity to avert the consequences of a crisis. Through the active participation of social media, the organization gains the power to manage the message, correct misinformation, and demonstrate accountability to the stakeholders

2.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter had reviewed crisis communication literature. Literature reviewed has outlined the revolutionary impact of social media on crisis communication approaches in organizational environments. The shift away from the traditional, managed approaches to communication to dynamic, two-way, and real-time communication through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube is a prominent feature of the literature. These social media platforms have recharted the expectations of stakeholders such that organizations do not only need to respond rapidly to crises but also to address the publics ahead of time to create and maintain trust. Literature underscores the dual nature of social media as a necessary channel of fast information exchange and a potential source of misinformation. Effective crisis management on social media requires not only a response but an elaborately conceived plan that involves paying heed, recognizing the concerns of the stakeholders, and maintaining two-way communications to enhance trust and credibility. Despite insightful findings, the literature records gaps in the existing information about the most effective approaches to the application of social media to multicultural and organizational environments, pointing to the need to do more research

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces and describes the theories that guide the study of the organizational crisis communication use of social media. They include the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image repair (IR) theory, and two-way symmetrical communication that collectively account for the use of strategies by organizations as a response to crises and as a means of communicating with stakeholders via social media. These theories, in addition to being a requirement to guide the methodological process, are also a requirement to guide the interpretation of the empirical findings in the context of the current digital communications. In the synthesis of the theories used, the chapter hopes to bridge the gap between theoretical thinking and practice application, contributing to a better understanding of how effective crisis communication strategies are developed and applied in an era of instant information sharing and public criticism. The synthesis hopes to provide an overview that not only adds to academic debate but also to practical crisis management practice.

3.2. SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which was formulated by Timothy Coombs, is an extension of Attribution Theory, a psychological concept. Attribution Theory suggests that people try to explain events, especially those that cannot be anticipated, and people tend to respond with emotional reactions. People try to explain such events and assign cause. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory specifies the factors that determine stakeholders' or the public's perceptions of a crisis. As indicated by Coombs (2007), it is an extension of Attribution Theory. It can test hypotheses related to how perceptions of the crisis affect the crisis response and the effects of crisis response on outcomes such as reputations, emotions, and purchase intentions. Coombs (2000) and Kyhn (2008) state that the development of the SCCT is also linked to the relationship

management theory of Ledingham (2006) because it applied the relational perspective to public relations crisis management. During a crisis, stakeholders look back at their relationship with a company, whether it meets their expectations, and to what extent they have been disappointed or satisfied by its actions.

According to Coombs (1998), a crisis manager must thoroughly understand the situation to select an appropriate response strategy for managing a crisis. Coombs developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which identifies three clusters of crises based on how the organization's responsibility is perceived by the public: victim, accidental, and intentional clusters. The victim cluster involves crises where the organization is seen as the victim, with very weak attributions of crisis responsibility. This includes situations such as natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering, or rumours, where the organization has little to no control over the event and is not seen as responsible for its occurrence. It is different with the accidental cluster, however, as it is defined by a low attribution of responsibility. Such crises usually result from unforeseen events, such as those caused by technical failures or product failure due to design faults. In such situations, the organization is not viewed as having caused the crisis deliberately; however, it is expected that the organization will take the necessary steps to reduce the consequences. On the other hand, the intentional cluster is concerned with those crises related to high attributions of responsibility, such as those that occur due to human failure or organizational wrongdoing. In such situations, the event is viewed as intentional or preventable, leading to the organization being blamed for the crisis. Such a category can include violations of moral codes, illegal operations, or intentional negligence.

Coombs (1995) formulated a matrix typology of crises that helps determine if a crisis arises due to internal organizational issues or external events, and if it occurs due to intentional behavior or unexpected events. Such a matrix provides a structured framework of understanding the nature of a crisis and helps organizations create an effective crisis communication that is dependent on the level of organizational accountability and the public's attitude toward the crisis. When the nature of the crisis faced is accurately known,

organizations are also better placed to craft responses that have a positive effect on public perception and reduce reputational harm.

| INTENTIONAL | | UNINTENTIONAL | | EXTERNALINTERNAL |
|-------------|--|----------------|--|------------------|
| Faux Pas | | Terrorism | | |
| Accidents | | Transgressions | | |

Source: Coombs, 1995

Intentional crises would be a violation, but internal crises occur within the organization. Unintentional crises would occur accidentally within the company. External crises would be viewed as intentional acts of terrorism and as inadvertent faux pas. An internal crisis is thought to be stable and controllable. The crisis will be the organization's fault. External crises, on the other hand, are unstable and out of control, and they may be seen as the organization's fault. The organization would instead be seen as the victim (Coombs, 1995).

According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), an organisation's response should align with the level of perceived responsibility for the crisis. As responsibility increases, the need for a more accommodative and empathetic approach becomes paramount. Public relations practitioners must thoroughly analyse the crisis to determine its nature and the most effective response. Accommodative crisis response strategies, such as issuing public apologies, offering compensation, or taking corrective actions, are particularly suited to crises within the preventable cluster. These strategies aim to repair trust and demonstrate accountability, ensuring stakeholders perceive the organisation's response as genuine and appropriate. Positive or neutral stakeholder and social media user feedback is a key success factor of the strategy, denoting the relevance of SCCT to new and old media forms of communication.

3.3 IMAGE REPAIR THEORY IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Image Repair Theory (IRT), developed by William L. Benoit in 1995, is a fundamental theory in communication studies that prescribes ways of reducing harm to public image after a crisis. It provides that organizations that undergo a crisis need to implement certain steps in order to restore their public image and the trust of their stakeholders.

Strategic Overview of Image Repair Theory

Denial and Blaming: Organizations can use denial as a strategy by fully rejecting any association with the crisis, with the aim of dissociating themselves from the negative event. This tactic often involves statements that challenge accusations or provide different explanations. For instance, an organization can claim that the reports are false or there is no proof linking them to the incident. Organizations might attribute responsibility to outside parties such as contractors, partners, or uncontrollable forces like market forces or acts of God, in an attempt to shift blame and protect their reputations. While such tactics can be successful in some cases, they can also lead to adverse consequences if conflicting evidence emerges, which could erode public confidence.

Evading Responsibility: These tactics under this category include pleading provocation, defeasibility by reason of uncontrollable circumstances, accidental occurrences, or raising good intentions defense.

Mitigating Offensiveness: This includes tactics that try to reduce the perceived harm of the crisis by improving the reputation of the organization, minimizing the perceived consequences, differentiating the action from worse acts, rising above the negative context, blaming the critics, or offering compensation to offset the damage.

Corrective Action and Mortification: Organizations might decide to commit to rectifying the problem and preventing its future occurrence, or they may select the route of acknowledging their culpability and seeking forgiveness, thereby exhibiting accountability and sincerity

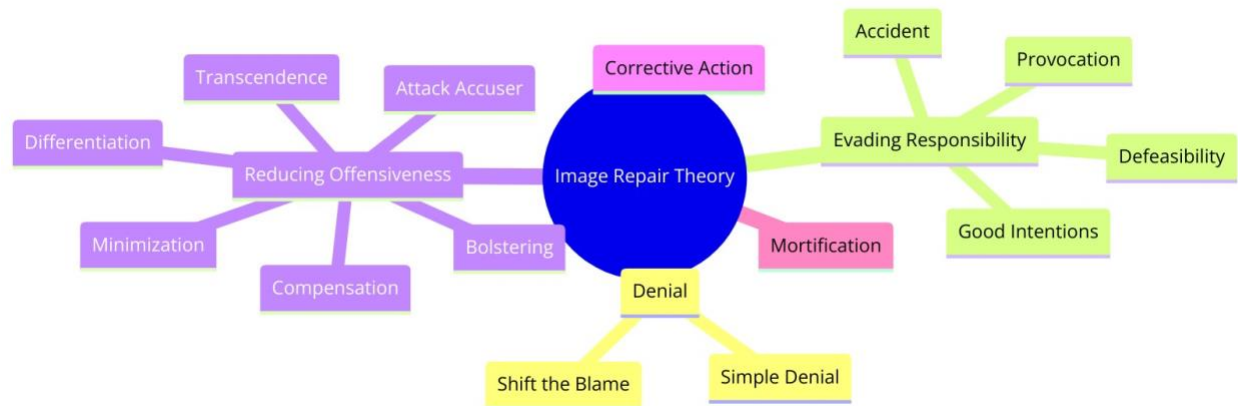


Fig 1

Application in Crisis Management

RT implies a strategic fit in crisis management, in which the choice of particular strategies must fit the type of crisis, the level of accusations, and the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. Successful use of these strategies can have a strong impact on public opinion and help restore an organization's reputation following a crisis

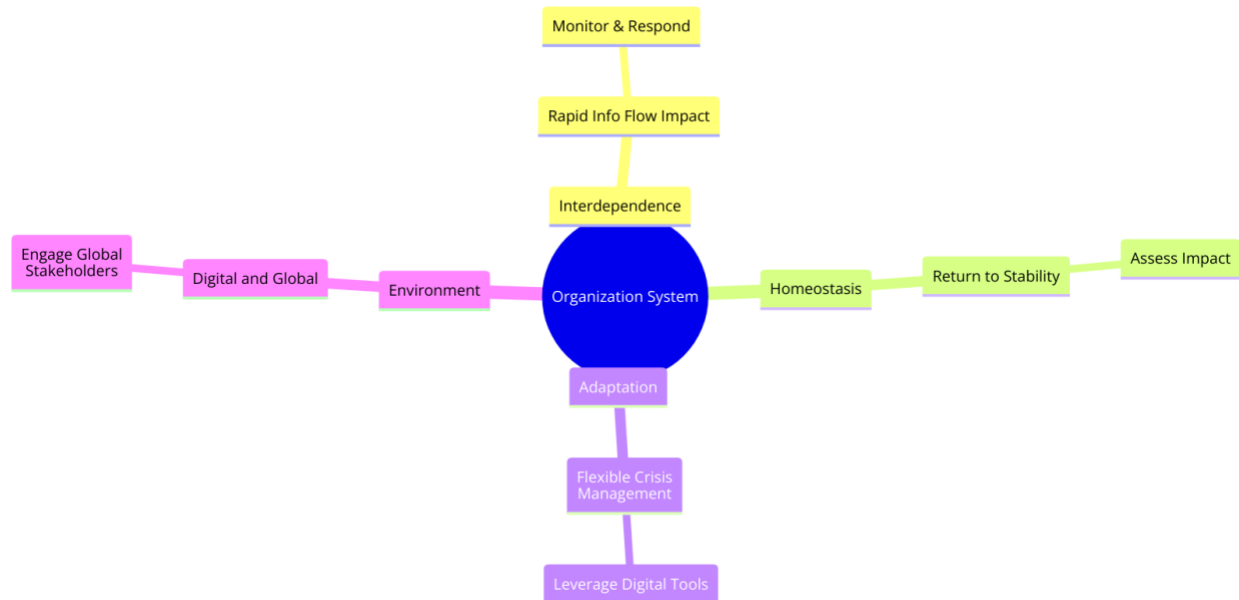


Fig 2

Contribution to Crisis Management in the Digital Age

Rapid Information Flow: Systems Theory accounts for the speedy spread of information and misinformation through interconnected digital platforms. Organizations must monitor and respond in a timely fashion to maintain stability.

Holistic Crisis Response: Since today's organizations are interconnected in nature, Systems Theory promotes the implementation of holistic crisis management strategies that take into perspective the possibility of far-reaching effect of electronic disruption.

Adaptive Strategies: The theoretical model emphasizes the necessity for organizations to remain flexible and adaptive, utilizing digital tools to react to crises and to incessantly innovate their crisis management strategies. The application of Systems Theory to crisis management, particularly in the technological era, enables organizations to build a more sophisticated appreciation of the intricate relationships within their systems. Not only does

this enable more effective crisis management, but also the prediction of possible disruptions through the promotion of a strong and adaptive organizational structure..

3.4 Two-way Symmetrical Communication

This study will employ two-way symmetrical communication by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations. These models serve as guidelines for creating programs, strategies, and tactics. Roper (2005) argues that two-way symmetrical communication as conceptualised by James E Grunig is said to form the basis of excellent public relations practice. According to the two-symmetrical model of communication, an organization's stakeholders and itself share power equally through reciprocal communication. Rahman and Theunisaan's (2011) two-way symmetrical model focuses way communication as a means of conflict resolution and for the promotion of mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Lee(2018) argues that symmetrical communication is characterised by understanding, collaboration, responsiveness, and the creation of long-term mutual relationships. These scholars are of the same that symmetrical communication creates long-term relationships.

Organisations need to practice two-way symmetrical communication as it forms the basis of excellent public relations. Lee (2018) argues that researchers have regarded two-way symmetrical as the ideal communication model in public relations specifically because of its ethical approach which contributes to meeting organisational goals effectively. According to Grunig and Grunig (2008), two-way symmetrical communication practitioners use research and dialogue to bring out symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviour of both their organisations and the publics Unlike the other models two-symmetrical models foster a two-way conversation between an organisation and its stakeholders.

According to Ropper (2015), two-way symmetrical has also been compared with the Habermasian concept of communicative action based on principles of the public sphere where self-interest is put aside in favour of the public good. As an organisation we need to put aside our interest for the public good so that we build a good relationship between

the organisations and the stakeholders. As an organisation, we need to use symmetrical communication to build long-term relationships with stakeholders. During a crisis two-way symmetrical is the best model to use as it ensures that there is dialogue. Mathee (2011) is of the view that two-way symmetrical communication is extremely effective with the online tools available. Duhe and Wright (2013) argue that Gurning's concept of two-way symmetrical communication remains both relevant and timely in a rapidly expanding online environment. Therefore two-way symmetrical communication is the best model to use during a crisis. Two-way symmetrical communication is characterised by dialogue rather than a monologue. Dialogue with the coming in of social media helps the organisation build relationships with its stakeholders online as well. As an organisation, we should strive to build relationships with all the stakeholders using dialogue. Two-way symmetrical communication is a communication approach that emphasizes mutual understanding and dialogue between an organization and its stakeholders

Two-way symmetrical communication is assumed to include "telling the truth," "interpreting the client and public to one another," and "management understanding the viewpoints of employees and neighbors as well two-way symmetrical communication is characterized by a willingness of an organization to listen and respond to its key stakeholders' concerns, interests, and actions; that is, using two-way symmetrical communication can satisfy the organization's moral duty to engage in dialog as employees and neighbors understanding the viewpoints of management" During a crisis, ethical answers based on truth-telling and an awareness of all points of view can accomplish two-way symmetrical communication, which logically entails transparency.

3.5. INTEGRATION OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The amalgamation of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair Theory, and two-way symmetrical communication gives a comprehensive framework that enhances the understanding and management of crisis communication within modern organizational contexts, particularly against the backdrop of the digital revolution and social media. Each theory offers distinct yet interrelated perspectives that collectively facilitate a nuanced approach to crisis management Coombs 2012.

Deepened Understanding through Theoretical Integration

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) forms the core of developing context-specific communication strategies aimed at crisis management in terms of stakeholder perception management. SCCT is related to Image Repair Theory, which outlines a number of approaches to repairing organizational image following a crisis. Together, the two theories dictate a strategic correspondence of messaging, which is most critical for effective crisis mitigation..

Deepened Understanding Through Theoretical Integration:

The combination of these theoretical frameworks enables a more complete understanding of crisis communication through the potential of organizations to create strategies that are strategic, stakeholder-focused, and receptive to systemic forces for example disruption theory, SCCT, and Image Repair theory provide the foundations for message construction and public communication.

Thus, the integration of these theoretical models provides organizations with a comprehensive crisis communication management approach. This method is essential in the current social media landscape, which is characterized by fluid information flows with potentially deep effects on public opinion and organizational stability. By integrating these findings, the model not only operates to facilitate timely crisis response but also to create durable resilience and stakeholder trust, making communications both reactive and responsible to the intricate realities of contemporary crises.

The theoretical underpinning comprising Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair, and two-way symmetrical communication provides a sound methodological framework for assessing the way in which the Nyaradzo Group utilized social media for crisis communication during the funeral policy crisis. The framework will enable in-depth examination of social media strategies, stakeholder engagement, and the effectiveness of the crisis response strategies adopted by the company. Application of SCCT, Image Repair, and two-way symmetrical communication model.

Theories will be employed to examine both the content and nature of social media messages dispatched by the Nyaradzo Group during this crisis. SCCT will aid in identifying both the nature of the crisis as well as linked strategies that most effectively worked, while Image Repair Theory will provide explanations on specific tactics that worked to minimize damage to the organizational image. This study aims at evaluating the extent to which communication adhered to established best practices in mitigating the impact of the crisis as well as reclaiming the organization's reputation. The conceptual model underpins the study in offering systematic methods to examining the effectiveness and suitability of the crisis management initiatives taken by the Nyaradzo Group on social media platforms. For instance: Assessing Communication Effectiveness: By applying SCCT, Image Repair and the research can evaluate whether the messages posted on social media effectively addressed the crisis phases and adhered to principles that prevent further escalation.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the theoretical framework of the study.... a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair, and two-way symmetrical communication to investigate Nyaradzo Group's approach to crisis communication via social media during their funeral policy crisis. The amalgamation of these theories equips the study to thoroughly assess the organization's crisis communication strategies, stakeholder interactions, and overall systemic responses in a digital context. By grounding the research in these theories, the framework not only prepares the groundwork for detailed methodological exploration and analysis but also anticipates generating profound insights into the effectiveness of employed crisis management strategies. The model seeks to provide both theoretical insights and practical guidelines, thus contributing to a better understanding of effective crisis communication, enabling strategic refinement in public crisis management, and making a valuable contribution to the research literature on crisis management and communication. The overarching theoretical framework suggested is expected to lead to a detailed

analysis that could shape policy development and strategic planning in the field of corporate crisis management in the future

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlined the research method that was used to study the way the Nyaradzo Group utilized social media to manage the crisis in the event of a funeral policy crisis. The use of a qualitative method allowed for an in-depth study of the textual and contextual meanings of the organization's social media interactions with stakeholders. Such a method of research was important to the understanding of the strategic communication efforts, stakeholder engagement, and the overall effectiveness of such interactions over the period of the crisis. Through the use of only qualitative methods, such as the content analysis of social media messages and thematic analysis of user comments and responses, the research aimed to identify subtle elements that the use of quantitative data could potentially overlook. The chapter also discussed the particular qualitative data collection and analysis approaches that were applied, as well as the ethical considerations that guided the research process.

4.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach to explore the use of social media in crisis communication in the context of the Nyaradzo Group funeral policy crisis. Creswell (2009) states that there are three major research paradigms: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Gibbs (2007) clarified that qualitative research involves analyzing and exploring social phenomena through the examination of data, materials, and experiences to understand how people or organizations relate to specific issues. The objective of the research was to explore how the Nyaradzo Group used social media to communicate with stakeholders during the crisis.

Qualitative methodology was most appropriate for this research since it allowed systematic explanation, interpretation, and the development of new concepts and theory (Haradhan, 2018). One of the most important merits of qualitative research is its ability to provide rich and complex insights into intricate social phenomena, thus improving

understanding of behaviours, experiences, and perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The use of qualitative methodologies enabled the researchers to grasp the subtleties of human interactions, making them most relevant to recording stakeholder interactions with crisis communication in real-time. Further, qualitative research was highly versatile and dynamic, allowing the research to change methodologies as they gained new understanding in the process of research (Bryman, 2016). Further, it has the ability to uncover emerging trends, unconscious motivations, and unexpressed attitudes that are usually evasive to more rigid structured quantitative approaches. Such versatility was helpful in analysing the way social media reformed traditional crisis communication approaches.

4.2.1 Philosophical underpinnings of the study

The ontological basis of the study was rooted in the foundations of constructivism, which holds the view that reality is a product of social interactions and is subjective in nature. This was vital in understanding the varied perceptions and meanings that the different stakeholders ascribed to the crisis management efforts of the Nyaradzo Group as portrayed on social media. In acknowledging the presence of multiple realities within different groups, this framework enabled the investigation into the complex dynamics of stakeholder interactions and their reactions during the crisis (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemological position of the research was aligned with interpretivism, which is concerned with the understanding of subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals ascribe to their experiences. This framework supported the in-depth exploration into stakeholder perceptions and reactions to the communications of the organization on social media. Interpretivism encouraged an intimate relationship between the researcher and the subject matter, thus allowing close engagement with social processes and communication flows within the digital platforms during the crisis (Schwandt, 2000).

4.2.2 Research Design and Methods

The research design was carefully conceived to study the strategic use of social media by the Nyaradzo Group using qualitative approaches. As posited by Bryman (2012), a research design is an important conceptual scheme for the collection and examination of empirical information. In the present study, the researcher used in-depth interviews, content examination, and questionnaires to obtain information on the use of social media by the Nyaradzo Group as it applies to the management of crises and communication. The most common methodology used was that of content examination, which involved a careful assessment of the social media messages, comments, and interactions that related to the particular crisis being studied. This was supplemented by thematic examination to reveal overarching themes or issues in the data, thus, to provide an understanding of how the crisis communication efforts of the organization were viewed and how they affected public opinion.

4.3 DATA COLLECTION AND TECHNIQUES

The researcher obtained data from Facebook and X (previously Twitter) to inform the research. The table below explains the relationship between the research objectives, the research questions, and the research methodology employed. The research methods applied to gather data in the current study were justified in light of their relevance to the research and the aim of attaining the outlined objectives..

| Research Question | Research Objective | Method Used |
|--|--|------------------|
| How did Nyaradzo Group use social media to engage stakeholders during the funeral policy crisis? | To examine how the Nyaradzo Group employed social media to engage with stakeholders during the funeral policy crisis | Content analysis |

| | | |
|---|---|------------------|
| What is the social media crisis communication strategy employed by the Nyaradzo Group | To assess the crisis communication strategies employed by Nyaradzo Group to handle the funeral policy crisis. | Content analysis |
| What challenges did the Nyaradzo Group encounter in handling the funeral policy crisis? | To understand the challenges faced by the Nyaradzo Group in managing the funeral policy crisis. | Content analysis |

Table 2

4.3.1 QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The researcher collected information from Alistar Chibaya's Twitter and Facebook pages, as he accused Nyaradzo Group of exploiting clients and benefiting excessively. The Nyaradzo Group's Facebook and Twitter pages were also used to gather data. The researcher will also analyse tweets from policyholders on Twitter and comments on Facebook. As Creswell (2007) suggested, content analysis is particularly relevant in textual data studies. Therefore, this study will utilize content analysis. According to Leedy & Ormrod (2014), content analysis is a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material to identify patterns, themes, or biases.

Leedy and Ormrod (2014:152) outline a systematic approach to conducting content analysis, consisting of several key steps essential for ensuring rigorous examination of the material under study. The first step requires the determination of the specific group of material to be analysed, thus laying a groundwork for the study by a clear identification of the material to be reviewed. The second step involves the determination of the attributes or features that will be reviewed in clear and unambiguous terms. This step is necessary as it ensures the validity of the review and ensures the researcher is aware of the parameters to be reviewed in the material.

During the third step, it is necessary for the research to deconstruct the individual elements into smaller, more discrete parts that one could analyze separately if need be.

Disaggregation of the material allows a level of detail and breadth of examination of the material that results in a better identification of patterns or trends. After the material is disaggregated, the fourth step requires careful examination of the material; a relevant example is the structured approach to carrying out content analysis as suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2014:152), which involves a set of initial steps necessary for a thorough examination of the subject material in question. The first step involves the identification of the particular corpus of material to be analyzed, thus laying the foundation for the evaluation by clarifying the material to be scrutinized. The second step requires the clear and accurate identification of the attributes or characteristics to be evaluated. Such specificity is necessary since it ensures the concentration of the examination and offers the researcher a firm grasp of what one must look for in the material.

During the third phase of the research process, it is important that investigators break down the elements into smaller, more tractable parts that could be analyzed separately if needed. The segmentation process allows for a more intensive and extensive study of the material, thus improving the detection of patterns or trends. After the breakdown, the fourth process calls for a careful examination of the material to identify instances of the attributes or characteristics outlined in the second process. Analysis could involve recording such instances of special words, names, topics, or categories that appear in the process of the research, ultimately forming a model of how to present the findings.

In the last step, it is necessary for researchers to extrapolate and make inferences from the content that has been subjected to analysis. This synthesizing process is important since it enables the researcher to make sense and develop broader statements about the patterns found in the content. Following these methodical steps turns content analysis into a powerful method for pulling out meaningful information from various media forms, and hence, developing an understanding of the underlying messages and themes in the material that has been studied, which fit into the characteristics or attributes developed in the previous step. Such an analysis can include the presence of particular words, names, themes, or categories that emerge during the process of analysis, thus forming a basis for classifying the results. In the last phase, researchers need to generalize and make

inferences about the material they have critically analyzed. The process of synthesis becomes crucial, as this enables the researcher to make conclusions and come up with wider assertions about the trends that have emerged in the material. Following these systematic steps ensures that the process of content analysis works better as a tool for extracting information from various forms of media, thus enabling a more insightful understanding of the messages emerging and the prevailing themes in the material being studied.

4.4 UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The entity under investigation in a study is referred to as the unit of analysis. According to Trochim (2006), it can be any socially significant thing that the researcher observes, evaluates, and explains, including social groups, persons, organizations, and more. The unit of analysis is crucial in a study as it helps the researcher identify and analyze individuals, groups, or organizations that are important to the research question. In this study, the Nyaradzo Group's communication on Twitter served as the unit of analysis, as the researcher will conduct content analysis specifically focused on this organization.

4.5 RESEARCH POPULATION

The population is defined as the group a researcher is interested in and wishes to conclude about. This study's target population comprised Nyaradzo Group funeral policyholders commenting on Nyaradzo Group and Alister Chibaya's Facebook and Twitter pages. The comments by funeral policyholders on these social media platforms provided relevant information for this study. Therefore, these individuals formed the research population.

4.6 SAMPLING

Sampling plays a central role in any research. Blumberg (2005) and Latham (2007) share that sampling is the act, process, or technique of selecting a suitable sample or a representative part of a population to determine the parameters or characteristics of the entire population. Alvi (2016) defines a sample as a relatively smaller group of participants

selected from a population for investigation purposes. He further states that sampling is the process by which a sample is extracted from a population. In this study, the researcher will utilize purposive sampling to select content for analysis. Tahakkori and Teddie (2003) define purposive sampling as selecting participants based on a specific purpose rather than random sampling.

4.6.1 PURPOSIVE SAMPLING

Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to select relevant content from the Nyaradzo Group Facebook page, particularly after the announcement of allegations involving client exploitation and unfair benefits. The sampling period for this study is from October 15th to November 31st. According to Schutt (2009), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling procedure in which the researcher deliberately chooses participants relevant to the topic of interest. In order to choose comments that respond to the research questions posed by the study, the researcher will employ purposive sampling. It is crucial to remember that because purposive sampling only considers pertinent comments, it has the potential drawback of bias.

4.7 OVERVIEW OF COLLECTED DATA

The data compiled for this study consists of various statements and public reactions from multiple social media platforms, focusing on Nyaradzo Group's management of communications during the funeral policy crisis. The collected data includes:

Nyaradzo Group Statement: A formal announcement was sent out via various social media platforms in order to address initial concerns over their funeral policy. The message is relevant to the study of the organization's initial crisis management strategy.

The Twitter public responses that came out following the first announcement by Nyaradzo Group provide key insights into the stakeholders' initial reaction and perceptions of the messaging of the firm. The CEO of Nyaradzo relayed a message of defense through Facebook, with the aim of clarifying the position of the organization as a way of countering the current crisis user responses to the defense statement by the CEO

of Facebook offer a better understanding of how people perceive the transparency and accountability of the firm. The Twitter responses to the comments expressed by the CEO also reinforce the level of public engagement as well as the effectiveness of communication via different media.

Policyholders' Expectations on Twitter: Comments and discussions from policyholders on Twitter regarding their expectations from Nyaradzo after raising their concerns help assess the crisis's impact on customer relations and expectations.

4.8. DATA ANALYSIS

In qualitative research thematic analysis is the commonly used form of analysis. Braun and Clarke (2012) define thematic analysis as the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns of meaning within a dataset. It allows researchers to identify topics relevant to the research question and explore the participants' experiences, thoughts, or behaviors. In this qualitative research study, the researcher will employ thematic analysis as it is an appropriate method for understanding the experiences of the Nyaradzo Group and how they used social media to manage a crisis. Therefore, thematic analysis aligns with the goals of this study. According to Macqueen & Namey (2011), thematic analysis moves beyond counting exact words or phrases. It identifies and describes both implicit and explicit ideas within the data.

Braun and Clarke's Six (6) steps to conduct Thematic Analysis

The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's six steps to identify themes for the study, beginning with familiarization of data. The first step involves an intensive working with the data to gain a deep understanding of its composition. Through careful and multiple readings of the material, the researcher becomes attuned to the subtlety and intricacy of

the information, thus promoting the identification of emerging patterns and trends. This important process is necessary for the development of a foundation on which future analysis will occur. The researcher then moves to the code generation phase. In the process of code generation, certain parts of the data are named or labeled with brief descriptions that capture salient characteristics of relevance to the research questions. The process of coding requires the segmenting of the data into smaller parts, one that highlights salient points that could subsequently be grouped or explored in more detail. The process not only helps to organize the data but also allows for a more intensive examination of repeated concepts or patterns.

During the later coding process, the researcher moves to the next step, i.e., the integration of the codes into thematic categories. The process requires careful study of the codes produced and organizing them into wide-ranging classifications or themes that encompass the overall concepts of the dataset. Through the consolidation of similar codes, the researcher builds a more organized representation of the findings, thus improving the understanding of the interrelations of the different components of the data. The fourth step involves the examination of the themes. Here, the researcher carefully examines the constructed themes to determine if they provide a credible representation of the data. In the process, it could involve a return to the initial dataset to verify that the themes have a good basis of evidence to support them and that they fit into the overall storyline of the study. Through an iterative process, the development of the themes could result in adjusting, aggregating, or eliminating them to enhance clarity and pertinence.

Next, the researcher determines the significance of the different themes. This step requires an evaluation of the relevance and implications of each theme in relation to the research questions and objectives. Through a consideration of the manner in which the themes enhance a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the researcher determines their relevance in the overall framework of the study. This reflexive analysis aims to clarify the implications of the findings and how they may affect existing knowledge. In the last step, the researcher embarks on the presentation of the findings. In the final step, the researcher presents the identified themes and their significance in a

structured format. This step not only involves the description of the themes but also the incorporation of exemplary examples and insights derived from the data. The presentation should adequately communicate the contributions of the study to the academic community, highlighting key findings and their implications for practice or subsequent research activities. By following Braun and Clarke's six steps, the researcher ensures comprehensive and systematic conduct of thematic analysis, ultimately deriving meaningful conclusions about the topic of the study.

4.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues are of paramount significance in upholding the integrity of research, particularly if it involves human subjects. This study centered on several key ethical issues to make certain that the foundations of responsible research are upheld.

The research process followed strict protocols in terms of anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were assured that all identifiable information would be deleted from the final dataset and the resulting publications to ensure that the data could not be traceable to the individuals. In line with the guidance of Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019), it is the emphasis that is placed on the protection of the participants' identities to create a credible environment that allows the free sharing of information.

Participation in this study was purely voluntary, and all participants had notice of their right to withdraw from the study whenever they wished without any consequences. Such a practice follows the norms outlined by Bryman (2016), which respect the research subjects' autonomy and emphasize the importance of informed consent as a central aspect of the ethical research practice. The participants were provided with full information about the purpose of the study, the nature of the involvement, and the potential uses of the findings so that they could make an informed decision about participation.

Data Security: Protection of the data collected formed a vital part of the research study's code of ethics. Data storage used equipment that had the support of encryption and password protection, which was only accessed by the research team. Physical data copies were also kept in a secure place that was always padlocked. These measures support the data protection principles outlined by Smith (2018), which emphasize the need to secure the information of the participants from unauthorized handling, loss, or damage. Ethical Review and Oversight: The study protocol was reviewed and approved by an institutional review board (IRB) to ensure that all ethical aspects, including participant risk and data management approaches, were following national and institutional ethical guidelines. In accordance with the suggestions by Mertens and Ginsberg (2009), IRB oversight is intended to enhance ethical practice in research through independent review of the study's adherence to accepted ethical standards.

Handling Confidential Information: Given the sensitive nature of the discussions regarding the crisis management approaches, great care was taken in the exchange and distribution of information. It was ensured to unveil the findings in a way that protects individual confidentiality and addresses the unique reputational issues relevant to the organization in line with the guidance presented by Sieber (2019).

4.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter sought to outline and discuss the methodology and methods used in the study. The research methodology for this study was meticulously crafted to investigate the Nyaradzo Group's use of social media during a crisis, utilizing a qualitative approach to deeply analyze the interactions and communications involved. The chapter discussed different practical aspects used to gather information for the study that was carried out. The researcher used in-depth interviews, content analysis, and questionnaires to collect data. The method of data analysis was also highlighted in this chapter. Ethical considerations in data collection were also highlighted in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the data collected to evaluate how the Nyaradzo Group utilized social media as a tool for crisis communication during the funeral policy crisis. The organization needs to match the results with the set research goals, which include examining the use of social media for stakeholder engagement, analyzing the crisis management approaches adopted, and determining challenges faced in responding to public concerns through social media platforms. The analysis focuses on content from Facebook and X, using both quantitative metrics, such as levels of engagement, and qualitative observations, such as examples of social media interaction and comments from users. The data were subjected to thematic analysis, a method that summarizes large datasets into structured themes, thus enabling the determination and explanation of patterns related to the social media behavior of the organization and stakeholders.

This structured framework harmonizes with the related research question, thus making it possible to present a coherent and orderly presentation that forms the groundwork for an exhaustive examination in the forthcoming chapters. Through the methodical structuring of material, the research communicates important findings on the effectiveness of the communication methods utilized by Nyaradzo Group, the organization's level of response to stakeholders' questions, and the broader implications of social media engagement across the field of crisis management. Finally, it improves the understanding of the impacts that have resulted from the organization's social media policy on crisis resolution and communication with stakeholders.

5.1.1 Use of social media for stakeholder engagement

Social media has increasingly become identified as a critical tool for stakeholder engagement, particularly in the cases of crisis communication. Empirical research proves that social media sites provide organizations with unique advantages for immediate and direct engagement with stakeholders, thus maximizing information exchange and two-way dialogical discussions (Coombs, 2014; Schultz, Utz & Goritz, 2011). The literature confirms that in crisis situations, the two-way symmetrical model of communication is the most effective model for communication with the public. This specific communication model nurtures a culture of engagement that enables dialogue and mutual understanding between organizations and the general public.. Two-way symmetrical communication fosters mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders. The model emphasizes open, transparent communication, wherein the organisation and its stakeholders engage in a dialogue to better understand each other's perspectives, values, and concerns Two-way symmetrical communication creates room for negotiation and mutual understanding to take place between organisations and the public. Two-way symmetrical communication fosters mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders. The model emphasizes open, transparent communication, wherein the organisation and its stakeholders engage in a dialogue to better understand each other's perspectives, values, and concerns. Two-way symmetrical communication creates a level of room for negotiation and mutual understanding to take place between the organisation and the publics.

5.1.1 Nature of dialogue

Nyaradzo Group's use of social media during the funeral policy crisis reflected a limited dialogue. The crisis response on platforms like Facebook and Twitter was mostly reactive, with the organisation focusing on defending its policies rather than engaging in constructive conversation with policyholders. Stakeholders voiced concerns on social media, but these concerns were not adequately addressed through a back-and-forth exchange of ideas. The CEO's intervention on social media, rather than providing a space for dialogue, was perceived as top-down communication that failed to engage stakeholders meaningfully.

Moreover, Nyaradzo's press statement on Twitter did not encourage an interactive dialogue. The statement from Nyaradzo Group did not address the issue raised by the policyholders; it intensified the crisis. The policyholders started attacking the Nyaradzo public relations department communication department. The statement shows that Nyaradzo was not ready to interact with the stakeholders. They were following the traditional way of crisis communication where communication was one way flowing from the organisation to the public and could not support feedback. Papacharissi (2002) argues that social media has created a new public sphere that is more participatory than traditional media. Social media allows for dialogue that's why the Nyaradzo funeral intensified because stakeholders are free to participate and air their views. Nyaradzo group's social media approach was one dimensional neglecting to address stakeholder concerns and instead solely promoting their products and services hindering meaningful engagement.

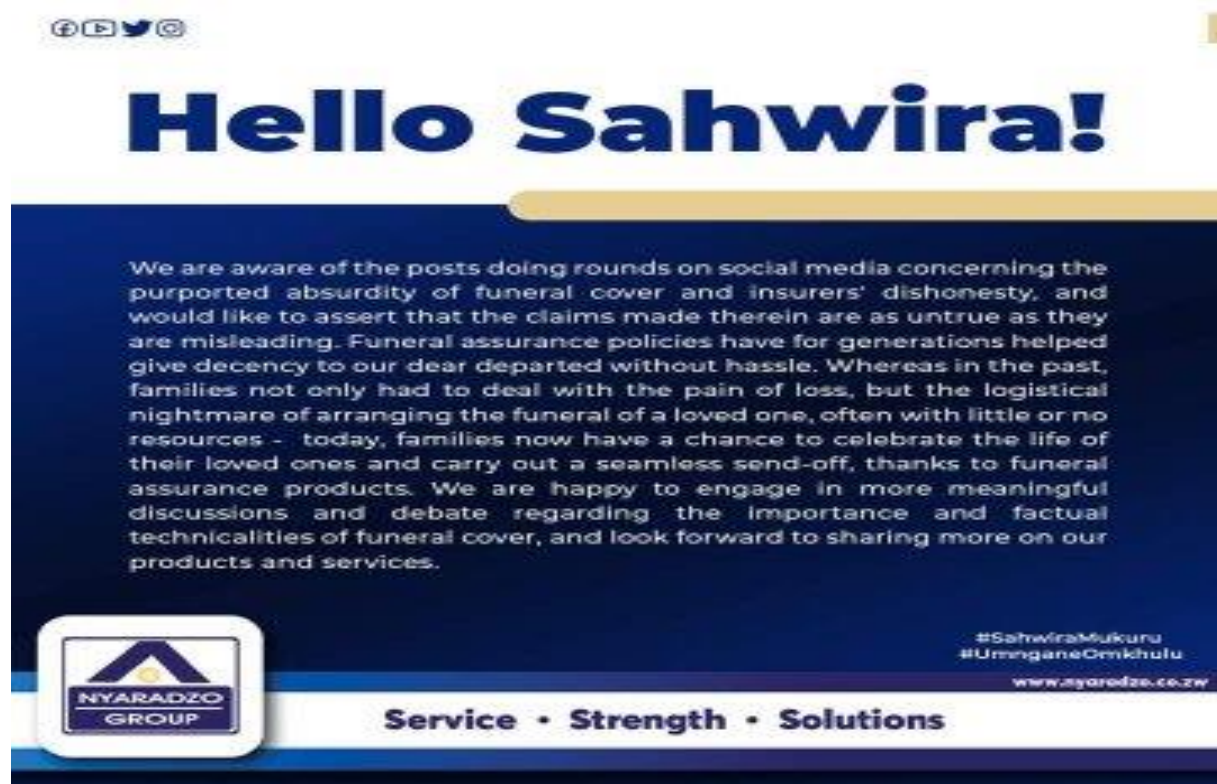


Fig 5.1 Initial statement from the Nyaradzo Group

Nyaradzo's communication was one-way asymmetrical it didn't address the concerns of the stakeholders. This feedback serves as a critical indicator of the initial public sentiment and sets the stage for evaluating the subsequent adjustments in the company's crisis communication approach.

Despite maintaining a social media presence the organisation persisted in employing a one-way asymmetrical communication, which ultimately precipitated an adverse public reaction and backlash. The failure of Nyaradzo to address their concerns highlighted a significant gap in Nyaradzo's use of social media to engage with the stakeholders. According to De Luca et al. (2022), effective social media communication enhances stakeholder engagement, which Nyaradzo missed. Dittori et al. (2018) also emphasize that digital platforms allow for greater dialogue and responsiveness, essential for building trust and maintaining a positive brand image. Nyaradzo's statement on social media was not transparent. Transparency is crucial in social media engagement. Being truthful about the situation and the organisation's actions can build trust and minimize misinformation.

5.1.2 Transparency of Communication and About Issues Discussed

Transparency is a key component of the two-way symmetrical model. Open and honest communication helps build trust between an organisation and its stakeholders, especially during a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Nyaradzo Group's communication lacked transparency during the crisis, especially regarding the financial structure of funeral policies and issues such as cashback and lapsing periods. While the CEO's posts attempted to clarify certain aspects, there was a lack of detailed responses addressing stakeholders' concerns. The PR department did not actively engage in transparent communication, resulting in further confusion and dissatisfaction among policyholders. The company's social media statements were often seen as defensive rather than providing clear, straightforward explanations of the issues.

Fig 5.2 Negative response from the stakeholders after the Initial statement



5.1.3 Accountability

Nyaradzo Group failed to demonstrate accountability during the crisis. The CEO's denial of stakeholder concerns on social media, particularly regarding policy lapsing and cashback, further alienated policyholders. The response strategy utilized was geared to de-escalate the seriousness of the issues as they existed instead of admitting accountability and making a concrete commitment to change. Taylor and Perry (2012), however, maintain that it is important for the organization to provide immediate and accurate information about the crisis and to take accountability. The organization's failure to admit accountability worsened its public reputation and the crisis as a whole, making the stakeholders feel overlooked and unappreciated.

5.1.4 Respecting Stakeholders and Understanding Their Perspectives

A critical aspect of the two-way symmetrical model involves the identification of stakeholders and a thorough understanding of their perspectives. This demands a capacity to empathize with stakeholders, acknowledge their problems, and respond in ways that are sensitive to their needs and emotional states (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Nyaradzo Group's crisis response demonstrated a lack of empathy and a poor understanding of policyholders' problems. The response by the CEO did not express a sympathetic attitude towards stakeholders but came across as defensive and dismissive. Policyholders expressed their discontent on social media platforms because there was no direct engagement and a disregard for both the emotional and financial impacts of the problems they faced. The absence of a stakeholder-focused approach in Nyaradzo's communication led to heightened frustration and further alienation from the company's audience. Nyaradzo Group failed to respond to the issues raised by policyholders to a satisfactory degree, thus ignoring the basic foundations of the two-way symmetrical model that facilitate open and responsive communication. This failure not only intensified the crisis but also led to long-term damage to the organization's relationship with its stakeholders.



5.3 Comments on Twitter on Nyaradzo's initial statement which did not address their concerns

5.1.5 Proactive Approach in Managing the Narrative

A proactive approach in crisis communication involves anticipating potential issues and managing the narrative before it spirals out of control. The two-way symmetrical model emphasizes the importance of taking a proactive stance to manage both the crisis and the communication surrounding it (Coombs, 2007). Nyaradzo Group's crisis management strategy was largely reactive. The organisation did not proactively engage with stakeholders until the crisis had already escalated. There was no clear strategy or pre-emptive communication plan in place to address potential stakeholder concerns. Instead of addressing emerging issues early, Nyaradzo's response was largely in reaction to feedback, which led to a lack of control over the narrative. The CEO's decision to intervene on social media was an attempt to manage the crisis, but it came too late and only added fuel to the fire.

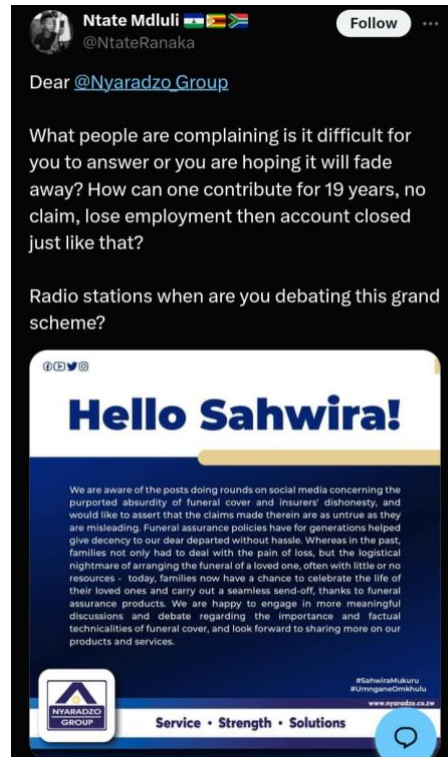


fig 5.4 Complaints from the stakeholders

Nyaradzo Group's use of social media during the funeral policy crisis revealed significant shortcomings in applying the principles of the two-way symmetrical communication model. T Communication patterns in the organization were predominantly defined by a culture of reactivity, unaccountability, and a failure to listen to the stakeholders. These shortcomings, coupled with a lack of proactive action in the response to a crisis, led to erosion of trust and worsened the crisis. Moving forward, Nyaradzo Group needs to adopt a more dialogical, transparent, and proactive approach to communication to rebuild stakeholder trust and better manage future crises

The researcher believes that reputation management on social media requires active engagement and transparency. Hurk 2013 in Roshan et al. (2016), organisations can respond to stakeholders' questions and concerns when using social media, potentially improving organisational understandings of stakeholders' crisis needs, providing greater clarity, and preserving or enhancing organisational reputation. The organisation must also listen to its clients by responding, giving feedback, and addressing customer issues. This

helps organisations to build a mutual relationship with their clients. PR response did not provide room for engagement or show the clients they valued their opinion

5.2 Crisis Management Strategy Employed by Nyaradzo Group

Nyaradzo Group's crisis communication strategies efforts were largely ineffective due to a deviation from established crisis communication best practices. The absence of a structured online crisis communication strategy led to improvised responses that failed to alleviate the growing discontent among the public. The shift from communications managed by the PR department to direct intervention by the CEO did not meet stakeholder expectations, which further intensified the crisis instead of resolving it. The inadequate response strategies during the funeral policy crisis highlighted critical areas for improvement. The negative feedback regarding the CEO's direct involvement and the apparent ineffectiveness of the PR department emphasize the urgent need for a solid crisis communication plan. This plan should detail specific roles and responsibilities, establish clear communication protocols, and include contingency measures for escalating situations. Going forward, Nyaradzo Group needs to fundamentally reevaluate its crisis management approach, focusing particularly on strengthening the PR department's capacity and public image to efficiently manage future crises.

5.2.1 Denial Strategy

Findings show that Nyaradzo Group used a denial strategy during the crisis. Nyaradzo Group's statement on Facebook and Twitter shows that they were using a denial strategy which exacerbated the crisis. According to Coombs (2007), the denial crisis response strategy is called attack accuser where the organisation confronts the person or group claiming that the organisation is doing something wrong. Nyaradzo Group claimed that the posts on social media were untrue and misleading, and they are happy to engage in a more meaningful discussion. Instead of the Nyaradzo Group answering questions raised by the policyholders on Facebook and cashback, policy maturity. The Nyaradzo Group failed to address the concerns of the policyholders on social media.

William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) posits that organizations under public scrutiny should strategically choose their communication responses to mitigate damage

to their reputation. In the case of Nyaradzo Group, the CEO's defense of the organization's policies can be seen as an attempt at reducing offensiveness by justifying the fairness of the policies. However, this approach was poorly received, as it failed to address the core concerns of the policyholders, such as issues around cashback and policy lapsing periods. The CEO's statement, which lacked a clear acknowledgment of the stakeholders' grievances and omitted key details, did not fulfill the criteria of effective image repair strategies such as mortification (admitting fault and seeking forgiveness) or corrective action (promising to rectify the issue). Instead, it could be perceived as a strategy of denial, which Benoit warns is often ineffective when the public perceives the organization as responsible for the crisis (Benoit, 1997). This misapplication of IRT principles highlights the importance of carefully choosing image repair strategies that resonate with stakeholder concerns and perceptions.



Fig 5.5 Comments from Twitter after Nyaradzo implemented the denial strategy

5.2.2 Initial Response Strategy

The analysis of Twitter's responses to Nyaradzo's initial statement offers crucial insights into Nyaradzo's crisis communication strategy. Nyaradzo Group's initial statement did not address the issues raised by the stakeholders it intensified the crisis. Hearit (2006) argues that organisations should apologise promptly and sincerely for their mistakes to restore their mistakes. Nyaradzo took time to respond to the concerns of the stakeholders and they said that the allegations are not true. The data reveals a predominance of negative feedback, indicating a significant gap between the company's communication efforts and public expectations. This feedback pattern reflects the initial adverse effects and poor reception of the first response by Nyaradzo, demonstrating that the communication was not fully attuned to the concerns of stakeholders and was not carefully crafted to respond to the issues of the current crisis.

Additionally, William Benoit's Image Repair Theory stipulates that organizations ought to utilize targeted approaches to restore their public image in a crisis. The public relations team of the Nyaradzo Group tried to respond to the accusations; however, it failed to effectively apply the corresponding IRT strategies. Instead of employing corrective action or mortification which would involve acknowledging the issue and promising to rectify it, their response seemed to lean towards denial or minimization of the problem

This approach failed to resonate with stakeholders, as evidenced by the continued negative feedback on social media. The organization's inability to effectively reduce offensiveness or take responsibility further damaged its reputation, showing a critical gap in applying IRT effectively. The data shows that Nyaradzo's communication was not aligned with the expectations of their stakeholders. The company focused more on digital marketing than on public relations, leading to inadequate responses during the crisis.



Nyasha Musandu

@NMusandu

Follow



Organisations need to learn to listen. What could have been a valuable opportunity to gauge public sentiment & pivot has turned into a full PR crisis. Before you put out a statement you need to understand the issue. You need clear protocols about who speaks & when.

10:00 AM · Oct 22, 2022

5.2.3 Bolstering strategy

The findings show that the Nyaradzo Group used bolstering to manage the crisis. Nyaradzo Group tried to highlight the organisation's past success or achievements to demonstrate its competence. The Group CEO tried to explain how the funeral assurance sector operates and that they now have policies that mature. Policies that mature only cover principal members and how they have crafted their funeral policies covering 6

members including parents from both sides. Stakeholders started to thank Nyaradzo Gr

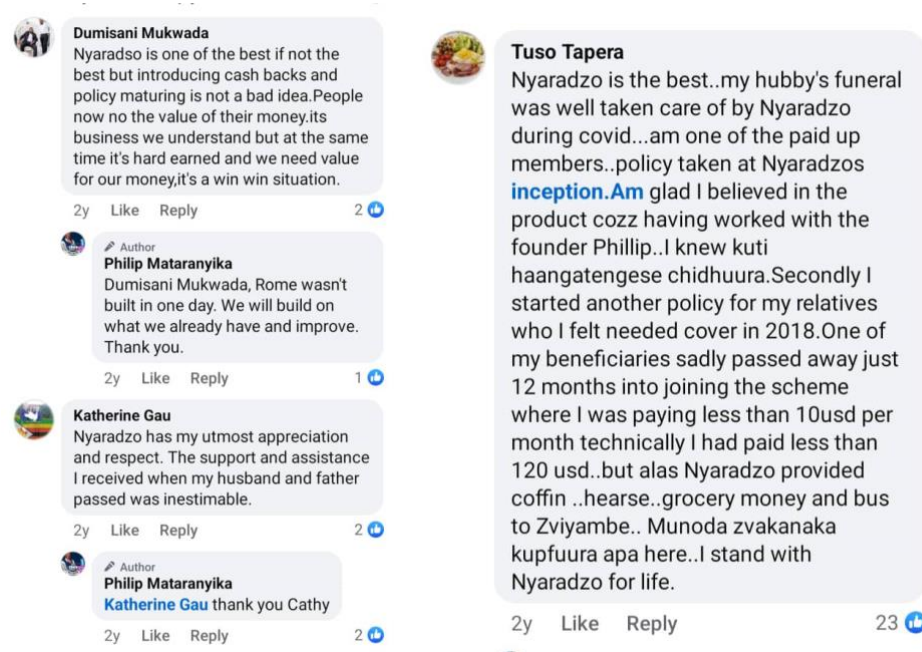


Fig 5.3 Comments on Facebook of stakeholders appreciating Nyaradzo

5.2.4 Direct intervention of the CEO to address the funeral policy issue

The researcher found out that when Nyaradzo's PR department failed to address issues raised by policyholders about their policies, the founder, the Group CEO, had to step in to address the issues raised by the policyholders. The Group CEO, Philip Mataranyika, gave a detailed explanation of the financial structure of the policies. The Group CEO explained to its clients that the organisation has mature policies. The CEO did not address the issue of cashbacks and the lapsing period. The idea of the Group CEO coming to defend the organisation led the funeral policyholders to start questioning the role of PR. The CEO was using his brand to address organizational issues. This shows the incompetence of the Group PR department. The crisis should have been handled by PR, not by the CEO.

The SCCT framework, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature of a crisis to select an appropriate response strategy, reveals significant shortcomings in Nyaradzo Group's handling of their funeral policy crisis. According to SCCT, crises can

be categorized into different clusters. Victim, Accidental, and Intentional based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization. In Nyaradzo Group's case, the crisis can be placed in the **Intentional Cluster** because the public perceived the organization as deliberately ripping off its clients. This high level of attributed responsibility required a more accommodative response from the PR department, such as admitting fault or offering corrective actions. Instead, the organization's response ignored the core issues raised by stakeholders, exacerbating the crisis and leading to further backlash. The poor alignment of their response with stakeholder expectations, as indicated by negative Twitter feedback, demonstrates a failure to adhere to SCCT principles, which stress that responses must be carefully matched to the type and severity of the crisis.

The situation was worsened by the fact that CEO Philip Mataranyika chose to confront the crisis head-on, bypassing the public relations department. While the move was intended to clarify the organization's position, it unintentionally increased stakeholder discontent and raised questions about the effectiveness of the PR department. As suggested by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a better response would have involved the use of accommodative strategies, including acknowledgment of policyholders' grievances, recommendation of corrective actions, and the show of empathy. The CEO's defensive attitude, as well as the lack of a unified communication approach, failed to meet the standards outlined by SCCT and thus worsened the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The failure to adhere to such established best practices demonstrates the need for the Nyaradzo Group to increase its understanding and implementation of SCCT fundamentals during future crises in order to better address stakeholder expectations.



Philip Mataranyika

21 Oct 2022 · 🌐



Just to give perspective to the discussion that has been raging on social media for the past few hours. I would like to let the public know that we have policies that mature and those that do not because of two reasons, pricing and flexibility.



Comments on Facebook on the direct intervention of the CEO

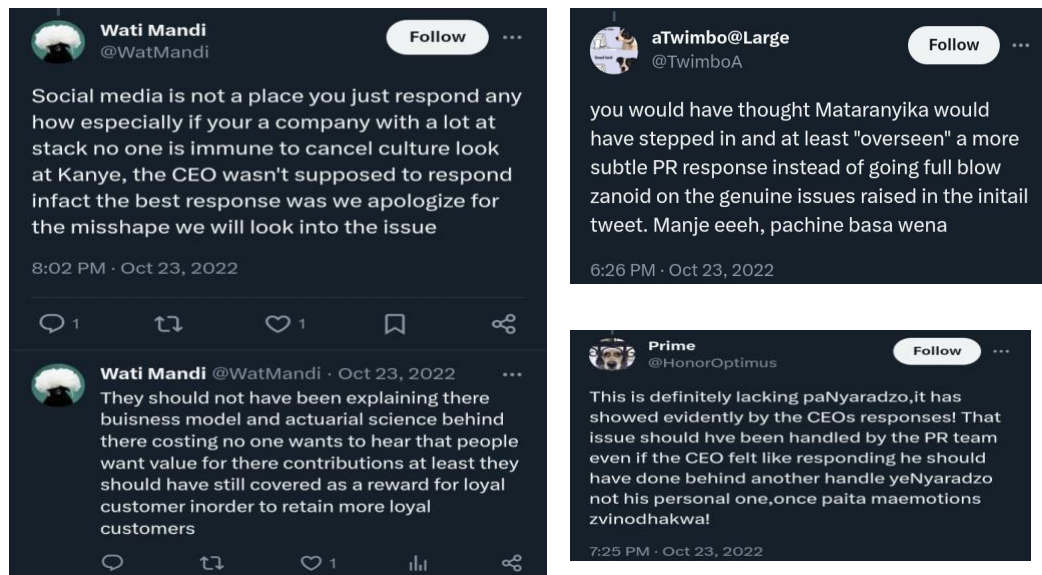
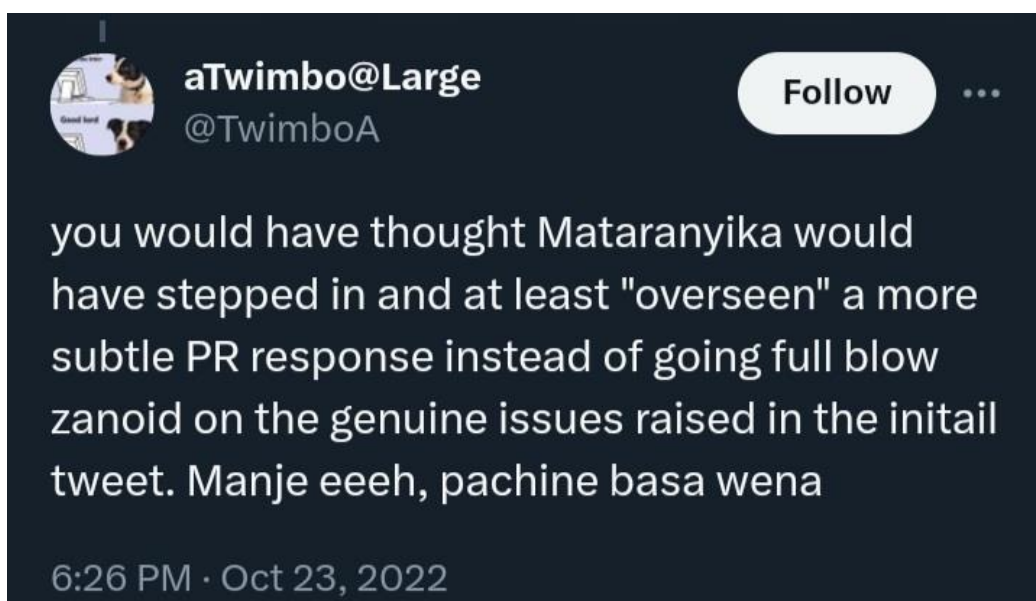


Fig 5.4 Comments from Twitter

The policyholders argued why the CEO would come on social media and try to defend the organisation while the PR department was there. The CEO undermined the role of the PR. The CEO intervention shows that the PR department had failed to manage the crisis. The organisations should first clear protocols before they put out a statement. The CEO used his account to engage by answering questions posed by people. He used his account to talk with the organization's stakeholders.

However, the failure of Nyaradzo Group's PR department to effectively manage the funeral policy crisis and the subsequent involvement of the CEO illustrates a breakdown in the organization's internal communication systems. The crisis communication techniques employed by Nyaradzo Group during the funeral policy crisis were largely ineffective, as demonstrated by their misalignment with established theories such as SCCT. The CEO's direct intervention, intended to manage the crisis, instead exacerbated it, revealing significant weaknesses in the organization's PR capabilities and internal communication systems. Moving forward, Nyaradzo Group must develop a comprehensive crisis communication strategy that aligns with theoretical best practices, ensuring that all stakeholder concerns are addressed effectively and that the organization is better equipped to maintain stability during future crises.

The application of these crisis management theories to Nyaradzo Group's handling of their funeral policy crisis reveals significant gaps in their strategy. The organization's failure to align its crisis response with SCCT principles, employ effective image repair strategies, consider stakeholder interests, and manage the interconnected nature of social media platforms resulted in an escalation of the crisis. This case underscores the need for a more strategic, theory-informed approach to crisis management in the digital age, where the role of PR practitioners is more crucial than ever. The crisis management process adopted by the Nyaradzo Group, complemented by the direct involvement of the CEO, revealed a significant gap between the organization and its stakeholders. The CEO's decision to respond to clients through social media was deemed to signal the presence of an ineffective and lacking crisis communication system that added to the eroding policyholders' confidence and trust. As much as the CEO probably wished to reassure policyholders, the initiative did not fully consider the long-term implications to the stakeholder relationship. Through his actions, the CEO acted to reinforce the failure of the public relations department, occasioning an added loss of stakeholder trust. The incident highlights the need for the Nyaradzo Group to carry out a complete evaluation of stakeholder communications strategies to ensure that communications are handled by the right departments that have the appropriate expertise to effectively manage crises.



This shows that Nyaradzo has not embraced social media for crisis communication/management. Nyaradzo found itself in a situation of being unprepared unexpectedly. They had no crisis communication policy. The group's Chief Executive Officer was asked if he could explain the complexities of funeral policies to all customers in all the branch locations. That was assigned to the team and not him. The CEO failed to respond to this question.

5.3.3 Challenges Faced by Nyaradzo in Addressing Public Complaints on Social Media

5.3.1 The type of crisis determines the response type

The results show that Nyaradzo faced serious challenges in their attempts to contain the funeral policy crisis. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) holds that organizations should vary their response based on the nature of the crisis and the level of responsibility they are perceived to have. The predicaments faced by Nyaradzo Group in responding to public complaints on social media demonstrate a major divergence from the tenets embodied in SCCT. The genesis of public discontent can be traced to the organization's failure to acknowledge and respond effectively to the issues posed, which is the basic expectation of the Rebuild Strategy in SCCT that includes actions such as the issuance of apologies and taking corrective action (Coombs, 2007). Furthermore, William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) calls for the need for organizations to manage their reputations strategically through the choice of appropriate communication responses during crises. The public complaints against Nyaradzo Group, especially the discontent expressed on social media forums, demonstrate the challenges the company faced in successfully utilizing IRT. Nyaradzo's failure to respond to the specific issues raised by policyholders, such as the lack of clarity on policies and inadequate customer service, indicates a failure to utilize corrective action and mortification, two basic strategies in IRT. Instead, the company's responses were seen as dismissive or defensive, thus fueling public discontent. Benoit (1997) argues that when an organization's response is seen as inadequate, it can further threaten its reputation. The case of Nyaradzo highlights the importance of not only choosing the right strategy but also implementing it in a way that is consistent with public expectations and actually addresses their concerns.



Comments from stakeholders



Comments from Facebook

5.3.2 Failure to meet stakeholder expectations

The research indicates that the failure of Nyaradzo to respond suitably to the expectations of the stakeholders in the crisis, due to the lack of a formalized crisis communications plan, is a shortcoming area of implementing proper SCCT methods. By failing to present key dialogue and being evasive in its response, Nyaradzo unintentionally fueled the crisis that could have been minimized by the use of more careful and understanding approaches to communications. Such shortcoming underscores the necessity of using SCCT to develop forward-looking communications approaches that enhance stakeholder engagement and address public issues effectively.

Nyaradzo's crisis communication response was too unengaged and unresponsive, and the stakeholders felt devalued and neglected as a result. Such a failure to respond to stakeholders and address their issues effectively constitutes a major area that needs to be improved. Nyaradzo failed to pursue a more responsive and versatile crisis communication model that considers stakeholder participation, openness, and the strategic use of social media to tackle issues of public concern and protect its reputation. Scam, rip-off, incompetent, and ineffective terms have been used to characterize its online campaign. Such a situation attests that the reputation of a renowned firm could be damaged in seconds if social media is not managed by public relations experts. Reputation management in crisis situations calls for skilled communication, openness, and immediate responses. A study by Roshan et al. (2016) revealed that big organizations in Australia that dealt with crises using social media revealed a limited understanding of the strength of social media as a crisis communication tool. Most of the time, organizations failed to respond to stakeholder questions or adopted crisis management strategies that could amplify reputational damage.



Stakeholders' comments show that the reputation of Nyaradzo has been tarnished

5.3.3 The Shift from traditional crisis communication

The findings support that the shift to social media requires more resilient and uniform crisis communication approaches within organizations. The fact that the organization did not have an appropriate online communication policy, along with the observed shortcomings of its public relations and marketing departments, highlights a failure in the organization's internal systems. The inability of Nyaradzo to attend to public grievances on social media shows that its internal mechanisms were not capable of effectively dealing with the crisis, thus highlighting the need for a more unified and synchronized method of crisis communication strategy.

The traditional channels of communication utilized by the organization became insufficient in the fast-paced and dynamic world of social media, as the stakeholders need instant interaction and response. The inability of Nyaradzo to adapt to the needs of social media in the crisis situation highlights the need for a more structured method of integrating digital communications tools into their crisis management systems.. Nyaradzo Group's challenges in addressing public complaints on social media during the funeral policy crisis underscore significant gaps in their crisis communication strategy. The organization's failure to apply key theoretical frameworks, such as SCCT, IRT, and two-way symmetrical communication contributed to its inability to effectively manage public complaints and maintain a positive reputation. One of the prominent e-commerce business owners of Fresh in a Box, Kuda Musasiwa, also questioned the role of Nyaradzo Group PR practitioners in the digital world. PR practitioners are lacking online PR training. Below is an insert of his post:



X users started discussing ways Nyaradzo should have used to deal with the crisis. They felt that Nyaradzo should have acknowledged the concerns that they raised. Also,

organisations need to learn to listen. They argued that before you put out a statement, you must understand the issues and clear protocols about who speaks and when.

Nyaradzo lacks an online communication strategy, making them confused when hit by a crisis. To manage social media effectively, strategies to engage must be applied. Jin et al. (2014) state that the public increasingly uses social media during crises, and consequently, crisis communication professionals need to understand how to optimize these tools strategically. The researcher found that Nyaradzo PR practitioners face challenges using social media for crisis communication. Social media has changed the way organisations and stakeholders communicate. The shift from traditional to online media has posed many challenges to organisations. Organisations are not yet fully prepared to handle crises online. They fail to use their social media to address and clarify issues with the public. Veil et al. (2011) and Wang (2016) share the same view that crisis communication and managing it on social media is now more important than ever before because there has never been so much information available to the public as there is now via social media. Public relations practitioners need to use social media to communicate with stakeholders.

Social media has redefined contemporary, changing consumers from their passive roles into active groups. Nyaradzo must monitor their overall online effectiveness. They should also manage their brand online, which is essential in an online environment. Nyaradzo should strive to maintain a good reputation because once damaged, it will take time to restore it. The data from Facebook shows that Nyaradzo faces challenges in using social media for crisis communication/management. PR practitioners need to be trained on how to use social media for crisis communication. Most organisations are pushing for digital marketing to maximize profits, forgetting they also need a good reputation. Nyaradzo should allow PR practitioners to play their role in the organisation. The researcher discovered that at Nyaradzo, the marketing department does both parts of marketing the goods or services and the PR simultaneously. When a crisis hits the organisation, they fail to deliver. In 2017, Dairibord Zimbabwe also faced an online crisis and consumer criticism. The continuous occurrence of online crises shows that organisations still struggle to use social media for crisis communication. The researcher discovered that

funeral policyholders questioned the role of PR practitioners during the online crisis. The PR practitioner's role has since evolved with the advent of social media. Traditionally, public relations practitioners used print and electronic media to address crises. Traditional media did not allow for feedback, and it did not cause much trouble to PR practitioners. PR practitioners could not measure if the message had reached the intended audience. It can be linked to the magic bullet theory, where communication was one way. Information was bombarded by the audience. Audiences were treated as zombies. The advent of social media has allowed for a free flow of information and mutual communication. It allows for feedback.

5.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter systematically examined Nyaradzo Group's use of social media for crisis communication during the funeral policy crisis, revealing key insights into both the effectiveness of their communication strategies and the broader challenges faced by organizations in Zimbabwe. The analysis of company statements and public responses, particularly the predominantly negative feedback on Twitter, highlighted significant gaps between Nyaradzo's messaging and stakeholder expectations, demonstrating the difficulties in managing public sentiment through digital platforms. Additionally, the chapter underscored that many PR practitioners in Zimbabwe are still grappling with the full potential of social media for crisis communication, with stories spreading rapidly across platforms like Twitter and Facebook. The evolving role of PR in the digital age and the need for better strategic use of social media for stakeholder engagement were also emphasized. These findings lay the foundation for further analysis of Nyaradzo Group's crisis management techniques and suggest areas for improvement in corporate communication practices during crises.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an integrated synthesis of the study's findings with the theoretical frameworks and literature reviewed earlier in the thesis. The research explored the use of social media for crisis communication and management, focusing on the Nyaradzo Group's response during a funeral policy crisis. The findings are critically analyzed in the context of existing theories, followed by recommendations that aim to enhance crisis communication strategies for organizations. The chapter concludes with reflections on the broader implications of the research and potential avenues for future studies.

6.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The researcher used qualitative research methodology to assess the use of social media for crisis communication/management. The qualitative research approach assisted the researcher in achieving the set objectives. It allowed the researcher to use content analysis and interviews to understand how Nyaradzo Group used social media to engage with stakeholders during the funeral policy crisis. The researcher used Facebook and Twitter to collect data. The researcher interviewed several PR practitioners to understand their challenges in addressing public complaints. The chosen research design tools allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information about the research problem and generated new ideas for further research. There are several companies in Zimbabwe in the Funeral assurance sector. In October 2022, Nyaradzo Group was accused of ripping off its client. The story started on Twitter, and it went on Facebook as well. It became a very topical issue during that time. It started trending on both Facebook and Twitter. The story drew a lot of attention from many people in Zimbabwe since Nyaradzo is one of the biggest funeral assurance companies in Zimbabwe with the largest market share.

Nyaradzo Group had to use social media for crisis communication/management. Traditionally, the organisation could have used print media. The organisation could have published a press statement in *the Herald* (the widely read newspaper in Zimbabwe) or

used electronic media. Traditional media crises can be contained since they are one-way communication, but with social media. It is now different; a story can go viral in seconds. This was the case with the Nyaradzo Group. They failed to contain the crisis. When the PR department could not address the concerns, the Group CEO and co-founder had to intervene. The CEO used his own Facebook account to address the problems. He also responded to almost everyone asking questions about Facebook policies. Social media creates room for feedback, which helps organisations to respond to every individual online. This helps in creating a mutual understanding between the organisations and their stakeholders. Data from the fieldwork was analysed using thematic data analysis to identify patterns and interpret data using themes to address the research question.

6.3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The researcher formulated research questions to assess the use of social media for crisis communication/management.

6.3.1 USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

The study's findings indicate that Nyaradzo Group relied heavily on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to engage with stakeholders during the crisis. This aligns with the two-way symmetric theory of communication by Grunig and Hunt (1984), that effective communication in a crisis requires an open-ended process of dialogue and two-way understanding between the organization and the public. The nature of social media allows for this kind of engagement to occur, with the organization being able to deal with issues as they happen in real-time.

However, the findings of the research revealed significant shortcomings in Nyaradzo Group's use of social media. In particular, the study highlighted the insufficiency of the public relations department to effectively handle the situation. The literature shows that, while social media offers outstanding opportunities for engagement, it requires a clearly defined strategic communication plan (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) highlights the imperative of

choosing a suitable response strategy depending on the type of crisis and the organization's past reputation. The action taken by Nyaradzo Group to allow the CEO to take over from the public relations team is an example of a reactive, rather than proactive, approach, thus demonstrating a gap between theoretical models and actual practice.

The review of literature demonstrates that the development of social media has altered the dynamics of power involved in crisis communication, as stakeholders are able to express their concerns more intensely and rapidly (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). This mandates organizations to adopt more adaptive and open communication approaches. The case of Nyaradzo Group demonstrates that, while the CEO's intervention was critical in eventually regaining some control, the failure of the public relations team to respond to the crisis effectively in its initial stages underscores the need for greater training and readiness in handling crises in social media environments.

6.3.2 SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNIQUES.

The researcher outlined several social media strategies that could be used within the context of crisis communication. Nevertheless, the Nyaradzo Group did not utilize these strategies. The crisis was characterized by an increased emotional atmosphere, which led people to use social media as a platform for venting their anger or showing discontent with the handling of the crisis. The crisis linked to the funeral policy of the Nyaradzo Group highlighted the importance of having an extensive online strategy for crisis communication. The company did not use social media for effective communication and crisis management. Therefore, it failed to respond effectively to the issues posed by the policyholders. In addition, the organization's Twitter statement worsened the crisis, fuelling the existing challenges. Providing timely responses during a crisis is imperative, especially in responding to the issues that have been raised. The findings of the study showed that Nyaradzo Group lacked a comprehensive online crisis communication plan, which is a critical ingredient for effective crisis management. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) posits that an organization's response to a crisis should be guided by its assessment of the situation and the potential consequences on its reputation (Coombs, 2007). The absence of a clear, pre-established plan at Nyaradzo Group led to an irregular and reactive response.

The prevailing corpus of literature highlights the imperatives of developing an elaborate crisis communication plan with social media strategies (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). In addition, the plan ought to set out specific responsibilities and roles, and thus ensuring the right persons are prepared to respond rapidly and efficiently. The Nyaradzo Group's reliance on the CEO to steer the company through the crisis after the failure of the PR team indicates a lack of preparedness and raises questions about the company's general capacity for crisis management. The Image Repair Theory, formulated by Benoit (1997), is especially relevant in this regard. According to this theoretical model, organizations ought to take proactive steps to repair their image in the wake of a crisis. While the participation of the CEO on social media is a step forward toward the rehabilitation of the organization's image, the initial damage caused by the public relations team's poor response emphasizes the need to have a competent and proactive crisis communication team. Literature supporting this also points to the need for continuous monitoring of the social media platforms and the capability to address issues as they develop into full-scale problems immediately (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Additionally, the study found that the responses of the Nyaradzo Group on social media were inconsistent, potentially exacerbating the crisis. The finding aligns with research that suggests that inconsistency in communication reduces the credibility of an organization and leads to poor public perception (Coombs, 2012). Effective crisis communications require a structured and unified approach that ensures all the communications conform to the overall goal of the organization's crisis management.

6.3.3 CHALLENGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA

The research highlights a number of challenges that come with the use of social media as a tool of crisis communication, especially the difficulty of handling the narrative as soon as it is established. Social media is most commonly described in existing research as a double-edged sword (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). While it provides a platform for fast interaction, it also puts organizations into the immediate and intense spotlight.

The case of Nyaradzo Group underscores the difficulty of dealing with misinformation and negative feedback on social media. As suggested by the Diffusion of Innovations Theory by Rogers (1962), the proliferation of technologies such as social media brings with it profound changes in the dynamics of information transmission and reception. As such, it is important that organizations learn the appropriate competencies to deal with such changes to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer number of responses and the speed of the way they are communicated. The literature states that social media can amplify negative feelings, making it more challenging for organizations to maintain control during crises (Liu, Jin, & Austin, 2011). The Nyaradzo Group case study illustrates this phenomenon, in that the organization's early response on social media was seen as inadequate, which created a domino effect of negative publicity. This finding reinforces the need for PR practitioners to be highly skilled in social media monitoring and response strategies.

Additionally, the study found that the PR department's tone on social media was criticized as being arrogant and dismissive, which only served to escalate the crisis. This aligns with the literature on crisis communication, which stresses the importance of tone and language in shaping public perception (Coombs, 2012). An effective crisis response should be empathetic, transparent, and respectful, qualities that were initially lacking in Nyaradzo Group's communication.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nyaradzo Group funeral policy crisis highlighted the need for an online crisis communication plan. The organisation failed to use social media for crisis communication/management. Crisis communication will assist the organisation when there is a crisis to respond and contain the crisis quickly. A crisis communication plan helps the organisation determine the spokesperson who will communicate effectively. During the crisis, the Nyaradzo case brought two spokespersons, the group PR department, and the Group CEO. This highlights the need for a representative in the organization. Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended to enhance crisis communication in organizations:

6.4.1 Develop a Comprehensive Online Crisis Communication Plan:

It is advisable that organizations develop an extensive crisis communications plan that clearly defines the role of social media. The plan should include policies for social media profile management, crisis response procedures, and stakeholder engagement practices. In addition, it is critical to have one spokesperson to ensure consistency in communications and reduce the possibility of potential confusion.

6.4.2 Invest in Continuous Training for PR Practitioners:

Public relations professionals should attend regular programs of study that address social media management and crisis management. These programs should include modern tools and methods that have relevance to the management of social media, as well as methods of ensuring effective and prompt resolution of crises. In addition, the training needs to emphasize the importance of tone, empathy, and transparency in the area of crisis communications.

6.4.3 Utilize Social Media Monitoring Tools:

Organizations should invest in advanced social media monitoring tools, such as Google Analytics, Hootsuite, and Sprout Social, to provide public relations departments with the ability to track conversations in real-time, identify possible risks in the earliest possible moment, and evaluate the effectiveness of communication strategies. Proactive monitoring allows for faster response times and can help to mitigate the effects of a crisis.

6.4.4 Establish Clear Protocols for Managing Social Media Crises:

Crisis handling in social media should be done according to procedures clearly laid out beforehand. These procedures should cover judging the seriousness of a crisis, selecting the best course of action to take, and communicating with other parts of the organization during and after the crisis. The guidelines should be looked at often enough that any suggestions for changes can be made in a timely manner. Keeping the guidelines fresh and relevant is one way to ensure that they are followed during a crisis

6.4.5 Ensure Consistency in Messaging:

In a crisis, communications consistency is vital. All communications—whether they come from the CEO, the PR team, or other spokespeople—should be in line with the organization's overall crisis management communications plan. Inconsistent messaging can lead to confusion and undermine the organization's credibility.

6.4.6 Adopt a Proactive Approach to Reputation Management:

Organizations should not wait for a crisis to unfold before engaging with stakeholders on social media. A proactive approach to reputation management, including regular positive engagement and transparent communication, can help build trust and goodwill, making it easier to manage crises when they arise.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The case study highlighted the use of social media for crisis communication/management. It also highlighted the role of PR practitioners with the emergence of social media. Nyaradzo Group's funeral policy crisis started on Twitter. Alistar Chibanda was accusing the organisation of ripping off its customers. The story began to trend on both Twitter and Facebook. The organisation's PR department failed to address the concerns of the policyholders. However, the statement caused more harm as it intensified the crisis. The CEO had to intervene and engage with clients on social media. The organisation's PR department must be trained to use social media for crisis communication/management. Organisations need an online crisis communication plan. Organisations should let PR practitioners actively participate in their strategic functions.

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