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## **SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN VIETNAM – A ORGANIZATIONAL VIEWPOINT**

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### **Abstract**

*Social media is considered one of the most popular communication platforms in Vietnam. Recently, organizations in Vietnam have seen a rise of social media usage during crises when stakeholders seek and share news about a corporate crisis on social media, and organizations start to respond on this same channel. This study examines the use of social media for crisis communication in Vietnamese organizations. Little research has dedicated to exploring this topic, on the use of social media in PR or in crisis communication in a Vietnamese setting. To address this gap, this research employs the diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory and the networked crisis communication theory (NCCT) to identify the many influences on social media adoption for crisis communication within organizations.*

**Key words: social media, organizational communication, crisis communication, crisis response, Vietnam, DOI, NCCT**

### **Introduction**

In Vietnam, 95% of internet users own a Facebook account, while other SNSs account for only about half of Facebook's share (Kemp, 2015). Facebook is ranked in the top three sites in Vietnam ("Alexa," n.d.). It is ranked even above most traditional news websites, including Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, Dan Tri and VnExpress, which are the nation's most popular and influential news websites. Moreover, compared to all other applications, Vietnamese people have online forums and blogs as their preferred social media channels to share information. During previous crises in the country, Facebook, forums and blogs were repeatedly used as the main channels for individuals to voice their concerns (Lan Huong, 2014).

However, only few studies conducted research on Vietnamese PR practice, and those usually focused on marketing purposes, not reputation management or crisis communication. By employing the diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory and conducting a series of in-depth interview with PR practitioners in Vietnam, this study aimed to give a thorough view on how Vietnamese companies view the use of social media in crisis communication, and how the social media can support the current practice of crisis communication.



## **Literature Review**

### **Social Media for Crisis Communication as an Innovation**

The first theory to be applied in this present study is the diffusion of innovation theory (DOI). The study treats social media for crisis communication as an innovation that is potentially still diffusing in Vietnam. The theory explains how an innovation is diffused, or communicated through different channels over time within a social system, before being adopted (Rogers, 2003). In this theory, diffusion is a special case of communication in which a new idea or practice is considered.

Rogers (2003) listed five interrelated attributes of an innovation that contribute to the rate of adoption. Positive or negative persuasion to adopt is based on the perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability attributes of the innovation.

Relative advantage is the perceived advantage of an innovation compared to previous ideas. Relative advantage is a comparison between the expected economic and convenience benefits, and the costs of adoption. In this study, relative advantage is the perceived benefits of using social media in crisis communication in Vietnam compared to sticking solely to traditional media channels. Relative advantage is the chosen attribute used to analyze social media characteristics in this current research.

Compatibility is how an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the current norms, values and experiences of users. In this study, compatibility represents whether the use of social media in crisis communication is congruent with the values and norms of Vietnamese organizations, and whether using social media requires significant change or could be incorporated into organizations' current practices.

Complexity denotes how perceivably difficult or easy an innovation is to understand and use. This present study sees complexity as how difficult it would be for a Vietnamese organization to communicate a crisis through social media channels.

Trialability is the possibility that an innovation can be divided into smaller parts to test its effectiveness before a full adoption. In this research, trialability refers to how easily a Vietnamese organization could trial social media in a crisis communication plan.

Observability is the extent to which the results of an innovation are easily communicated and observed. It is presented by how the contributions of social media in crisis communication could be visible to a Vietnamese organization.

### **Social Media as an Important Platform in Crisis Communication**

Another theory used in this study is the networked crisis communication theory (NCCT), developed by Schultz, Utz and Göritz (2011). The result showed that the medium influences all three aspects, while the message only affects the secondary crisis reactions such as sharing negative messages about the organization to persuade others



to boycott the organization. They thus concluded that in crisis communication, the platform is more important than the message.

Since its development, NCCT frequently has been used to study the influence of communication medium on stakeholders' perception and acceptance of an organization's crisis communication effort. For example, Utz, Schultz and Glocka (2013) conducted a survey to ask for opinions on a real crisis communication scenario. The study assessed participants' crisis emotion, secondary crisis reaction and reputation. Their study showed a strong medium effect, indicating that crisis communication on social media led to positive reactions of participants.

From NCCT's assessment of the importance of social media in crisis communication, this study sought to understand if Vietnamese organizations agree with this assessment, and how it would contribute to the crisis communication in Vietnam.

### **How Vietnamese Organizations and Stakeholders Perceive the Use of Social Media in Crisis Communication**

Similar to traditional media, social media are usually full of information and convenient to use. Information on social media requires personal involvement and personal recommendations to develop and spread through a community. However, unlike traditional media, social media lack the gatekeeper function so the credibility of these channels is often questionable.

Without professional gatekeeping, the credibility of a social media news story may be controversial. In its 2014 report, the Pew Research Center (Richter, 2014) noted that fewer than 10% of U.S. adults regard most social media outlets as an acceptable way to receive news. In contrast, much academic research assessed that social media channels have become additional, somewhat credible, news sources during crises. This view of social media may also be the case in Vietnam, as the Media Department of the Ministry of Information and Communications confirmed that Vietnamese people have been increasingly trusting of social media and choose these channels over traditional media for information (Bao Dien Tu DCSVN, 2012). Accordingly, this present research will examine the perceptions of crisis information on social media in Vietnam to see if social media channels are also useful and reliable in the Vietnamese context.

However, in a research on how Vietnamese organizations and stakeholders perceive the use of social media in crisis communication, Ly-Le (in press) conducted two series of interviews of the PR practitioners and stakeholders in Vietnam to compare their perceptions. The interviews showed that while the PR practitioners believed stakeholders are using social media increasingly and they tend to seek and share crisis information on social media, in fact, the stakeholders thought differently. Although the stakeholder participants think that social media is somewhat convenient, they prefer



traditional media for communication of crisis information. Social media was generally considered to be unreliable and to lack credibility.

Further, another gap in the perceptions assessed in Ly-Le (in press) is the content strategy in crisis response. While the stakeholder participants expected sincere crisis responses and little information avoidance, practitioner participants indicated that Vietnamese organizations typically suppress the information of crises and deny the existence of crises on social media by trying to delete negative comments and remove harmful information.

In this current study, the author aimed to see how Vietnamese PR practitioners react with such contradicting results and identify the influences on the use of social media in crisis communication.

### **Research Design**

This study employs of a set of interviews with Vietnamese PR practitioners. These interviews were conducted with Vietnamese PR practitioners working in-house or in agencies. This research design aims to explore in more depth the perceptions and intentions to use social media in crisis communication strategies among organizations. The target products of these interviews are explanations of the findings in the reviewed literature and expectations of how social media can be used in crisis communication in Vietnam in near future.

The interviews were semi-structured interviews. The interview included a structured part with a planned list of topics to cover and an order of questions to follow and an unstructured part with questions arisen from participants' experience and responses. Each participant was interviewed in a one-to-one setting, with one question at a time. Each was given an option to skip questions or to stop the interview at any time. The questions and themes in this interview are described in table 1 below.

**Table 1. Preliminary themes for Interview**

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Question</i>
Current social media use in crisis communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Have you used social media as a main platform to respond during crises? If yes, is it your preferred crisis communication platform and why? If no, is it listed as one of the platforms to use in your crisis communication plan? Why haven't you actually used it when a crisis happens?</li><li>2. Why have you (or haven't you) included social media to your crisis communication plan?</li></ol>



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	3. Do you think social media is useful in crisis communication? Can you give an example when social media works well during crisis response?
Consideration of stakeholders when deciding to use social media in crisis communication	<p>1. One of the findings in a previous research is that Vietnamese stakeholders use traditional media more to seek and share crisis information. How does this make you plan to use traditional media and social media in crisis communication any differently?</p> <p>2. One of the findings in a previous research is that Vietnamese stakeholders do not trust crisis information shared on social media channels. How do you think about the statement? Does it make you plan your crisis communication any differently?</p> <p>3. One of the findings in a previous research is that in crisis communication, the choice of platform is more important than the message? How do you think about the statement?</p>
Crisis communication content strategy	1. One of the findings in a previous research is that Vietnamese organizations underappreciate the value of sincerity and accommodation content (including corrective action, and mortification or apology). How do you think about this finding? Can you give an example when this statement holds true (or does not hold true) and lessons learned?

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This research based on Jugenheimer, Kelley, Hudson and Bradley's (2014) recommendation of the ideal sample size of five to 12 people for an in-depth interview to determine patterns of ideas and perceptions. Accordingly, the interviews were conducted with 12 Vietnamese practitioners. Among them, six were male and six were female; seven worked in agencies while five worked in-house; and the participants had varying ranges of experience. Four participants had two to five years of PR industry experience, five had six to eight years, and three had nine or more years.

## Results and Discussion

### Vietnamese PR Practitioners Think the Advantages of Social Media are Perceived Relative Advantage and Observability



The interviews asked what the participants think are the advantages of social media as a crisis communication channel. The answers were categorized into one of Rogers's (2003) five interrelated attributes of an innovation that contribute to the rate of adoption: perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability. The participants replied that the advantages of social media are perceived relative advantage (mentioned by four participants) and observability (also mentioned by four participants).

In more details, the participants said that compared to traditional media, social media has transparency and a wider and faster reach, which helps spread a crisis response message instantly and reassure the public.

*Compared to traditional media, social media has other advantages when solving crisis. Firstly, it allows for direct, transparent communication with the [target audience]. The transparency is the top concern when we spread the [crisis] information to customers... [As traditional media is controlled, edited and has its own agenda], when we have to approach a large number of audience, we choose [social media]. Especially, at this period, [social media] is seen as an official place for people to seek for information so [social media] gains a fair amount of trust. – Participant 1N, an in-house practitioner with seven years of experience.*

*We can see that news can spread very quickly on the social media, both good and bad... Facebook acts as a channel to reach millions of people, possibly all Vietnam and if we have enough budgets, it will be even available to reach all kinds of people. – Participant 1U, an agency practitioner with 20 years of experience.*

As shared by four participants, the other advantage of social media is the observability of the results. When using social media for crisis communication, it is quick and easy to see how the stakeholders receive and reply to the organization's response.

*With social media, it's easy to see the results. Social media helps you to check the feedback of the [stakeholders]... In the past, they went to forums or small communities to share; and now social media is a public place, so we can check how they feel about the brand or the company more easily. And from that, I can evaluate whether the campaigns that we are doing are really influential to the stakeholders, [and what we can do to improve our communication]. – Participant 1Q, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.*

Altogether, the advantages of social media in crisis communication include perceived relative advantage and observability, as the participants stated that using social media in crisis communication is better, quicker and more transparent than using traditional media, and the results can be observed more easily.



## **Vietnamese PR Practitioners Think the Disadvantages of Social Media are Complexity and Trialability**

Out of Rogers's (2003) five interrelated attributes of an innovation that contribute to the rate of adoption, two attributes were thought as disadvantages of social media, making organizations hesitant to adopt it. These attributes include complexity (chosen by seven participants), trialability (chosen by four participants).

Seven out of twelve participants responded that it is difficult it would be for a Vietnamese organization to communicate a crisis through social media channels. They thought that social media is uncontrollable and hard to use effectively in crisis communication.

*It is hard to use social media as it has many different [channels] and all those [channels] are public. During a crisis, there can be negative, contradict or flaming conversations on social media. A crisis communicator needs to be trained carefully or equipped with years of experience to deal with this effectively. – Participant 1T, an agency practitioner with eight years of experience.*

*The disadvantage of using the social media to handle the crisis is that we do not have enough resources to stop the spread of information. For example, when you [share information on social media], if there is someone commenting negatively, then the previous commenters will go back and share the issue... Things are muddier during a crisis... Vietnamese people will push themselves in the same direction [of the one who started the crisis], react to that crisis without knowing what the story behind it is. When this issue happens in such a large scale, the organization will be greatly affected. – Participant 1W, an in-house practitioner with seven years of experience.*

Further, four participants mentioned that it is impossible to trial social media in a crisis communication plan.

*I think social media is not something we can try, or should try, [especially during crises]. Social media is not a solution for crisis communication. If we respond [to a crisis] on social media, everyone can comment on it or share it... We can try to [delete] those comments but the [stakeholders] will notice and question why we do so. If we try to use social media, and use it ineffectively, there'd be no return for us. – Participant 1M, an agency practitioner with four years of experience.*

To conclude, Vietnamese PR practitioners think the disadvantages of social media are complexity and trialability, which could be the reason many Vietnamese organizations still prefer traditional media in crisis communication.



## **Vietnamese Organizations Believe That Although Stakeholders May Not Trust Information on Social Media, They Still Use Social Media During Crises**

From the reviewed literature, it was found that Vietnamese stakeholders use traditional media more (than social media) to seek and share crisis information and that Vietnamese stakeholders do not trust crisis information shared on social media channels (Ly-Le, in press). In this study, the researcher asked how the participants think about these findings and if the findings make them plan their crisis communication any differently. The results were mixed.

Six participants were asked if they agree to the finding that Vietnamese stakeholders prefer using traditional media (to social media) to seek and share crisis information. Three participants agreed and three disagreed.

The participants who agreed thought that Vietnamese stakeholders now understand social media well enough to know that it is not a credible platform, thus they seek to traditional media for serious information, as in the case of a crisis.

*People gradually realize that not every information on Facebook is official or trustworthy. There are lots of people and organizations share information on social media to seek likes and shares, and try to get others' trust. Vietnam now has a law prohibiting sharing misleading information on social media, but people still can't trust this platform completely... To find trustworthy information, people tend to look for traditional media and television. – Participant 10, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.*

In contrast, the participants who disagreed mentioned they would still use social media in crisis communication because social media is where the conversations about a crisis take place.

*I still prefer using social media to spread out information in crisis because every speech and discussion is led by social media. Therefore, I will focus every direction to social media. It is effective in linking different communication channels. Also, if I book [an advertorial on traditional media], the news outlet will also put the article' link to their fanpage. There will be readers coming to read and discuss about the issue on social media. I believe where discussions occur, there will be the spread of information. – Participant 1N, an in-house practitioner with seven years of experience.*

Eleven participants were asked about their opinions of the finding that Vietnamese stakeholders do not trust crisis information on social media. Three people agreed, three people disagreed, and five people said it would depend on the crisis.

The ones who agreed thought that social media could be the platform for stakeholders to get ahold of crisis information or a crisis response, but they always check





an additional source such as friends or traditional media to verify the information.

*I think the finding is true. When [the stakeholders] read the information on the crisis, they just read to know about it, not to believe it. To verify, they go to other tools: on the Internet, mainstream newspapers or through acquaintances, but they do not verify through social media.* – Participant 1T, an agency practitioner with eight years of experience.

Additionally, one participant shared that the reason stakeholders do not trust information shared by organizations on social media may be the commercialized and promotional content on organizations' fanpages.

*Almost all the information on brands' fanpages in Vietnam is commercialized. We do not have any trustworthy portal for customers to seek for information. For example, a social influencer can be paid to give good review for a product... Therefore, any information, including crisis information, that comes from those fanpages will not gain the trust from the publics. Using social media to solve crisis is still not effective in Vietnam so the people in communication industry always have other traditional communication channels to back up, especially, newspaper or TV to send out positive responses.* – Participant 1O, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.

On the other hand, the participants who disagreed to the finding mentioned that social media always has some influence on the audience and can shape the audience's perception to an extent.

*Generally, the information flow on the social media has a certain influence on the [stakeholders]. When they seek information about certain crisis, if they are superficial, they will tend to believe the negative information. However, objective [stakeholders] will look at both negative and positive sides of a crisis; they will read carefully to see if that information is credible enough and they will give final decision.* – Participant 1S, an in-house practitioner with ten years of experience.

Five other participants said that stakeholders may or may not trust crisis information on social media, depending on the crisis. However, two out of these five people highlighted that although a stakeholder do not trust crisis information on social media, he or she will share it.

*I think [whether the stakeholders trust crisis information on social media] depends on the situation. They may not believe the information, but they still share with others on social media. That information is accidentally spread even further. And the person who receives the information from those on Facebook, will go online to learn more and spread the information even further. Or they do not know how that issue is, but they still gossip about it.* – Participant 1P, an



agency practitioner with eight years of experience.

In conclusion, the participants established while stakeholders may not trust crisis information shared on social media, but it is still a platform to look out for, as stakeholders will share and spread crisis information further.

### **Vietnamese PR Practitioners Do Not Think that the Choice of Communication Platform Matters More than the Response Message**

In the reviewed literature, NCCT compares the influences of the communication medium and message on organizational reputation during crises and argues that in crisis communication, the choice of medium matters more than the message (Schultz et al., 2011). This survey asked the participants how they think of this finding.

Among the seven participants asked, only one thought that the platform choice matters more than the message, and social media can be used to temporarily alleviate the crisis flame before an official statement can be issued.

*For me, the selection of communication channels is more important than the crisis response message... Before building up any messages for responding, we need to think and plan carefully which communication channels are suitable and effective during [a crisis time]. For example, Facebook can be used to quickly respond by providing simple statement such as "We are assessing the customers' complaints and feedbacks. We will have official documents and responses for this type of concerns soon". We do not tell the publics which is right and which is wrong at this stage. We just show the publics that we are listening and caring for the customers and we will handle the problem and release the official statement.* – Participant 10, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.

On the other hand, six participants disagreed. They firmly believe that message is the core of crisis communication, and platform is only a supporting tool.

*I think building the message to respond in a crisis is always the most important. It takes a lot of time and resources to think about what message to be transmitted. If you focus on your channel and your message is wrong, the plan will fail. Both are important, but the message is much more important.* – Participant 1S, an in-house practitioner with ten years of experience.

To conclude, most Vietnamese PR practitioners interviewed do not think that the choice of communication platform matters more than the response message. Instead, a carefully crafted crisis response is valued more in crisis communication.

### **Most Vietnamese Organizations Do Not Want to Deliver a Sincere Crisis Response**

In response to Ly-Le's (in press) finding that Vietnamese organizations underappreciate the value of sincerity and accommodation content (including corrective action, and mortification or a apology), the researcher asked the participants if they agree



with this finding and if their organizations would consider a sincere crisis response. Ten out of ten participants who were asked this question agreed that Vietnamese organizations want to avoid any responsibility during a crisis, therefore accommodation content is their least preferred crisis response strategy. Among these participants, six people named some organizations that had good crisis response practice by accepting responsibility and seeking corrective actions. However, all the examples are foreign companies working in Vietnam (i.e. Samsung, Toyota, Yamaha), no Vietnamese-born companies were mentioned.

*[Some companies] apologize with practical actions... If a company apologizes and act sincerely, no one would go against it anymore.* – Participant 1Q, an agency practitioner with five years of experience.

Participant 1M, an agency practitioner with four years of experience explained that the nature of traditional media in Vietnam makes organizations think they do not have to produce a sincere apology.

*The corrective actions, mortification and apology are only for showing to the publics... [Traditional media] is easily influenced and affected by money... [Traditional media] may cover a crisis for a short period of time then turn to another news, or it can be paid to twist the crisis [in a way that benefits the organization.] In foreign countries, journalists wait for the news and come straight to the scene to get information, but in Vietnam, the journalists are paid to get the news or come to get the news and write in other angles. Hence, Vietnamese publics are always skeptical about the information. In this age [of social media emergence], organizations still have this [responsibility avoidance] habit because they believe they can cover up a crisis.*

To conclude, all participants agreed that most Vietnamese organizations do not want to deliver a sincere crisis response, with a few exceptions of foreign organizations operating in Vietnam. One of the reason of this crisis response preference is the unique nature of Vietnamese media.

## **Conclusion**

This study provided useful insight to Rogers's (2003) DOI as it can be applied to crisis communication field today. The results are consistent with the DOI prediction that since social media is perceived to have relative advantages, observability and the social system support, it is likely to be adopted in crisis communication. However, the results also showed that two DOI attributes, complexity and trialability, were thought as disadvantages instead of advantages, making organizations hesitant to adopt social media in crisis communication. As DOI connotes that innovations should be eventually diffused and adopted, rather than be re-invented or rejected, this finding suggests that



DOI and its attributes could also be used to examine if an innovation should be revised before adoption, or be rejected.

On the other hand, this study also observed a rejection of NCCT assumptions that the choice of platform matters more than the message (Schultz et al., 2011). The participants strongly insisted that message is the core of crisis communication, not the platform. Thus, this study questioned the validity of NCCT about the sole influence of the medium on organizational reputation.

An inconsistency in previous literature is that while Vietnamese organizations think their stakeholders seek, share and trust crisis information on social media, Vietnamese stakeholders actually do not. The participants in this study were asked how they think about these findings. There were an equal number of participants who agreed or disagreed to each finding. A notable from this study is that three participants highlighted whether social media is trustworthy or not, crisis information on social media is still shared and spread further, and social media still has an impact on the audience's perception to an extent.

Another suggestion from previous literature is that there is a need for a review of crisis communication strategy to integrate honest and sincere responses during a crisis. In this study, all participants asked agreed that it is important to dialogue with stakeholders in a crisis. However, all of them also pointed out that Vietnamese organizations do not want to deliver a sincere crisis response, and some organizations may not want to engage in a dialogue with stakeholders at all. The provided explanations include organizations wanting to avoid responsibility and overexposure to the public, and afraid to be quoted on the media, thus escalating the crisis in an unwanted way.

The findings of this study shed light to an upcoming PR trend, using social media in crisis communication. Since technologies have been changing rapidly, it is necessary for organizations to fully grasp how to evaluate new technologies, such as social media, to keep pace with immediate trends and stakeholders' needs.

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