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SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN VIETNAM – A STAKEHOLDER'S VIEWPOINT

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Abstract

With the growing importance of social media for the Vietnamese people, in the past five years, Vietnam has seen many company or brand crises that started on social media, and some organizations have started to use social media for crisis response. However, little research has explored the use of social media in PR or in crisis communication in a Vietnamese setting, and even fewer studies were dedicated to exploring the stakeholders' viewpoint. Therefore, this research examines the use of social media for crisis communication in Vietnamese organizations from a stakeholder's viewpoint. By using the networked crisis communication theory (NCCT) and through a survey with 370 people in Vietnam, this research aims to understand how Vietnamese stakeholders perceive the organizations' effort of using social media in crisis response and what they think the organizations should have done with social media during crises.

Key words: social media, stakeholder communication, crisis communication, crisis response, Vietnam, NCCT

Introduction

In Vietnam, social media has become one of the most popular communication platforms. It is noteworthy that the social media penetration rate in the country is more than 43 percent with more than 40 million social media active users. In the past five years, Vietnam has witnessed many organizational or brand crises that started on social media platforms. In such instances, through extensive online sharing of a single stakeholder post about an organizational issue, social media users attracted enough attention to the issue to turn it into a full crisis.

To date, little research has explored this topic on the use of social media in public relations (PR) or crisis communication in a Vietnamese setting. To address this gap, this study aims to explore how Vietnamese stakeholders perceive the organizations' effort of using social media in crisis response and what they think the organizations should have done with social media during crises. The results of this study are expected to contribute to Vietnamese current PR practice, to help Vietnamese PR practitioners understand their stakeholders better, and to understand whether social media should be used in crisis responses.

Literature Review

Current Use of Social Media in Crisis Communication

The business environment is increasingly competitive. Organizations thus should constantly communicate to reinforce trust and reputation among stakeholders. Several researchers have found that organizations are showing more effort to actively engage in dialogue with their stakeholders during crises now than in the past (Diers & Donohue, 2013; Kerkhof, Beugels, Utz, & Beukeboom, 2011). In the past, from the organization's side, traditional PR tactics, such as traditional press releases and press conferences, were the most prevalent choices for crisis management; however, research has shown that organizations are now adopting social media and two-way communication. In this digital age, social media channels have dramatically changed the way people seek and share information, and have changed stakeholder communication practice in many ways. These changes also apply to Southeast Asian and Vietnamese PR practice. According to Domm (2015), in the ASEAN region, local technology use and communication practice is a major factor in decision making about organizational PR strategies and tactics. When mentioning communication technology, Domm observed that Vietnamese PR practitioners think of social media first and consider these channels as a must-use in PR practice.

Social media, unlike traditional media, can bypass the journalistic gatekeeping process, and thus has the unique capability to disseminate information quickly and directly to individual audience members. This characteristic matches Coombs's (2014) notion of effective crisis communication, which is providing stakeholders with accurate, timely, consistent and relevant information (Coombs, 2014). Coombs further noted that if provided frequent information about a crisis, stakeholders can feel assured and less likely to have impractical expectations.

Besides speed, social media is also praised for its interactivity and participatory nature. Since social media content is collectively sought and created, many online news readers now consider it more relevant, interesting and credible than traditional media (Siah, Bansal, & Pang, 2010; Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2007). This content is now used as an additional news source. Further, social media channels have not only begun contributing to an organization's crisis communication effort, but also to stakeholders' crisis information-seeking activities.

According to Siah et al. (2010), people have trusted and adapted to social media so well that when a hint of crisis sparks on social media, it can easily gain momentum and perpetuate a large audience in very little time. Several researchers (e.g. Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012, 2012; Procopio & Procopio, 2007) have found that during crises, stakeholders perceive social media channels to be news sources as credible as traditional mass media because social media provide up-to-date, unfiltered information and peer-support to

crisis victims. Additionally, when a crisis is over, the information, discussions and comments on a crisis and an organization still linger online, even after the traditional media stop reporting about it. Hence, social media are not only channels that can be used for responding during crises, but are also considered to be crucial elements in escalating and following up after crises (Siah et al., 2010). Social media have empowered stakeholders in both engaging in a crisis and replying to an organization's crisis communication processes.

While much research assessed that more and more companies have chosen to use social media channels to respond instantaneously and communicate interactively to public criticism during crises, Jaques (2014) noticed that organizations have not utilized these channels to their full function. Some recommendations for effective use of social media in crisis communication include those of Coombs and Holladay and Persuit. Coombs and Holladay (2012) expressed that to best utilize this ease of reach characteristic, crisis communication should be on the same channels on which a crisis can potentially start or has started. The researchers proposed three social media rules of crisis communication, which are further explained by Persuit (2013). The first rule is to be where the action is, suggesting a response to a social media crisis should occur through the social medium that was used to start the crisis. Second, organizations should be there before the crisis, maintaining a social media presence to establish their own voice before a crisis happens. The last rule is to be redundant and sprawl. Organizations should utilize the amplification (sharing) effect of social media and its ability to transfer information from one platform to another, using both social and traditional media to communicate the message.

The Networked Crisis Communication Theory

This research looks at this adoption from the Vietnamese stakeholders' point of view. To define, the stakeholders are an organizations' customers, crisis victims or their associates, as well as general audiences who care about the crisis and its outcome. Using the lens of the networked crisis communication theory (NCCT) proposed by Schultz, Utz and Göritz (2011) and extended by Schultz, Utz and Glocka (2012), this study examines stakeholders' expectations of an organization's social media usage in the crisis information seeking and sharing process. The theory challenges the older sole focus on the message during crisis communication by showing the effects of media type on crisis communication and how the public responds to the same messages distributed on different media channels.

In developing NCCT, Schultz and colleagues (2011) conducted a study with 1,937 participants on their perceptions and reactions to crisis communication via social media. The participants were recruited via an online panel and were from a wide range of ages, education levels and types of employment. Most of them were daily internet users. In

the study, the participants were shown different crisis communication scenarios and presented one of the three reactions (apology, sympathy, information) via one of three media types, which were newspaper, blog and Twitter. The results showed that in crisis communication, different media, which are the channels through which an organization chooses to communicate with its stakeholders, have different effects on how stakeholders respond to the same crisis information message (Schultz et al., 2011). The theory compared the effects of medium to those of the communication message with three dependent aspects: reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reactions. Compared to traditional media, Schultz et al. (2011) found that crisis communication on social media leads to higher post-crisis reputation and less intense crisis reactions.

Reputation is one of the most important assets of an organization, influencing the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders (Podnar, 2015), especially in times of crisis. The main purpose of crisis communication is to protect the reputation of an involved organization during and after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996), and the reputation in turn impacts the degree of crisis responsibility and the crisis communication efforts (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Schultz et al., 2011). As a result, reputation is the first and foremost condition to measure crisis communication effectiveness.

Comparing the influences of the communication medium and message on organizational reputation during crises, NCCT argues that in crisis communication, the choice of medium matters more than the message (Schultz et al., 2011). As social media allows organizations to communicate in real-time, the stakeholders are not left worried and stressed due to lack of information. Compared to communication via traditional media, crisis communication through social media channels shows that an organization commits more to its stakeholders, wants to inform them more quickly and directly, and is willing to engage in dialogue with them, thus showing the organization to be more sincere and caring (Schultz et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2012). Another advantage of social media is that organizations can communicate directly with their stakeholders, skipping the step of journalistic gatekeeping to deliver personalized messages (Schultz et al., 2012). Although traditional media channels might be more mainstream and credible, information delivered on social media projects a perceived human voice and communicates an organization's commitment better (Schultz et al., 2011). Social media thus offers the possibility of building trust and satisfaction among stakeholders better than its traditional counterparts. Additionally, Schultz and colleagues (2011) noted that positive post-crisis reputation is highest when multiple social media channels are used together. For example, in their study, Twitter and blogs were both employed. Schultz and colleagues argued that since the stakeholders were exposed to the message more

frequently, they could process it more thoroughly. Altogether, NCCT demonstrates that crisis communication on social media can lead to a higher reputation of an organization than crisis communication via traditional media (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013).

The second aspect considered in NCCT is secondary crisis communication, which is the stakeholders' willingness to tell their friends about a crisis, share information about it and leave comments (Schultz et al., 2011). According to NCCT, the choice of media strongly influences secondary crisis communication. Contrary to the common belief that social media allows easy information sharing with only a mouse click, secondary crisis communication occurs more in the traditional media condition of NCCT studies (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al., 2013). Stakeholders tend to talk mainly about the information they received through traditional media. Moreover, even though the channels they use to pass information along may be social media (i.e. retweet a piece of news or hit "share" to an article), people are more likely to share with their acquaintances a traditional media article that is posted online than a post written purely for social media (Schultz et al., 2011). Utz and colleagues (2013) explained that this tendency is because of the higher credibility of traditional media; stakeholders thus depend more on traditional media for crisis news. On the other hand, the final factor of secondary crisis communication, leaving comments, is more likely to happen on social media (Schultz et al., 2012), as social media is not meant to create news, but is rather a platform for people to read news and share opinions.

The remaining aspect examined in NCCT is secondary crisis reactions, which are the acts of judging a crisis communication effort, talking badly about an organization, or boycotting an organization. The results from Schultz and colleagues' (2011) study showed that participants in the social media condition made fewer secondary crisis reactions than those in the traditional media condition. As mentioned previously in secondary crisis communication, people who receive crisis information from traditional media tend to share or speak about it more often. Moreover, these people are also more likely to talk badly or boycott an organization, compared to those who read information on social media channels (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al., 2013). This result indicates that sharing information and acting on that information are two different things to consider (Schultz et al., 2011). Utz et al. (2013) explained that the conversational and transparent characteristics of social media fulfill stakeholders' demand for timely and accurate information; therefore, stakeholders will not engage in unfavorable behaviors toward an organization. NCCT concludes that crisis communication through social media upholds an organization's reputation and reduces negative secondary crisis reactions (Schultz et al., 2011). Therefore, crisis managers should pay more attention to the effects produced by the chosen medium.

According to Liu and Fraustino (2004), a limitation of NCCT is that it only passively reports the impact of social media use. The theory lacks suggestions or observations about how organizations could use social media to strengthen crisis communication and mitigate negative outcomes. Further, although NCCT is an original model, switching focus from content to medium, it has been criticized for undervaluing crisis communication content.

This study applies NCCT to explore the use of social media in crisis communication from the stakeholders' viewpoint. The study seeks to understand whether Vietnamese stakeholders prefer organizations to utilize social media in their crisis response efforts, if social media has an influence on the stakeholders' perception of the crisis information and their reactions to the organizations' responses, and if there is any other influence on stakeholders' perception besides use of social media platforms.

Research Design

The survey examined two dimensions, which were stakeholders' current preferred communication channel during crises and stakeholders' expectations of an organization's social media usage in crisis communication. Accordingly, the survey contains the following measures: preference of timeliness and responsiveness in organizations' crisis response, preferred communication channel in organizations' crisis response, perception of organizations' crisis response on social media and reactions to organizations' crisis response on social media. The first section of the survey asks for respondents' demographic information to confirm their qualification to the survey. Demographic questions include the respondent's age and knowledge about social media, social issues and the business landscape in Vietnam. The second section consists of questions on stakeholder's preference and evaluation of an organization's social media usage in crisis communication. Additionally, respondents can freely express their expectations of an organization's crisis communication in Vietnam in the final open-ended section. The measuring items were randomly mixed together. The items employed in the survey for group 2's participants are described in table 1.

Table 1. *Measures for Survey*

Role	*Item*
Preference of timeliness and responsiveness in organizations' crisis response	1. You believe traditional media is a credible channel for organization to share crisis information. 2. You believe traditional media is a quick channel for organizations to share crisis information. 3. You believe traditional media is a convenient channel for

	organizations to share crisis information. 4. You believe social media is a credible channel for organization to share crisis information. 5. You believe social media is a quick channel for organizations to share crisis information. 6. You believe social media is a convenient channel for organizations to share crisis information.
Preferred communication channel in organizations' crisis response	1. During crises, you expect the organization to share information on traditional media. 2. During crises, you expect the organization to share information on social media. 3. If a crisis starts on social media, you expect the involved organization to respond on the same social media channel.
Dimension of stakeholders' expectations of an organization's social media usage in crisis communication (from NCCT)	
Role	*Item*
Perception of organizations' crisis response on social media	1. If an organization responds quickly and directly through social media, you'd think the organization is sincere. 2. If an organization responds quickly and directly through social media, you'd think the organization is caring about its stakeholders. 3. If an organization responds quickly and directly through social media, you'd think the organization is willing to have a dialogue with the stakeholders.
Reactions to organizations' crisis response on social media	1. If an organization responds quickly and directly through social media, you would be more likely to stop sharing bad news or talking badly about the organization. 2. If an organization responds quickly and directly through social media, you would be more likely to support the organization after the crisis.

The survey was administered to the Vietnamese stakeholder group. It employed a quantitative approach to quantify the respondents' opinions on the research topics. Using a three-point Likert scale ("always," "occasionally," and "never") and a five-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree," "disagree," neither disagree nor agree," "agree," and "strongly agree"), the survey was designed to capture the various degrees of agreement with the provided statements. The survey was distributed online. The main purpose of the surveys was not to increase the generalizability of the results but to test the

variables with a large sample, to confirm the findings from the in-depth interviews with statistical results.

The target participants for this survey are members of the general public who care about social issues and corporate ethics. Since this target group is the majority of the Vietnamese internet population, which is 47.3 million people (Kemp, 2016), the researcher based the sample size on the required size for large populations at 5% confidence interval, which is 384 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The survey for this group used snowball sampling technique to get as close as possible to that number.

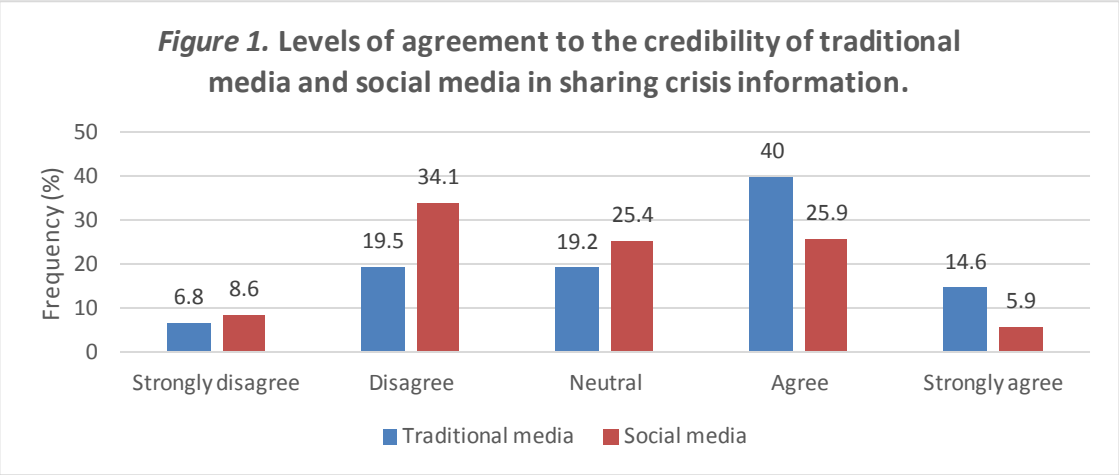
After distribution, respondents in this survey were 370 individuals who have lived and worked in Vietnam in the last two years. The ages ranged from 18 to 63 (mean: 29, standard deviation: 9.2). The respondents were 64.3% female and 35.7% male. The paired Wilcoxon test was used to test for differences in overall scoring between the perceptions of using traditional media and social media in crisis communication.

Results and Discussion

Vietnamese Stakeholders Do Not Trust or Appreciate Crisis Information Shared on Social Media Channels, But Think Social Media is Fast and Convenient

The first set of questions aimed to explore if Vietnamese stakeholders trust and appreciate crisis information shared on social media channels. By trust and appreciation, the researcher means the credibility, speed (in relaying crisis information) and convenience of social media, and how it compares with traditional media. Accordingly, the survey respondents were then asked for their perception of social media and traditional media as credible channels, quick channels and convenient channels to share crisis information.

Figure 1 presents the answers to the questions whether respondents "believe traditional media is a credible channel for organizations to share crisis information" and whether they "believe social media is a credible channel for organization to share crisis information." 54.6% of the respondents at least agreed that traditional media is a credible channel for communicating crises, while only 31.8% agreed that social media is credible. Moreover, the respondents' perception on social media's credibility was not neutral, as 42.7% thought it is not credible. To conclude, the respondents significantly regard traditional media as a more credible channel for sharing crisis information than social media ($p < 0.001$).



In the next set of questions, respondents were asked if they "believe traditional media is a quick channel for organizations to share crisis information" and if they "believe social media is a quick channel for organizations to share crisis information." Figure 2 indicates the overall perception of the respondents to the speed of traditional media and social media in crisis communication. 38.2% of the respondents at least agreed that traditional media is a quick channel for crisis communication, and 78.1% agreed that social media is a quick channel. Social media is significantly regarded as a quicker channel for crisis information sharing than traditional media ($p < 0.001$).

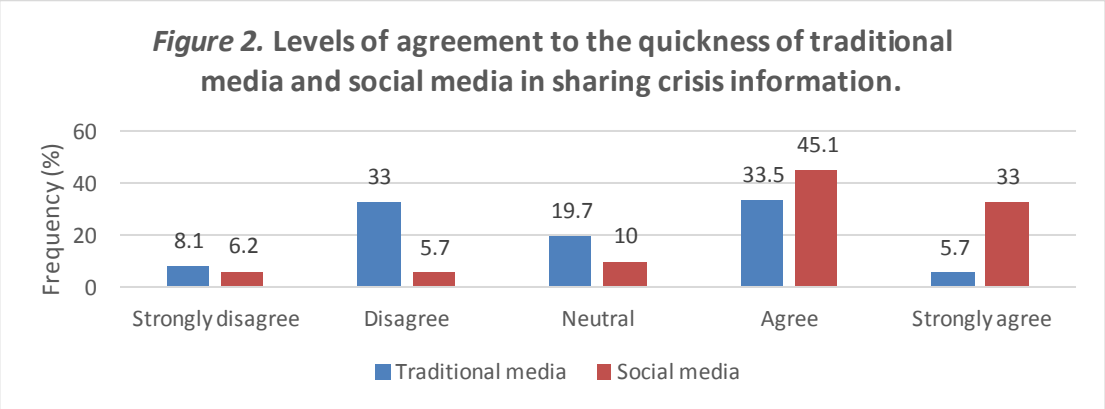
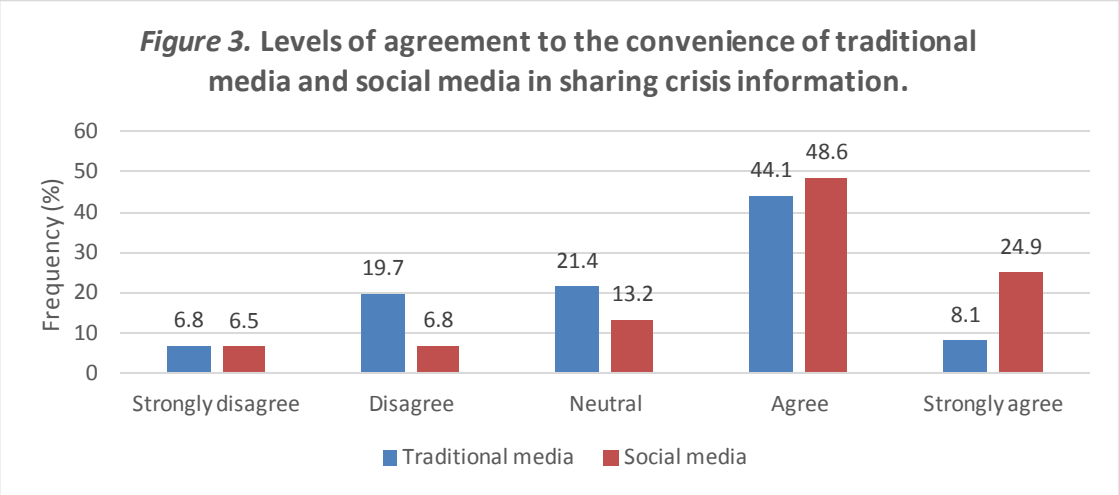


Figure 3 shows the answers to the questions of whether respondents "believe traditional media is a convenient channel for organizations to share crisis information" and if they "believe social media is a convenient channel for organizations to share crisis information." Comparing the overall agreement of all respondents to the convenience of the communication platforms, the results show that 52.2% of the respondents at least agreed that traditional media is a convenient channel for crisis communication, while 73.5% agreed that social media is a convenient channel. The difference was statistically significant, $p < 0.001$. Social media was considered a more convenient channel for crisis information sharing than traditional media.

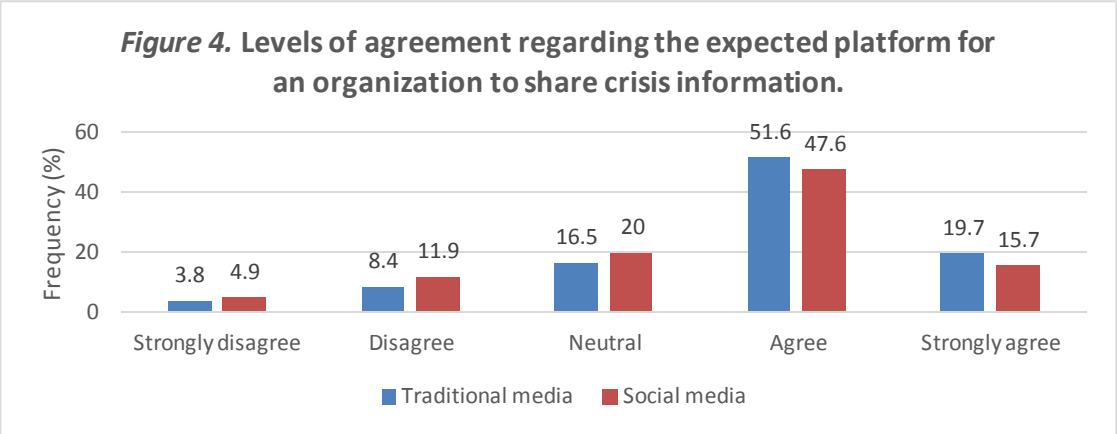


Conclusively, the survey showed that the respondents appreciate social media for its fast speed and convenience, but they do not consider it a credible or reliable news source.

During Crises, Vietnamese Stakeholders Expect Organizations to Respond On the Same Social Media Channels On Which the Crisis Started

The survey asked which platform respondents prefer for crisis communication: "During crises, you expect organizations to share information on traditional media" and "During crises, you expect organizations to share information on social media." The respondents were asked to state their levels of agreement that they expect an organization to response on each communication platform. The assessment was on a scale of 1-5 (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree) as described below.

Figure 4 presents the overall agreement of respondents about their expected platform for an organization to share crisis information. 71.3% of the respondents at least agreed that during crises, they expect an organization to share information on traditional media, and 63.3% agreed that they expect information on social media. The difference was statistically significant, p = 0.001. The respondents indicated that they more frequently expect an organization to share crisis communication on traditional media than social media.



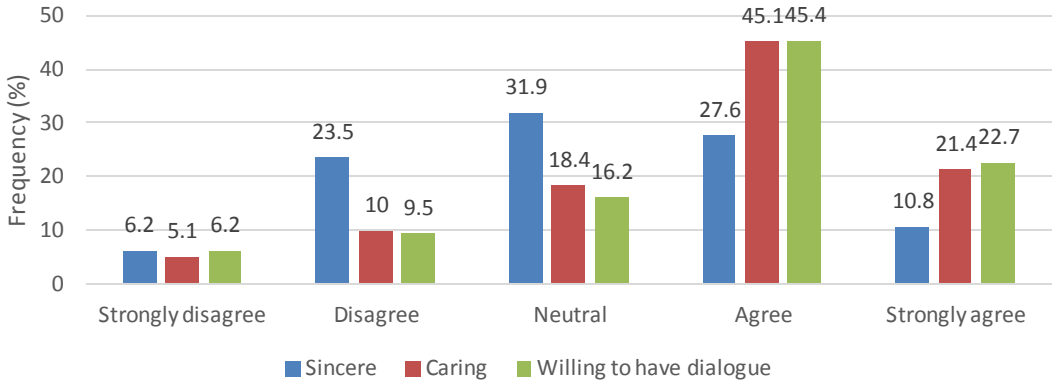
The survey concluded that stakeholders expect an organization to share crisis information on traditional media. However, if a crisis started on social media, they would expect an organization to respond on the same social media channel.

In Vietnam, Crisis Response On Social Media Leads to Better Evaluation and Perception of an Organization

The respondents were then asked how they would perceive an organization's effort if it responded to a crisis on social media. Suggested perceptions were that the organization would be sincere, caring, and willing to have a dialogue, and the answers are presented in figure 53. On a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), the respondents expressed the agreement to the choices of perception.

Assessing the overall results, respondents were generally positive toward organizations that used social media for crisis response. 66.5% of the respondents at least agreed that they would perceive the organization caring and 68.1% at least agreed that they would perceive the organization as willing to have a dialogue. On the other hand, the "being sincere" perception did not receive much agreement. Only 37.4% of the respondents at least agreed that they would perceive the organization as sincere. Nonetheless, the results overall indicated that respondents favored organizations using social media and welcomed organizations' efforts to solve issues. Details on each perception are presented in the following figure.

Figure 5. **Levels of agreement across age groups that stakeholders would perceive an organization to be sincere, caring, or willing to have a dialogue if it used social media for crisis response.**



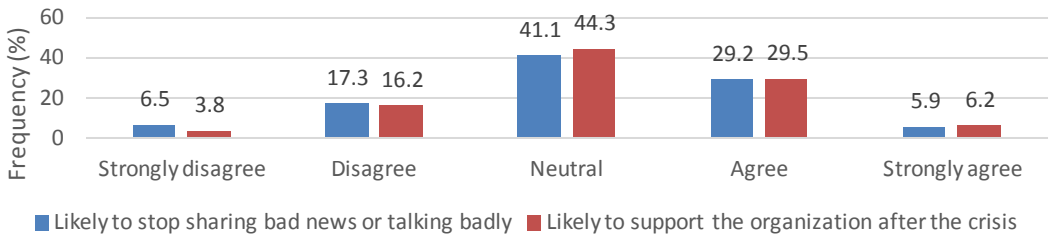
The survey showed that Vietnamese stakeholders hold better evaluation and perception towards organizations that use social media for crisis response. Most respondents expressed that organizations responding on social media are caring and willing to talk with stakeholders.

In Vietnam, Crisis Response On Social Media Does Not Lead to Fewer Secondary Crisis Reactions than Crisis Response On Traditional Media or No Crisis Response

In the next questions, respondents were asked how they would react to organizations that use social media for crisis response. The assessment is on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Figure 6 presents overall reactions to an organization that uses social media for crisis response. For the “stop sharing bad news or talking badly” dimension, only 35.1% of the respondents at least agreed, while 41.1% were neutral and 23.8% at least disagreed. Similarly, for the “support the organization after the crisis” dimension, only 35.7% of the respondents at least agreed, while 44.3% were neutral to the statement, and 19.0% at least disagreed. Details of the answers to each reaction are presented in the following figure.

Figure 6. **Levels of agreement regarding stakeholder secondary crisis reactions if an organization used social media for crisis response.**



The survey showed that most respondents would not expect stakeholders to provide any supportive reactions towards organizations that use social media for crisis communication. Compared to organizations that respond on traditional media or provide no response, they also would not expect a reduction in secondary crisis reactions.

Conclusion

This study concluded that Vietnamese stakeholders do not trust crisis information shared on social media channels, but they appreciate social media for its fast speed and convenience in sharing crisis information. To review, social media allows stakeholders to reach one another easily, quickly and conveniently (Coombs, 2014), thus making it an ideal channel for stakeholders to communicate during crises. In contrast, as mentioned above, the level of trust in social media use in crisis communication is a debatable topic. However, social media is now used more as an additional crisis news source and stakeholders have increasingly use this platform during crises (Siah et al., 2010; Sutton et al., 2007). The result of this study is thus expectable from the reviewed literature.

This study further confirmed that during crises, Vietnamese stakeholders expect organizations to respond on the same social media channels on which the crisis started. This result is consistent with Coombs and Holladay's (2012) and Persuit's (2013) recommendation, stating that a response to a social media crisis should occur through the same medium that was used to start a crisis.

This study also confirmed that In Vietnam, crisis response on social media leads to better evaluation and perception of an organization. This result agrees with previous studies on crisis communication via social media (e.g. Schultz et al., 2011; 2012), which stated that crisis responses on social media can persuade stakeholders to be in favor of an organization and strengthen organizational reputation among stakeholders.

Lastly, the current study concludes that Vietnamese stakeholders do have any supportive reactions to the organizations using social media for crisis communication,

and social media does not lead to fewer secondary crisis reactions than crisis response on traditional media or no crisis response. This finding is inconsistent with Schultz and colleagues' (2011) assessment, which stated that using social media for crisis communication can lead to more support and fewer secondary reactions from stakeholders. A possible explanation to this is that stakeholders do not consider only the communication platform in crisis response but also the message content. This indicates that the choice of medium is not the only factor that matters in crisis communication as Schultz et al. claimed.

In conclusion, although Vietnamese stakeholders use social media to communicate and find information during crises, this platform is not as highly regarded by stakeholders as organizations expect. Stakeholders appreciate social media for its quickness and convenience, and organizations responding on this platform can gather more positive evaluation. However, stakeholders think information on social media is not trustworthy and organizations responding on this platform do not automatically receive more supportive reactions or fewer secondary crisis reactions.

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