

# GAPS IN PERCEPTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN VIETNAMESE ORGANIZATIONS AND STAKEHOLDERS

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the emergence of social media in many aspects of Vietnamese lives, including marketing and promotional activities, Vietnamese organizations have used little social media in their crisis communication efforts. The organizations are hesitant to adopt social media in crisis communication and prefer to use traditional media because of its controllability and professionalism. However, with the increasing number of organizational crises that started on social media in the past years, it is arguably that Vietnamese stakeholders use social media as one of their main communication channels during crises. Should the organizations use social media in response? Through a series of interviews to PR practitioners and stakeholders in Vietnam, this research aims to find out the similarities and gaps in the perception of social media use for crisis communication between these two groups, and to guide a crisis communication practice that is appreciated by stakeholders.

Keywords: social media, crisis communication, Vietnam, organization communication, stakeholder communication

## ABSTRAK

*Meskipun munculnya media sosial dalam banyak aspek kehidupan Vietnam, termasuk kegiatan pemasaran dan promosi, organisasi Vietnam telah menggunakan sedikit media sosial dalam upaya komunikasi krisis mereka. Organisasi ragu-ragu untuk mengadopsi media sosial dalam komunikasi krisis dan lebih suka menggunakan media tradisional karena pengendalian dan profesionalisme. Namun, dengan meningkatnya jumlah krisis organisasi yang dimulai di media sosial dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, dapat dibayangkan bahwa pemangku kepentingan Vietnam menggunakan media sosial sebagai salah satu saluran komunikasi utama mereka selama krisis. Haruskah organisasi menggunakan media sosial sebagai jawaban? Melalui serangkaian wawancara kepada praktisi PR dan pemangku kepentingan di Vietnam, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui persamaan dan kesenjangan dalam persepsi penggunaan media sosial untuk komunikasi krisis antara kedua kelompok ini, dan untuk memandu praktik komunikasi krisis yang dihargai oleh para pemangku kepentingan. .*

*Kata kunci: media sosial, komunikasi krisis, Vietnam, komunikasi organisasi, komunikasi pemangku kepentingan*

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## 1. Introduction

Vietnam is one of the many countries where the level of public trust and confidence in media is low. In their research on the communication overview in Vietnam, Parker, Nguyen and Brennan (2012) assessed that Vietnamese journalists are underpaid, so they expect a number of financial incentives offered by organizations in exchange for positive coverage. On an international level, Vietnam's media credibility is not appreciated either. Kruckeberg and Tsetsura (2003), in their exhaustive research on worldwide media transparency, ranked Vietnam third to last (among 66 countries considered) on media transparency level with no perception of comprehensive corruption laws and no free press.

Internet and social media penetration in Vietnam is growing strongly. According to the 2015 report by "We are Social," a London-based social media agency, which has been conducting annual reports on global digital, social media and mobile marketing trends, Vietnam is among those countries with the fastest digital growth (Kemp, 2015). Social media has become an important integration to the internet life of Vietnamese people. Vietnamese PR practitioners have tapped into this platform to communicate with their stakeholders (Van, 2013). Acknowledging the emergence of social media and its impact on traditional media practice, the Vietnam Journalist Association held a symposium to discuss the interaction between old and new media. During the symposium, it was highlighted that social media has challenged traditional media workers as it shifts the news making and sharing processes to the public (Trung, 2015).

In the many crises that happened in the country over the years, social media has not been a focus or a prioritized

communication channel, as seen in the example to be discussed below. After a quick review of crisis communication efforts in Vietnam through published media articles on previous crises from 2010-2015, the author realized that social media has been underutilized by organizations as a channel to reach out to their stakeholders. This present research thus aims to find out the similarities and gaps in the perception of social media use for crisis communication between these two groups, and to guide a crisis communication practice that is appreciated by stakeholders.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Stakeholders Use Social Media in All Three Stages of a Crisis

According to Ruehl and Ingenhoff (2015), stakeholders find social media an ideal channel for communicating with organizations. Stakeholders now have the opportunity to put their evaluations, critiques, questions or concerns about a brand, service or company online, in front of a bigger audience than ever before. Social media can amplify stakeholders' voices, making them more detectable and approachable by many publics, and essentially, by any involved organizations (Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015).

During precrisis, the interactive and instantaneous characteristics of social media allow it to be a platform for stakeholders to raise their voices, approach organizations with compliments, critiques or questions about products, services or business actions (Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015). Therefore, individuals seek social media during crisis times to voice their concerns, ask questions, convey thoughts and contribute to the information-sharing process.

During the crisis stage, according to Austin, Liu and Jin (2012), the main reason stakeholders use social media in crisis times is to seek information from

insiders and from their friends and families. Much research indicates that individuals turn to social media because it presents crisis information instantly, in an unfiltered and comprehensive form (Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Taylor & Kent, 2007). During crisis times, people try to find more and more information, and to find it quickly (Austin et al., 2012); information found on social media channels can meet this very need. While the credibility of social media news is controversial, some research assert that users believe social media information is more up-to-date, unique and reliable than traditional media coverage (Austin et al., 2012; Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Sutton et al., 2007).

On the postcrisis stage, when traditional media has lost interest in an issue, stakeholders again depend on social media for follow-up information. According to Coombs (2014), when a crisis has ended, stakeholders still have an opportunity to give feedback on the crisis management efforts. Since the online information remains, the stakeholders can sustain the conversations on social media channels as long as there is further interest in the story.

## **2.2 A Crisis Response Should be Accommodative, Consistent and Open**

According to Stephens, Malone and Bailey (2005), the main goals of crisis communication are minimizing damage, influencing perceptions and maintaining organizational reputation. Among studies on message strategies in crisis communication, Benoit's (1997) approach for organizations' crisis communication is one of the more frequently cited models. Benoit proposed five crisis communication message options for repairing the image of an individual or an organization: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness,

corrective action and mortification or apology. In Benoit's model, denial is denying the existence of a crisis, followed by an aggressive advance toward the less powerful people who have reported otherwise. Evasion of responsibility is attempting to weaken an organization's responsibility by making excuses or justification. Reduction of offensiveness is trying to gain public approval and reduce negative feelings. Corrective action is claiming that an organization will actively resolve the problems and make changes. Finally, mortification is admitting responsibility and trying to win forgiveness and acceptance from stakeholders.

Many academic studies have since adopted Benoit's framework. Coombs (1998) concluded that defensive strategies (such as denial, evasion of responsibility and reduction of offensiveness) are more appropriate in external crises, while accommodative strategies (corrective action and mortification or apology) are more appropriate in internal crises. Furthermore, Coombs and Holladay (2008) asserted that corrective actions, when combined with expressions of remorse, sympathy or regret, are the most effective strategy of all for both crisis victims and the general audience. In general, strategies that reflect compassion are the most powerful crisis communication approach, whether they are used alone or combined with other strategies (Coombs, 2014). An honest, candid, open and consistent stream of messages is advocated by both communication scholars and crisis communication experts in the industry (Smithson & Venette, 2013; Stephens et al., 2005). However, in business practice, the majority of organizations aim to distance themselves from crises, appearing uninvolved and unaffected. Organizations appear to use the denial strategy regardless of the situation, and

employ denial alone or with other accommodative strategies, resulting in inconsistent, ineffective response messages and negative consequences (Coombs, 2014; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009).

Communication scholars recommended that a crisis response be consistent, open and polite. Consistency is important to build credibility in messages communicated. Even though different stakeholder groups require different levels of responsiveness in crisis communication, the response content should be consistent across all groups and all channels so the message appears more trustworthy (Coombs, 2014).

### **2.3 The Lack of Research on Stakeholders' Perspective of Social Media Use in Crisis Communication**

Research on the issue of crisis communication often centers on an organization's use of social media and neglects stakeholders' perspectives on an organization's response efforts (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Since the stakeholders and general public dominate social media, how they contribute to the development of a crisis, as well as how they react to a company's crisis responses, should also be considered when studying crisis communication. By examining the existing literature, the author sees that while it is generally agreed that stakeholders turn to social media during crises, what they actually look for in an organization's crisis message and how they perceive the use of social media in crisis communication leaves much room for further research. Therefore, this present study will investigate stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of a crisis response, and compare stakeholders' expectations to companies' efforts, to evaluate the effectiveness of Vietnamese crisis communication plans.

### **3. Research Design**

This study has two main groups of participants in Vietnam who are PR experts (group 1) and organizational stakeholders and general audiences (group 2). Accordingly, the study is conducted with two separate parts for each of these two groups. Members of each group will participate in an in-depth interview. Each group has its own sets of questions. This research design aims to examine the intention to use social media and social media adoption process in crisis communication strategies among organizations in group 1 and to identify their expectations of social media use (by organizations) in crisis response among group 2. The interviews with group 1 are labelled interview (1) and interviews with group 2 are labelled interview (2). According to Jugenheimer, Kelley, Hudson and Bradley (2014), it is recommended that a sample size from five to 12 people be adopted for a single respondent profile for in-depth interviews. A sample of that size is considered to be big enough to show patterns of ideas and perceptions and is adequate to provide a level of depth so researchers can determine themes and patterns from the responses. Therefore, this study aimed for sample sizes around 12.

Interview (1) was conducted with 12 participants: seven male and five female PR practitioners in Vietnam. The interviewees were a mix of agency (eight participants) and in-house workers (four participants). The interviewees had a wide range of experience: five participants had two to five years of PR industry experience, four participants had six to eight years, and three participants had nine or more years of experience. The purpose of interview (1) was to answer how organizations and PR practitioners in Vietnam perceive the use of social media

channels to communicate with stakeholders during crises.

Interview (2) was conducted with 13 participants: six males and seven females from the working population in Vietnam who use social media and follow business news. The participants were of different age ranges: seven participants were under 25, five participants were from 25 to 34 years old, and two participants were 35 and above. Participants of group 2 had lived and worked in Vietnam in the past five years. The purpose of interview (2) was to explore whether Vietnamese stakeholders expect an organization's crisis response to appear on social media channels, and if so, how. The participants of both groups were interviewed in a one-to-one setting, with one question at a time. They were given an option to skip questions or to stop the interview at any time.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1 Most Vietnamese Organizations Misunderstand That Their Stakeholders Seek and Share Crisis Information on Social Media**

It was concluded in interview (1) that Vietnamese organizations believe their stakeholders seek and share news on social media frequently. Nine out of 12 interview participants agreed that most stakeholders would prefer social media for an organization's crisis response.

*I think it's necessary for Vietnamese organizations to use social media in crisis communication. The number of Vietnamese people using social media to share their points of view or information is increasingly high. I believe [social media] is an undeniable communication channel.* – Participant 1E, an in-house practitioner with two years of experience.

*The number of people caring about and using social media has increased significantly; but in crisis communication, social media is only a part of the plan. People can be doubtful of the messages we deliver on social media. Press conferences with the attendance of trustworthy publications are still necessary.* – Participant 1I, an agency practitioner with three years of experience.

The participants also indicated that the stakeholders would want to see a response on the same social media channel if a crisis starts on social media. They further indicated that their organizations believed social media will soon be adopted more in crisis communication because of this reason.

In Vietnam, social media is developing quickly. There are many crises originating and ending here. Using social media is a good way to communicate with stakeholders and solve these crises. – Participant 1A, an agency practitioner with five years of experience. This belief of the practitioners and organizations significantly contradicts the results from interview (2) with the stakeholders. Ten out of 13 interview (2) participants picked traditional media as their preferred information channels and a frequent source and news platform to turn to for information and support during crises.

*I prefer to read newspapers and watch TV rather than social media. I use reliable online news sources like Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien or a foreign news source like the BBC. I assume that when information is published on traditional media, the publications will be more cautious with the words and sources because they are responsible [for the stories]. Therefore, the credibility is higher.* – Participant 2C, male, 25 years old.

*I only use Facebook to see what my friends and relatives say about an issue, or what [traditional media] articles they share on their Facebook pages. I also go to [traditional news pages] for official information... There are multiple social media groups that provide quicker and more detailed information than traditional news. I can use them to know about the issue but still need to find another source to confirm it. – Participant 2M, male, 37 years old.*

This would suggest that most Vietnamese organizations misunderstand that their stakeholders seek and share crisis information on social media. Together with the expectation to use both traditional media and social media discussed above, this finding may lead the organizations to reprioritize the communication channels in their crisis plans. Although social media is important and frequently used, it is not a reliable platform for serious or sensitive information such as during crises.

#### **4.2 Vietnamese Organizations Underappreciate the Value of Sincerity and Accommodation Content**

All the reviewed literature emphasized the value of sincerity and accommodation content in crisis communication. This notion is consistent with the second expectation of a good crisis response (beside timeliness) mentioned by five participants in interview (2). The participants expect the involved organizations should show sincerity and responsibility, and not avoid or deny the issues. The participants mentioned that they would look more into the nature of a response content and reaction than just evaluate the chosen media channels.

*[Companies] need to show their responsibility by investigating the root causes. If the fault belongs to the company, it should admit, apologize and try to resolve the problem. If the fault is [external], the company needs to prove it by finding evidence. – Participant 2F, female, 23 years old.*

*Of course, there are many investigations or internal things a company must do beforehand... However, before sending out an official announcement, a company should give out their apology or explanation to the [public]... I think the customers can understand and accept your mistake if you admit your fault or know how to persuade them otherwise. – Participant 2G, female, 25 years old.*

While the content of a crisis response was considered as important as the speed of the response by the participants of interview (2), this expectation of sincere content is usually underappreciated by the PR practitioners. In interview (1), only three out of twelve participants expressed attention to the content of a crisis response. Further, from the replies of group 1, while the PR practitioners still think being honest, sincere and taking responsibility works best with the stakeholders, these content strategies are often overlooked and underused.

*My client asked me if he posts a video response on social media and sees many negative comments, whether I can monitor and delete all those comments, whether I can control all the feedback. I had to tell him that control doesn't mean to erase, but to respond. The stakeholders need a response, and they need it fast. Denying their feelings or requests won't solve the problem. – Participant 1B, an*

agency practitioner with 19 years of experience.

*I have mentioned that social media should not be used for crisis communication, but it's mostly because people don't use it properly. I think the truth is the most welcomed information; but organizations sometimes want to hide the truth at all costs.* – Participant 1C, an agency practitioner with 19 years of experience.

This finding suggests there is a need for a review of crisis communication strategy in most Vietnamese organizations to further plan how they can act and respond more honestly and sincerely during crises.

#### **4.3 Managerial Implications**

The findings provided insights into both Vietnamese organizations' and stakeholders' perspectives, as well as predictions on crisis communication practice in the near future. Beside the main contribution to the current PR practice in Vietnam, there are two key findings of this study: the increasing importance of social media in crisis communication from both organizations' and stakeholders' perspectives, the continued efficiency of traditional media

in crisis communication in Vietnam, and the focus on the crisis response content.

By finding these gaps of perception between the practitioners and stakeholders, this study shed lights on how organizations should communicate a crisis in this social media age, and suggests more careful review of the stakeholders' preference in crisis communication before adopting social media and more importantly, before planning how to best communicate a crisis to them. Crisis will not disappear from organizational settings. Social media will become even a more important part of everyone's daily life. Therefore, exploring the connections between crisis communication and social media is and will be an imperative focus of public relations field, not only in the academia or in Vietnam, but also in business practice and in a global context.

#### **5. Conclusion**

As social media has become an increasing concern in the country, these scholars and professionals seek new and different ways to improve crisis communication practice, especially on this platform, through reviewing the influences of social media adoption within an organization and the underlying beliefs of stakeholders from this study.

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