

Institutional Response Strategies of Health Crises through Public's Lens

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Abstract. This descriptive study employs the Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model [SMCC] to primarily identify the crisis response strategies adopted by the Palestinian Ministry of Health in facing the Corona Covid-19 pandemic. The extent to which the public accepted these strategies approved by the ministry following the form of the messages directed to the audience is consequently examined. The study, at the same vein, attempts to detect the audiences' emotional responses that have been shaped following the selected form of messages under analysis. Traditional media, social media or offline word-of-mouth entail the form of message. A content analysis was conducted on the ministry's communications during the study period. To triangulate the data, a questionnaire has been designed and electronically distributed on a sample of 370 students enrolled at Hebron University, Palestine. The analysis has shown that the supportive strategies are the most acceptable responses to the audience. They create a positive emotional reaction following the type of message source applied. The study also concludes that—in health crises—social media and offline word-of-mouth are more convenient as a form of message at the outbreak and during the pandemic. The form of message is highly influential on the development of internal and external dependent-attributed emotions. The current study argues that it is essential to adopt social media and offline word-of-mouth as a communication form during health crises.

Keywords: SMCC, Coronavirus Crisis, response strategies, crisis communication.

1 Introduction

Life is progressively becoming virtually-oriented. The Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model [SMCC] was developed as a theoretical framework to manage crisis communication in the light of that significant shift towards social media. It describes the way in which the form and source of crisis information influence the audience's acceptance and emotional responses. This model examines the organization's options for crisis response strategies from the public's point of view.

The world is witnessing various consecutive and complex crises. The Coronavirus Crisis has recently emerged on a worldwide scale as a result of the rapid spread of Corona Covid-19 virus. The Palestinian Ministry of Health applied a set of preventive measures determined by the World Health Organization [WHO] to confront the pandemic. Lee [2004] argues that there is a need to shape a better understanding on how

individuals understand the organizational crisis and interact with the course of related actions.

It is essential to detect the public interpretations and interactions of communication process during crises. When the public realize the seriousness of a crisis situation, their participation in the communication process increases. Their attribution of responsibility is activated, as well [Coombs, 2007]. The severity of the crisis may, therefore, lead to negative emotional reactions towards the organization. In other words, the public relations practitioners must exert greater efforts to enhance the credibility of message form and source. In so doing, they motivate the audience to follow directions, trust in the source and form, and determine the degree of message acceptance [Avery, 2010].

2 Crisis Communication: A Public Viewpoint

According to [Adi, 2020], previous studies in crisis communication focus more on examining communication theories used by organizations in times of crisis. There is, however, a dearth of research that investigate the crisis communication from public's point of view. In the same vein, literature review has shown a lack of organizational communication research that consider the aspects of stakeholders/public affected by a crisis. Austin and Jin [2016] argue, relatedly, the need for applying the SMCC Model to health crises in particular. McDonald et. al [2010] agree on the inevitability of hindrance that might be formulated through public's negative emotions against institutional response strategies during a crisis. They see an urgent need to explore a variety of crisis emotions and their impact on public responses and attributions, therefore.

Yang et al. [2010] called for conducting more research on the impact of sources credibility on the public's acceptance of and participation in strategies to confront crises. Liu et al. [2016] also recommend to broaden a better understanding of how crisis communication can affect the emotional responses of audience.

In her study, Abdullah [2017] has shown the effect of messages of a humanitarian nature on the positive response of the public to the crisis when adopting the strategy of denial in particular. She recommends conducting studies on the level of public acceptance of response strategies through social media. According to Mak and Song [2019], emotional responses play key role in how the public participates in a crisis. The findings show that organizations, social media creators, and influencers can influence the feelings of social media followers. However, these emotional changes also depend on the content of crisis information introduced through different types of influencers in various forms. Liu [2011] found that the public accepts crisis responses via traditional media in the largest proportion, followed by social media and oral communication, respectively.

Austin et al. [2012] argue that there is an impact of the third party in communication during crises. They see also a need to integrate traditional media and social media in responding to crises. Park and Avery [2018] concluded that in a public health cri-

sis, people desire a variety of opinions and perspectives and turn to social media, especially during health crises.

3 Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model [SMCC]

Scholars have developed SMCC model as a practical framework for managing crisis communications via social media in the modern media landscape. It serves as the first theoretical framework to describe the relationships between organizations, online and offline audiences, social media, traditional media, and offline word-of-mouth before, during and after crises [Austin et al., 2012; Cheng, 2020].

The form of information can influence the communication behaviors of the public. Coombs [2012] argues that the form of information could be more significant than the actual crisis response messages. Scholars in crisis communication, meanwhile, pointed out the impact of the source of crisis information as it plays a key role in building trust and credibility. Thus, the level of acceptance of crisis response strategies will be affected accordingly [Avery, 2010]. The source of information was classified into two categories: from the organization and from a third party outside the organization [such as media outlets].

Five factors influence the institutional crisis communication of institutions were identified [Liu et al., 2011]. The origin of the crisis [whether the crisis was caused by an internal organizational problem, or by external factors. The attribution of responsibility, and response strategies are affected on this regard. Secondly, the type of crisis [victim, accident, intentional]. Thirdly, the infrastructure that overlaps the level of the institution's response to the crisis. Finally, the source and the form of the message detailed earlier.

This model hypothesizes that the degree of acceptance of the strategy is affected by the source of the crisis information [first party: the institution itself, or a third party: a source from outside the institution, such as the media]. For instance, the degree of acceptance of a particular strategy by the institution itself may differ from receiving it from a media outlet. Consistent with what the model postulates, the form and source of the message also influence the emotions/feelings that the audience may form when responding to a crisis [Austin and Jin, 2016].

The SMCC model argues that the public turns to social media during a crisis for emotional support and the desire of emotional venting. Hence, the type of emotional support that the public receives through information sources affects their perceptions of crisis response strategies. According to Jin [2009] the higher the responsibility of a crisis attributed to the institution, the greater the negative feelings of the public are. It is, therefore, significant to investigate to which extent the form of crisis information shapes the feelings of the public experiencing a crisis [Liu et al., 2011].

Pertaining to institutional response strategies during a crisis, the model suggests twofold question [Liu et al., 2011]: what are the audience's feelings and emotions shaped following the selection of form and source of message; and to which extent they accept these strategies following the form and source of message? Figure [1] visualizes the overlapping among variables within the suggested model. It shows ten

response strategies introduced by Coombs [2007]. These strategies were reclassified into four major groups [Coombs, 2012]. The SMCC variables are applied to these strategies, which creates the dimensions as presented in the figure.

This paper solely employs the assumptions related to the form of message as a theoretical thrust. It examines the response strategies adopted by the Palestinian Ministry of Health to confront the Coronavirus Crisis, then investigates the effects of the form of messages on the public's degree of acceptance and in shaping their emotions and feelings towards these messages.

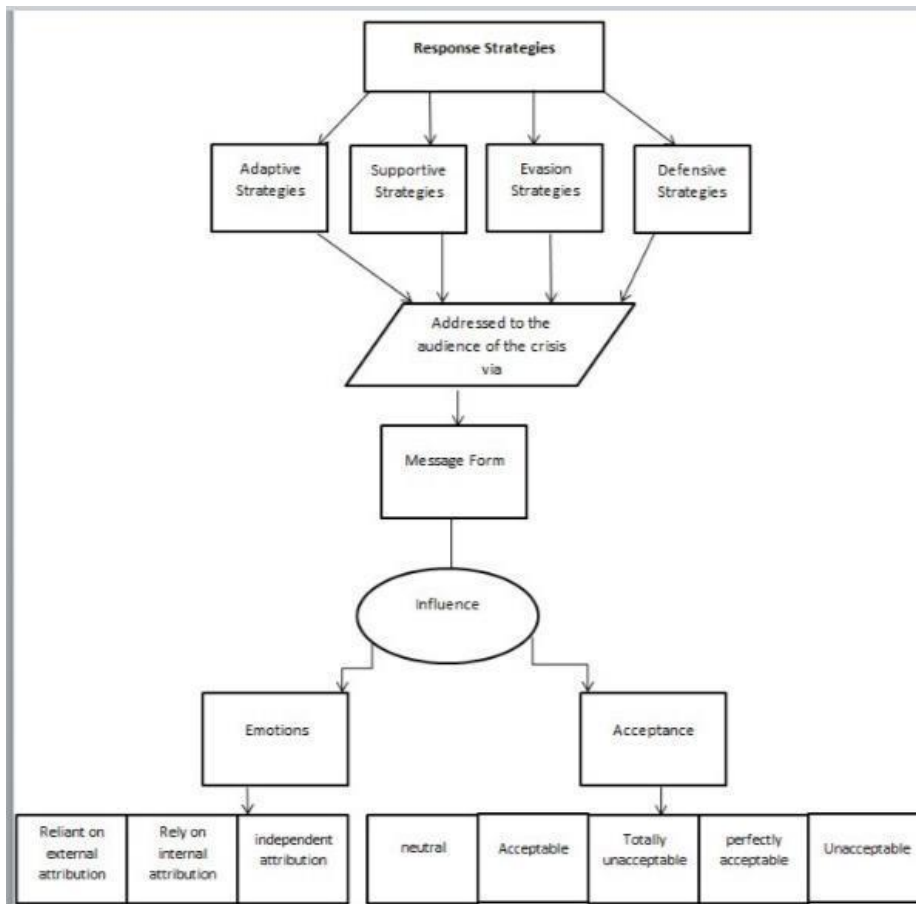


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

4 Methodology

In this descriptive study, a mixed methodology is adopted. Both quantitative and qualitative tools are used to achieve the research objectives. First, a coding sheet and coding book was designed to identify the institutional response strategies employed

by the Palestinian Ministry of Health during the crisis under scrutiny. Following that, a questionnaire was distributed on a random sample of the Palestinian public to examine their degree of acceptance and identify the feelings the shape when they were exposed to the concerned strategies.

The students of Hebron University, West Bank, represented the study population as the Coronavirus Crisis erupted in Hebron then spread out to the rest of the West Bank territories. A random sample of 370 students received the questionnaire electronically. The questionnaire comprises 42 items distributed on three dimensions. The first is communicated with the respondents' demographic variables. The second and third dimensions measure the respondents' degree of acceptance and the type of emotions developed following the form of information [social media, traditional media, offline WOM], respectively. The questionnaire's items related to the type of response strategy are designed following Coombs [2012] classification. That is adaptive strategies, supportive strategies, evasive strategies and defensive strategies.

The Cronbach's Alpha mean was calculated to measure the stability of the test, where the total stability of tool was [81.4]. This is deemed a high stability coefficient and satisfies the purposes of scientific research. The arithmetic mean, percentages and standard deviation were calculated to identify answer the research questions.

A content analysis, as well, was conducted on a total of 85 message directed from the ministry to the public during the study period as follows: 50 written posts, 35 videos. The videos included 20 television interviews, 6 press conferences and 9 other videos posted by the ministry on its Facebook page. The study period started from the beginning of March 2020 through the end of September 2020.

Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to measure the reliability and internal consistency of the analytical tool. The alpha coefficient of the related tool was 81.4, which reflects a high stability and satisfies the purposes of scientific research. The percentages and frequencies of the strategies used according to the classification of Coombs [2012] were calculated, too. The arithmetic mean, percentages and standard deviation were also taken into account to examine the level of audience's acceptance of the strategies under scrutiny.

5 Analysis and Findings

The analysis have shown that the adaptive strategies are the most prominent. In contrast, the supportive strategies are the least [see Table 1]. The adaptive strategies appear to be more acceptable to the public when using social media and/or offline WOM as a form of message. More importantly, this overlapping creates negative emotions against the corporation. This result is consistent with what Liu, et al. [2011] concluded. The public accepts adaptive crisis responses when issued by the organization itself through offline WOM.

The results have also illustrated that the supportive strategies are more acceptable to the audience when using traditional media and offline WOM. In the same token, Liu et al. [2011] suggest that the audience is more receptive to supportive strategies transmitted through traditional media instead of social media. The emotions shaped

when employing supportive strategies were positive, particularly if social media and traditional media are used as form of the message.

Table 1. Crisis Response Strategies of Palestinian MOH.

Type of Response Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Defensive	19	12.5
Adaptive	86	56.6
Evasive	37	24.3
Supportive	10	6.6
Total	152	100.0

The evasive strategies were acceptable to the public to a moderate degree following the applied source and form of the message. They are more acceptable to the audience when using social media. This result differs with what Liu et al. [2011] found. Their analysis has shown the audience in a more receptive manner to evasive responses communicated via traditional media rather than social one.

When social media is used to communicate strategies to evade crisis responsibility, the audience creates emotions of external attribution. The analysis, as well, has shown that offline WOM messages used to communicate evasive strategies create independent-attributed emotions. However, the defensive strategies are more acceptable to the public when using offline WOM. This result is inconsistent with Liu's et al. [2011] findings. They argue that the audience is more receptive to defensive strategies communicated via traditional media. The emotions developed when applying defensive strategies are positive, particularly if offline WOM and traditional media are used as a communication tool.

The results show that choosing the appropriate form of crisis information has an impact on the emotional responses of audience. When adopting offline WOM, the dominant emotions are independently attributed. However, these emotions appear at a lower rate when the crisis information are communicated via traditional media.

The public accepts crisis responses through social media and WOM in a greater proportion than traditional media. Social media and offline WOM have not noticeably contributed in creating a positive emotional responses following the source of message. This result is in line with Yang's et al. [2010] findings. They contend that the credibility of source has a slight effect on audience participation in the crisis communication process.

The results also reveal that the public is more receptive of crisis responses via offline WOM, followed by social media, and finally traditional media. This order of message form differs from what Liu et al. [2011] suggests. They found that traditional media comes first, followed by social media, then offline WOM.

The results have illustrated that when crisis information are disseminated via social media and offline WOM, the dominant emotions created are independently attributed. When supporting strategies are used, the audience will also form independently attributed emotions in a greater proportion than if other strategies were employed [adaptive strategies, evasive strategies, and defensive strategies].

By using defensive strategies, the audience will form emotions dependent on external attribution in a greater proportion than if other strategies were used. The results have shown that emotions dependent on external attribution recorded the highest percentage when using defensive strategies compared to other strategies. It is also worthy to mention that emotions dependent on internal attribution are the least developed regardless of the type of response strategies. The form of message has greater impact than message source on developing emotions dependent on external and internal attributions.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Institutional response strategies vary during a crisis. According to Traintafillidou and Yannas [2020], corporations experience an urgent need to apply social media as a platform to communicate during crises. Monitoring audience's feedback, communicating with them, and responding to their needs are more facilitated via new media. This will resultantly drive crises managers to build trust with their public. A study on American public revealed that the majority consider the internet as their favorite and most trustworthy medium to receive news [Austin et al., 2012].

The direct and immediate nature of crisis responses maximize the challenges on PR practitioners to produce effective content. Social media may constitute a serious risk on effective crisis communication if messages are not designed accordingly [Kapuściński et al., 2021].

Social motivation is deemed the significant reason behind using social platforms by audience. They tend to express themselves, search for information, operate social monitoring and fulfill their political needs [Liu et al., 2010]. Responding to a crisis is considered the most perilous period in the institution's lifecycle [Garhama et al., 2015]. Therefore, social media should be included in the crisis management plan to reduce its negative effects. Even after the crisis ends, communicating with audience continues.

Park and Kim [2017] argue that individuals tend to trust peers more than corporations. Institutions are seen as untrustworthy source of information by the public. They lack credibility and transparency while communicating with their audiences. Social media could offer unique information during crises [Adi, 2020]. However, this paper recommends employing traditional and offline WOM to communicate response strategies when a crisis erupts. In later periods, social media could be considered an effective form of message.

The current study was limited to one segment of audience, namely, university students. It recommends expanding the sample for future research to include further segments of the public. Moreover, It agrees with Xu's [2020] recommendation to explore the way of how social media might influence the institutional reputation after a crisis ends. This study solely focused on Facebook as a representative medium of social platform. Other social platforms are recommended to be under scrutiny, therefore.

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