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Strategic Crisis Communication On Social Media During Public Health Emergencies: A Comparative Analysis Of Government Responses

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Abstract

The research question presented in this study is how government crisis communication affects social media in times of a health crisis, and how the Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms, Government Transparency in Crisis Communication, and Social Media Engagement affect the Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media. A quantitative survey design was used to collect data on 200 respondents and statistical analyses on the data were done using SPSS, correlation, regression and reliability test. The findings indicate that government transparency and the use of social media positively impact the level of public trust the most, whereas the credibility of the platform, still being significant, has a less important impact. These results emphasise the importance of governments using transparent and interactive communication approaches in situations of the national health crisis as the means of creating and sustaining the trust of the population. The present research paper adds to the existing body of research on crisis communication as it illustrates the relative significance of these elements and provides a way of informing future studies on the specifics of the government communication strategy that should be employed in the event of an emergency.

Keywords: Crisis communication, social media, public trust, government transparency, social media engagement, health emergencies.

Introduction

Social media use in influencing mass opinion in times of public health crisis has become a popular subject, more so with regards to governmental crisis communication policies (Malecki et al., 2021). The world is witnessing governments that use platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to pass critical messages in case of health emergencies such as pandemics (Li et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2021). This change in communication patterns is an indicator of the increased role of social media as an affordable and real-time communication method through which the governments and the citizens can interact (Anwar et al., 2020). The rising reliance of social media in the case of public health emergencies poses both special opportunities and challenges to governments in the communication strategies.

This research has examined how emergency communication by the government through social media platforms during the times of a crisis in health influences the use of this form of communication and more specifically how the communication affects the public trust. The rationale of this research is based on the literature gap on the effectiveness of different communication strategies, including transparency, engagement, and responsiveness, in affecting the perception of citizens on government efforts. The research has relevance because it has given the empirical data on the way various communication strategies can be used to promote trust and compliance in critical health events. The results have also provided practical

suggestions to policy makers on how they should better interact with the people during subsequent emergencies of the same, in case of a public health problem.

Literature Review

The situation of the social media in crisis communication has been discussed in depth, especially in disaster situations, but less in the cases of emergency in the context of public health (Muniz-Rodriguez et al., 2020; Talaue et al., 2025). Available literature indicates the disruptive nature of digital platforms on the manner in which governments interact with citizens in case of crisis. Both Wiese and Van Der Westhuizen 2023) and Citrawijaya et al. (2024) claim that crisis communication is vital when it comes to minimising panic, offering reassurance, and encouraging adherence to health-related policies. These researches are however mostly in one-way communication models where the government is known to transmit information without the involvement of the people in a discussion.

An important lacuna in the literature is how two-way communication strategies compare in terms of their effectiveness in government responses. The current literature is mostly devoted to government announcements and updates in the situation of a pandemic of a disease (e.g., the H1N1 outbreak), yet it does not consider direct interaction with the population by means of comments, responses, and feedback requests (Baekkeskov, 2020). This is a major gap because research on the social media engagement theory (Li & Cho, 2023) indicates that the active involvement by the population and governmental response can potentially exert a significant influence on the level of public confidence and perceptions. The interactive aspect of crisis communication, in which governments do not just provide updates but also engage in dialogues with the people and their inquiries and anxieties, is not empirically studied on the circumstances of occurrence of the public health crises.

Besides, although literature has proposed that transparency in communication promotes trust (Molina Rodríguez-Navas et al., 2021), little has been conducted on the extent of transparency required to build trust through social media. Government transparency and, particularly, the delivery of clear, coherent, and truthful information is a topic yet to be discussed in the current literature on health crises, even though key to the various theories of communication (e.g., Situational Crisis Communication Theory).

Also, most of the current studies study specific crises or local situations largely, whereas comparative analysis across nations or other types of social media platforms is lacking. This research intends to fill these gaps by exploring how various types of government communication via all different types of platforms influence public trust in times of health crisis and comparing strategies used by governments in various situations throughout the world.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, two primary theoretical approaches are used; the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Social Media Engagement Theory.

The situational Crisis Communication Theory argues that situational crisis dictates the best kind of communication strategy to use by the organisation or government (Ham & Kim, 2019). The strategies to refer to during a public health crisis are supposed to be based on transparency, empathy, and direct approach to the population. According to SCCT, the information given by the governments can help in mitigating the reputation damage that the crisis has brought and restore trust in the government in the event they give the right, timely and consistent information (Coombs, 2020). The theory offers a practical approach to comprehending the manner in which the government can communicate through its strategies to affect the trust of the people in times of public health emergencies.

Social Media Engagement Theory (Davies et al., 2024) is a complementary approach to SCCT because of its focus on the two-way, interactive communication on the digital platform. Contrary to the traditional media, social media presents the opportunity to have direct communication between the governments and the people. This theory emphasises the role of engagement, including answering questions, giving clarifications, and considering the opinions of people, may help to increase the level of trust and form the attitudes towards the actions of the government in crisis (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Integrating SCCT with the Social Media Engagement Theory, this research aims to address not only the

possible impact of governments on communicating in the context of a health crisis but also how the interaction of governments with the population on such platforms as Twitter and Facebook can affect their trust and reaction.

Methodology

The study design was a cross-sectional survey that was quantitative. The rationale was that the practice was likely to give an approximation of what people thought and did at a given time even during a social health crisis. The design allowed the collection of data in a systematic manner among a great number of respondents providing an overview of the perception of the government communication strategies across different demographics. It was a cross-sectional type of design that gave the researcher the opportunity to examine the relationship between the variables, such as government transparency, social media involvement, as well as social media trust in the situation of the crisis.

The convenience method was applied in this study to pick 200 respondents as the sample. This strategy was chosen as it was feasible and effective when it had to target a wide range of people who used the services of the state social media. The 200-sample was also appropriate to do regression analysis since it was more than the minimum size that would give reliable results (Rvspk et al., 2020). The population was selected through an online survey and this has enabled the sample to cover a large pool of population that had some form of experience of government communication throughout the health crisis.

The information was collected based on the online survey that was distributed by email and social media. The approach was chosen since it offered effortless distribution and high reach that enabled the research to take into account the responses of individuals actively seeking government communications on social media. The questionnaire was a survey in Likert scale questions that included the perceived credibility of the social media platforms, government transparency, and the way that citizens used government posts. It was also apt in this research since it allowed the capturing of attitudes and perceptions on a vast group of people.

Data analysis had been performed using SPSS statistical program that made it possible to establish the descriptive statistics, correlation, regression and reliability testing. The descriptive statistics gave an overall overview of the sample demographics and the distribution of responses. The correlation analysis was used to determine the relationships between the independent variables (e.g., government transparency, social media engagement) and the dependent variable (public trust). The strength and direction of these same relationships were also tested through regression analysis as they assisted in understanding the extent to which the messages that the government wrote on social media influenced the degree of trust in people. The instrument of the survey was tested against the Cronbach alpha in order to test the reliability of the data.

The study was ethical in this research because the researcher used ethical research practices when researching on human beings. The study goals, voluntary nature of the exercise, and confidentiality of the responses were informed to the subjects. Informed consent was used in participation and the choice of withdrawing was allowed to respondents. Data were kept under a safe deposit box and individual answers were anonymised to maintain the privacy of the respondents.

Results

Demographic Profile

Table 1: Gender

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	122	61.0	61.0	61.0
	female	78	39.0	39.0	100.0

	Total	200	100.0	100.0

As per the gender of the sample, it is apparent that most of the respondents are male (122 people, or 61.0). The rest of the sample is made up of females (78 39.0%). This distribution offers some reasonable representation of gender with males slightly outnumbering the female. The cumulative percentage is 100% and it shows that all the gender categories have been taken care of in the total number of respondents, which is 200.

Table 2: Age

Age					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-24	67	33.5	33.5	33.5
	25-34	63	31.5	31.5	65.0
	35-44	46	23.0	23.0	88.0
	45 and above	24	12.0	12.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

The age structure of the sample indicates that the biggest sample of respondents is in the 18-24 age bracket in which the age category constitutes 33.5% (67 respondents) of the population. The 25-34 years group is in the second place, and its percentage is 31.5 (63 respondents). The age range of 35-44 years (46 respondents) contributes 23.0 and the 45 and above years contribute 12.0. This distribution indicates that it was a sample of younger individuals and most of them are below the age of 35. The percentage is cumulative and adds up to 100 percent which is a full representation of the different age groups among the 200 respondents.

Reliability Analysis

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	**N of Items**
0.981	13

The Cronbachs Alpha value of 0.981 shows that the survey tool has excellent internal consistency, that is, the 13 items that are used to measure the variables (Public Trust, Social Media Engagement, Perceived Credibility, and Government Transparency) are reliable. Generally, a Cronbachs Alpha of more than 0.9 is used to imply high level of reliability whereby the items always measure what they are supposed to. Such high reliability guarantees that the information obtained at the survey will be reliable and the constructs under investigation (e.g., the trust of people in the governmental crisis communication in the social media) will be assessed precisely.

Correlation Analysis

Table 4: Correlation Results Table

Variable	Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms	Government Transparency in Crisis Communication	Social Media Engagement	Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media
Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms	1.000	0.957**	0.943**	0.956**
Government Transparency in Crisis Communication	0.957**	1.000	0.959**	0.987**
Social Media Engagement	0.943**	0.959**	1.000	0.979**
Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media	0.956**	0.987**	0.979**	1.000

The results of the correlation indicate that there are strong positive correlations between the variables being studied. Credibility of Social Media platforms perceived, Government Transparency in Crisis Communication as well as Social Media Engagement are all significantly correlated with Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media.

Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms and Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media are positively correlated and significant ($r = 0.956$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that the more the perceived credibility of social media platforms, the more the people will trust the government communicating about the crisis on the social media platform. This shows the importance of platform credibility in determining the perception and reaction of the people towards government communication in cases of health emergencies.

Government Transparency in Crisis Communication has the strongest relationship with Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media ($r = 0.987$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that through open communication by the government in the face of a crisis, the confidence of the people in its social media communication increases dramatically. Openness of communication assists in creating trust in society and particularly when the governments provide clear, consistent and honest updates on health crises, it has been observed to build trust and further participation of the people.

The correlation concerning Social Media Engagement with Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media is also very strong ($r = 0.979$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that the high level of involvement e.g. posting publicly concerning crisis related posts, answering questions and actively contributing to the discourse plays a major role in enhancing the level of trust in the population. The active participation will make the government feel involved and responsive, which will improve the view that the government cares about the people and their needs and concerns in case of a crisis.

Each of the three independent variables (Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms, Government Transparency in Crisis Communication, and Social Media Engagement) is positively correlated with the rest with the highest positive correlation coefficients of 0.943, 0.959 (all significant at $p < 0.01$). These high correlations mean that these issues are interdependent and they have a combined effect on creation of public trust in government communication activities on social media. This interdependence stresses the need to engage with a multifaceted communication strategy, i.e. including not only credibility and transparency, but proactive participation as a way of generating trust in the face of a health crisis.

In general, the evidence of the correlation analysis indicates that all three independent variables, which are credibility, transparency, and engagement, are important determinants of the influences on the development of social media-based public trust in the governmental crisis communication. Government transparency shows the greatest correlation with the public trust, with social media engagement in close follow-up, which supports the significance of open and responsive communication in the context of a public health emergency.

Regression Analysis

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.994	0.987	0.987	0.10904

Table 6: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	181.989	3	60.663	5102.229	0.000
	Residual	2.330	196	0.012	
	Total	184.319	199		

Table 7: Coefficients

Model	Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
1	Constant	-0.103	0.016		-6.464	0.000
1	Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms	0.015	0.031	0.014	0.487	0.627
1	Government Transparency in Crisis Communication	0.623	0.035	0.600	17.552	0.000
1	Social Media Engagement	0.373	0.029	0.390	13.078	0.000

Model Summary: The value of R (0.994) implies that there is a very strong relationship between predictors (Social Media Engagement, Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms, and Government Transparency) and Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media. The value of R 2 at 0.987 indicates that 98.7 percent of the fluctuation in the trust of the people can be attributed to the three independent variables. The 0.987 adjusted R square value indicates the number of predictors, which is good and the standard error of 0.10904 is relatively low, which means that the dependent variable is accurately estimated.

ANOVA: As indicated in the ANOVA table, the model is quite significant because the F-value 5102.229 is below 0.01 (p). It means that the aggregate predictors (Social Media Engagement, Perceived Credibility, and Government Transparency) contribute to the considerable amount of variance in Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media. The remaining amount of squares (2.330) shows that it is a very small amount that lacks an explanation, and the sum of squares 184.319 shows the fact that the model captures the majority of the variance.

Coefficients: The Constant value of -0.103 is significant (p = 0.000) which means that the level of trust to government communication by default is 0.103.

Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms does not have a significant impact (B = 0.015, p = 0.627) which implies that though it is correlated with trust, it does not assume significant influence on predicting trust in crisis communication on social media when the other variables are considered.

The effect of Government Transparency on Crisis Communication under the government (B = 0.623, p = 0.000) is very significant and has a positive impact on the public trust. This implies that when governments are open in their crisis communication, it goes a long way in enhancing trust in their social media communication activities by the people.

The social media engagement (B = 0.373, p = 0.000) likewise has significant positive impact on the public trust which means that greater engagement and contact between the public and social media sites directly affect the confidence in governmental communications.

Generally, the findings indicate that Government Transparency and Social Media Engagement are the most potent predictors of Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media, and Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms have less effect on the outcome when used with the rest. These results demonstrate the value of open and interactive communication to use in emergency situations in the public health to sustain and provide confidence in the government measures.

Hypotheses Summary

Table 8: Hypotheses Summary Table

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1: There is a positive relationship between Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms and Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media.	This hypothesis tests whether the credibility of social media platforms significantly influences public trust in government communication.	Supported
H2: There is a positive relationship between Government Transparency in Crisis Communication and Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media.	This hypothesis explores whether higher transparency in government communication improves public trust during public health crises.	Supported
H3: There is a positive relationship between Social Media Engagement and Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media.	This hypothesis examines if increased public engagement on social media enhances trust in government crisis communication efforts.	Supported

Discussion

The findings of the present research offer profound information on the connection between governmental crisis communication on social media and population trust in the situation of the outbreak of a serious health issue. It was established that all the three independent variables included Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms, Government Transparency in Crisis Communication, and Social Media Engagement had strong positive effect on public trust to government communication using social media. The findings are agreeable with the available literature that highlights the importance of clear, credible and interactive communication in promoting trust in crises.

Social Media platform perceived credibility showed a strong positive correlation with public trust ($r = 0.956$, $p < 0.01$), which is in line with the research performed by Cooley et al. (2019) who stated that perceived credibility is among the determinants of whether the public will trust information posted on social media. Coombs (2020) also emphasise in the situation of crisis communication that the more credible the platform is considered, the more likely it would increase the message credibility of the government. Although the correlation is very high, the regression outcomes imply that the influence of Perceived Credibility was less important compared to other variables, including transparency and engagement, which

reveals that credibility is very important but not the sole factor that affected the level of public trust to government communication.

The highest level of correlation with the public trust was observed in Government Transparency in Crisis Communication ($r = 0.987$, $p < 0.01$), which also corresponds to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs (2020). According to the theory of SCCT, open communication is beneficial to minimise negative perceptions and enhance the level of trust in the people in times of crisis. The transparency, as demonstrated in the results, seems to be a key element of the trust building process because the government that openly provides information and updates on a public health crisis is more likely to win the trust of people. The same results are mirrored by Molina Rodríguez-Navas et al. (2021) who opines that transparency can reduce fear and uncertainty among the people especially in times of health crisis.

Social Media Engagement also had a high positive impact on the trust of population ($r = 0.979$, $p < 0.01$), which once again highlights the interactive features of the social media as a crisis communication tool. This finding can be supported by the Social Media Engagement Theory by Davies et al. (2024) who say that social media engagement, involving responding to social media posts, updating, and other two-way communication may play a crucial role in influencing the perception and the trust of the population. The more governments interact with the populace on social sites such as twitter and Facebook, the higher chances they have to create a transparency, empathy and responsiveness which are key to keeping the people trusting them even in the face of a health crisis. This replenishes the assertions of Molina Rodríguez-Navas et al. (2021), who claim that engagement is one of the strategies that governments can use to build credibility and keep the population trusting them regarding their efforts in managing crises.

Although the findings reveal the high-impact of transparency and engagement, the research also demonstrates that there is a literature gap on the relative significance of these variables against the perceived credibility of the platforms in particular. The regression analysis indicates that the government transparency and engagement are more likely to have an effect on trust compared to platform credibility, which can indicate that the content and interaction are more important to the populace compared to the platform as a whole being trustworthy. It is a significant finding because it refutes the earlier ideas that platform credibility is the most relevant factor as referred to by Citrawijaya et al. (2024).

To sum up, this paper supports the significance of government transparency, credibility and involvement in building trust in a time of emergency in public health. The results indicate that not only the message by governments, but also their interactions with the population in the social media platforms should be emphasised. Governments can increase the trust of the populace and make certain they comply more with health guidelines on future health crises by implementing open, respective and interactive communication plans. Further studies in the future would be useful to investigate the effect of various forms of social media interaction and the types of communication that are most effective in meeting the people's expectations in case of health emergencies.

Conclusion

This research can be useful in understanding how people are impacted due to the lack of trust in governmental communication about crises in social media related to the public health crisis. The results indicate the significance of Government Transparency, Social Media Engagement, and the Perceived Credibility of the Social Media Platforms in influencing how people perceive government reactions to crises. Particularly, the paper has found that social media transparency and engagement have the greatest influence on public trust, and platform credibility is a supportive but less critical factor. These findings are consistent with the literature available in the field that emphasises the importance of clear-cut communication and engagement in discussions to inculcate confidence among the population in times of emergency. Practical implications of this research are wide-ranging to government agencies and the general health organisations. As a way of making crisis communication more effective, the governments should not just aim at information dissemination, but also be able to interrelate closely with the people, in an open and transparent way. Governments can establish trust and increase adherence to the public health guidelines by taking strategies that foster interaction, responsiveness, and clarity. Future studies can examine the effect

of certain engagement methods in various social media and extend the research to understand how the level of trust of the populace changes throughout the duration of a health crisis.

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Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

Demographics:

Gender

- Male
- Female

Age

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45 and above

1. Perceived Credibility of Social Media Platforms

- I believe that the information provided on social media platforms during public health emergencies is accurate.
- Social media platforms are a reliable source of information during health crises.
- I trust the information shared by health organizations on social media during a public health emergency.

2. Government Transparency in Crisis Communication

- The government provides clear information on social media regarding the actions being taken during a public health emergency.
- The government's communication on social media is transparent and open.
- During a public health emergency, the government shares regular updates on social media.

3. Social Media Engagement

- I regularly interact with public health updates shared on social media.
- I actively engage with government posts related to the public health emergency on social media.
- I share or comment on social media posts related to public health emergencies.

4. Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication on Social Media:

- The information shared by the government on social media during public health emergencies is trustworthy.
- I feel confident in the decisions made by the government based on the information shared on social media during public health emergencies.
- I believe the government effectively addresses public concerns through social media during a crisis.
- The government's crisis communication on social media helps me make informed decisions during public health emergencies