A Case Study on Social Media Usage in a Water Company in Malaysia

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Abstract
Water organisations fall under the service provider sector, which encounters unforeseen crises in the form of disrupted water supply, high water supply demand, and low water quality. Such complexities require the organisations to develop a holistic and effective crisis communication approach. Hence, water companies have begun utilising Facebook, a social media platform, to convey water issues to consumers. This qualitative study employed a case study approach to examine the key factors to consider when using social media and relevant communication strategies from the perspective of water organisations. The empirical data, which were gathered through an in-depth interview with an expert responsible for social media management, were thematically analysed to extract themes that complemented the study objective. In line with Objective 1, transparency, trust, and engagement were considered when using social media. The findings for Objective 2 highlighted response time,

knowing the audience, and selecting the appropriate platform as social media communication strategies from the perspective of water organisations.

Keywords: Social Media, Transparency, Trust, Engagement, Water Company

Introduction

Some of the unforeseen incidents that commonly occur across various sectors, business corporations, or service operations may prove detrimental to organisational business activities. As an unanticipated and unusual event or a series of incidents that significantly increase and threaten organisational ambiguities and its top priorities, respectively (Seeger et al., 2003), the term 'crisis' essentially denotes the degree to which such occurrences impact organisations. Organisational managers have extensively utilised crisis management in line with the contemporary business environment driven by globalisation and high market dynamics (Vašíčková, 2020).

Companies must precisely identify the crises encountered, establish corresponding strategies, and address the adverse situations. Consequently, the crisis management process seeks crisis prevention (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). By definition, crisis communication mitigates the negative impacts of unprecedented incidents on organisations and their stakeholders (Coombs, 2007), who deem such circumstances as disastrous. The effective implementation of crisis management and communication efforts could optimally resolve these situations (Ulmer, 2001).

The service provider sector (including water organisations) is one of the industries facing unanticipated crises. Water companies, which typically provide involving water supply, maintenance, and treatment services, face water crises. Following the World Water Vision, the water crisis resulting from water management intricacies has adversely impacted millions of people and the environment (Cosgrove & Rijsberman, 2000).

This study selected one water organisation in Malaysia that provides water supply, treatment, and maintenance services as a case study. The company under examination occasionally encounters issues involving water supply interruption and demand, low water pressure, and water quality issue. Such concerns, which inevitably induce water crises, necessitate crisis management and communication. Such efforts would ensure consumers that the water organisation effectively manages and resolves the aforementioned issues.

The water industry is one of the key sectors in utilities that provide the state and individual consumers with clean water for household and industrial use. As a water organisation is the sole provider of clean water resources, the company should practice effective communication amidst a water crisis. It is deemed vital for the organisation to resolve water crises, such as water supply interruption and demand with a proper and effective crisis communication approach and uphold the organisational reputation.

The number of complaints and inquiries during water interruptions rises drastically following its abruptness and consumers' unawareness of the disruption. Most of the announcements were only made through traditional media, such as local radio station programmes, the official website, and bulletin boards (Cadenas & Lagura, 2022), which depicted a lag in information delivery. Consumers' need for real-time crisis information through social media has compelled water companies to utilise digital platforms to communicate with consumers. Hence, social media platforms benefit water organisations, specifically in terms of conveying current water situations. The use of social media during a water crisis enables consumers, who seek clarity on the issue, to access primary information

sources. Additionally, social media platforms reduce the dependency on the water organisation's voice channel.

The research objectives of this study are: 1) to identify the important factors to consider while using social media, and 2) to identify the social media communication strategies from the perspective of the water company.

Literature Review
Crisis Communication Management and Social Media Usage
Crisis communication in public relations study and practice implies organisational actions pre-, mid-, and post-crisis (Marsen, 2020). Effective crisis communication constitutes pre-planned management, channels, and forms that comply with the principles of transparency and integrity to resolve unforeseen situations with minimal damage (Özer & Çerçi, 2022). Notably, crisis communication scholars examine (i) how companies react to, defend against, and rationalise a crisis, (ii) the steps undertaken to determine the causes of the crisis, (iii) how the actions are conveyed to the public, and (iv) how various media resolve their undermined reputations (Marsen, 2020).

As a monopoly business and the sole provider to the state population, the reputation and image of a water company prove crucial for organisational sustainability in the industry. As such, the companies must promptly communicate unexpected water problems to the public, who seek real-time information, through traditional and digital media. Water organisations must address associated crises by informing consumers of the corrective measures and solutions to mitigate them. Prompt public announcements and an effective communication method following the public relations principles of honesty, integrity, and transparency must be prioritised by the companies (Özer & Çerçi, 2022).

Communication is a core component in crisis management that address the queries of consumers seeking real-time information. It is deemed beneficial for water companies to proactively address a crisis rather than remain non-committal, which may induce a public outcry for not addressing the issue. Digital technology advancements in the form of social media, official websites, and mobile applications have led to effective water crisis communication and information delivery. For example, consumers can easily access relevant information on current water issues through the water organisation's Facebook page. Other social media platforms are also used to spread awareness of water-conserving efforts and provide educational content on water treatment.

Past literature has underscored the significance of novel crisis management technology and the pivotal role of social media in crisis communication response and management within organisations (Silviani, Nisa & Pratama, 2022). Social media platforms could mitigate crises and optimise risk communication by promptly delivering messages, reaching huge audiences, and enabling public awareness and forums (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). In this vein, digital platforms have emerged as the most essential means of communication, particularly during emergencies and other critical situations, when interacting with customers is a key determinant of crisis management (Mirbabaie, Ehnis, Stieglitz, Bunker & Rose, 2021; Day, O'Shay-Wallace, Seeger & McElmurry, 2019; Snoussi, 2020).

As one of the most effective communication channels between businesses and their customers (Dewinta & Irawan, 2021), social media are expected to provide crisis communication opportunities (Roy et al., 2020). Apart from functioning as a corporate communication channel, digital platforms have become a form of media that also connects consumers (Špoljarić, 2021). These customers utilise social media to express their

appreciation for the products and services used (Dewinta & Irawan, 2021). It is deemed vital to satisfy customers online, specifically in times of crisis, by promptly addressing their comments on company profiles (Snoussi, 2020).

Water Issues in the Water Company

Water issues, such as water supply interruption, water supply demand, low water pressure, and water quality are incidents encountered by a water company that provides services to consumers. As one of the water-related issues in Malaysia (Rahman, 2021), water supply disruption could occur through leaking, which requires pipe repair and scheduled maintenance. High water supply demand results from dry seasons and a surge in tourist arrivals. Low water pressure is caused by low water levels in reserve dams, higher ground locations, and end-of-pipeline areas. As water companies prioritise the water quality channelled to the consumers, water treatment ensures the cleanliness of the water supplied to consumers.

Water organisations must practice effective communication to manage the aforementioned issues and keep consumers well-informed of the situation through social media platforms. Facebook is a primary platform used to communicate and engage with consumers apart from websites and mobile applications. Consumers could lodge complaints and provide feedback on the water services through social media.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

The SCCT entails response strategies that could be implemented by organisations to manage crises by outlining the crisis communication path and subsequent organisational actions based on the situation (Amaresan, 2022). Under SCCT, the crisis manager assesses the crisis to evaluate the reputational risk level posed by the unanticipated situation (Coombs, 2007). Following Amaresan (2022), a valid situational crisis poses organisational threats, urges the company to make rapid decisions, and potentially poses a reputational risk. The crisis manager can select effective crisis response strategies that would uphold their reputation based on the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Crisis response strategies under SCCT serve to salvage the organisational reputation and mitigate negative crisis effects (Coombs, 2007) through four elements of rebuilding, diminishing, denying, and bolstering (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). In line with SCCT, how an organisation communicates with the general public during a crisis affects public perceptions (Coombs, 2007). Thus, crises must be effectively and promptly addressed. The SCCT provides a mechanism for predicting how stakeholders would address a crisis in terms of the reputational threat posed by the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Organisations should immediately implement adequate crisis response strategies when consumers suffer from crisis-induced harm, (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Additionally, SCCT predicts public response to crisis management methods (Coombs, 2007).

Research Methodology

This qualitative study explored the water company's actual social media usage in addressing associated water issues. The current work employed the case study approach. One expert, the Head of Customer Services in charge of managing the company's social media platform, was interviewed in-depth. This research also gathered information from the water organisation's annual report. A thematic analysis was performed post-data collection. Relevant themes that fulfilled the study aim were duly extracted.

Result and Discussion

Table 1
Thematic Analysis Coding

Theme	Sub-theme	Descriptions
Core Values	Transparency	The water company provides consumers with relevant information.
	Trust	The consumers believe in the honesty and reliability of the water company.
	Engagement	The water company engages with consumers through social media platforms.
Communication Strategies	Response time	The water company promptly addresses complaints, inquiries, and feedback.
	Know your audience	The water company acknowledges different consumer backgrounds.
	Choose the right platform	The water company uses the most convenient social media platform for information distribution.

Core Values
Core values involving trust, transparency, and engagement are fundamental to performing organisational activities and upholding its image and reputation via social media (Chihana, 2020). Transparency and trust are key values in any organisation, including water companies. Transparent water organisations provide consumers with relevant water service information. The water company in this study applied transparency when posting updates on social media and allowed consumers to believe in its honesty and reliability through the value of trust.

> *"Okay, I agree that transparency and trust are important factors when posting any information on social media. Because the most important thing is you have to tell the truth. It is better for you to tell the truth at the very beginning so that you will not have any problems later. The most important thing here is that you need to remain honest even in a challenging situation. By doing that, basically, customers will respect your organisation."*

Generally, both transparency and trust complement one another. The water company in this study portrayed transparency in terms of water supply interruption, awareness of water tariffs, water-saving campaigns, and water supply contingency plans. Such transparency in all activities induces trust following the dissemination of genuine information.
Transparent information on household-level water usage and public water usage behaviour may be delivered to water consumers (Bakar et al., 2021). With regards to water companies, consumer trust entails believing in their accurate assessment and reporting of water-related risks (the vulnerability component) and initiatives to reduce water consumption in the community (Larbey & Weitkamp, 2020). These organisations should

adopt two-way, dialogic, and relationship-building strategies in their communication approach with the public to develop a high level of trust (Larbey & Weitkamp, 2020).

Engagement is another core value in social media usage. The water company in this study actively employed social media to deliver water service messages and periodically inform consumers about the water situation in their areas. Meanwhile, consumers used social media to lodge complaints and share feedback. Water companies must prioritise consumer queries to establish two-way communication between the organisation and consumers.

> *"In order to gain trust, you need to respond, you need to encourage interaction, and the most important thing is you need to thank customers for their feedback. The more you interact, the more people will reach out to you. Basically, from this, it will build a reputation as a brand that is available and answerable to its audience; hence, people will be more confident and trust us."*

Diverse information delivery platforms, such as television, social media, and word-of-mouth increase the opportunity to reach out and engage the entire community and manipulate the different strengths of each method (Wolkin et al., 2019). The water company in this study utilised a Facebook page as a social media platform to engage and interact with consumers. Overall, water companies prefer Facebook and Twitter for social media communication and engagement (Lewis et al., 2018). In the UK, it is deemed vital to have an ongoing conversation about water with consumers (Larbey & Weitkamp, 2020).

Communication Strategies

In this study, the water company emphasised several communication strategies (response time, knowing the audience, and choosing the right platform) to interact with consumers on social media. These strategies primarily catalyse organisational communication with consumers through digital platforms. This water company prioritised its response time by promptly responding to consumers' queries and complaints.

> *"Our response must be 24/7 and 365 days. I believe response time is the most significant factor when using social media for water organisation, not just to attract customers but basically the most important thing is we need to get the customers' feedback and we want to resolve customers' issues such as no water supply, low water pressure, and low water quality. Yes, in the water business, response time is number one. Because response time will improve customers' trust towards any organisation. For example, if there is a case of water supply interruption, you must engage, you must respond to the question quickly, if not, they will never trust us."*

Organisations benefit from rapid responses to a crisis (Marsen, 2020). In this regard, social media is a popular and extensively-employed platform used to communicate water efficiency and water (Lewis et al., 2018). A prompt response would lead to effective customer service as social media operates in real-time (Snoussi, 2020).

The water company in this study was also concerned about knowing its consumers' demographics, such as age, race, and language. Such details prove pivotal for organisations to truly gauge their audience and optimally deliver information. For example, language

barriers may hinder some consumers from obtaining real-time information. Hence, water companies used multiple languages to distribute information.

> *"In the context of the water industry, the most important thing is you need to know your audience. It means demographic factors, such as age group, ethnicity, language, and others. Sometimes when you observe our Facebook postings we want to reach out to many people as possible. For example, our press statement in our postings, there are Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin, and Tamil. We try to accommodate local preferences. Plus, when we want to create our postings, we try to be as simple as we can. We don't want to be lengthy and now we try to make it as an infographic."*

This water company also focused on selecting the right platform, such as Facebook to engage and communicate with consumers. The features of Facebook render it convenient for the company to share lengthy wording, photos, and videos.

> *"Some organisations probably prefer Twitter, Instagram, and others. But for our company, we prefer Facebook rather than other social media. Because it offers more words for postings, then it serves as a great way to spread information about the organisation. Sometimes we have announcements, new services, shot articles, press statements, news coverage, and others."*

Social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) facilitate water organisations to easily reach consumers and engage in crisis communication (Lewis et al., 2018). For example, governmental agencies and other responding organisations utilised social media to communicate with the public and professional stakeholders during the 2014 California drought (Day et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Organisational usage of digital technology, such as social media platforms plays a pivotal role in disseminating crisis information. The water company in this study has proactively used social media as a novel platform to interact with customers from 2017 to date. From the interviewee's perspective, social media prove useful for water organisations to distribute information to consumers. Water issues (leakage) that could occur without a prior sign require prompt responses from the water company. As such, notices of water supply disruption could be easily posted on social media to keep consumers informed on the situation.

The case study findings revealed three key factors to consider in social media usage: transparency, trust, and engagement. These elements represented the core values implemented by the water company. Furthermore, the water company focused on social media communication strategies to reach out to the consumers, such as response time, knowing the audience, and choosing the right platform. Such approaches proved advantageous in facilitating the water company to provide consumers with excellent water service.

This study contributes to the management of water issues through social media usage. The SCCT serves as a guideline on how organisations should communicate water issues to consumers and the public. Organisations should have proper strategies to address the water

issues complained by the consumers to minimise reputation risk. Practically, the water company in this study emphasises core values such as transparency, trust, and engagement while using social media. The water company also highlights the communication strategies to ensure consumer satisfaction with the services offered.

Acknowledgement

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