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**THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT ONLINE CRISIS
COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK IN STRENGTHENING PUBLIC
TRUST**



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Abstract

Governmental crisis communication is one of public relations functions to deliver government crisis messages to public. Of late there were rising concerns on negative media coverage by international media toward the country's recent financial performance. The unfavorable news reporting from these international regulatory bodies can be seen as polemic issue which has potential to weaken the government integrity and ability in overcoming its economic crisis. The objective of this study is to examine the governmental crisis communication practices to reduce public uncertainty toward international negative media coverage on the financial crisis. To address this issue, the study integrates two models in social media crisis communication namely the networked crisis communication model (NCC) and the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) to build a governmental crisis communication framework. The framework also incorporates two crisis communication elements such as negative online media coverage and public trust/distrust. The study will employ quantitative approach which involves survey on the perception among the Malaysian youth toward governmental crisis communication efforts and tests the hypotheses that has been put forward. This study contributes to enhance and establish a scientific, evidence-based guideline to fully utilise online public communication in conveying the government's initiatives and policies. The implication of the study emphasises on protecting national security through significant roles of effective public relations practices in managing governmental crisis communication to regain public trust.

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Keywords: Government online crisis communication, negative media coverage, public uncertainties and distrust



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1. Introduction

Public distrust has long been regarded as major threat to national crises. This issue, if not been attended to immediately may have create yet another severe financial crisis in the country's history. While the remedy towards the impending crises is imperative, and the understanding that the new ruling coalition is still in its infancy, it is felt that the government should resume the accountability to be transparent to the people in communicating the financial crisis messages. Government clear communication on the financial issues is crucial to ensure the confidence among the investors as well as the stakeholders. This is especially important as the external attack could be a major threat to its national security which could push foreign investors away from the country. Likewise, a country political stability and legitimacy are very much dependent on its strong national reputation as the outcomes (Wæraas, & Maor, 2015).

2. Problem Statement

Negative financial media coverage from international media agency and regulatory institutions toward government financial performance will create public uncertainty toward government ability to manage the country's economy. If government is seen as not taking serious step to communicate with its public, it could widen the public uncertainty as to whether the government acknowledged and accepted the news coverage as true which could result to the decline in citizen trust on government political legitimacy. Negative responses from the public (Badrul Isa, 2019; Izwan Abdul Halim, 2019) could be a serious sign of their uncertainties which may have been translated to the unfavourable acceptance of the government. The situation warrants an urgent need to re-examine the government communication to public as to restore public confidence and trust. Considering the severe consequences of public distrust, neglecting to communicate the crisis news to the public is not an option. Therefore, it is vital for the government to be pro-active by taking preventive measures to overcome the potential hazard that is seen forthcoming. One of the areas that need to be given fair attention is the role of public relations in crafting and delivering crisis messages across to its public through every possible online medium.

From the theoretical perspective, crisis management and rebuilding reputation has been examined through the lenses of various disciplines especially business and management, and communication. A growing body of literature on crisis communication indicated that there is still limitation in terms of theoretical approach to online crisis management and national reputation. The need to expand current crisis communication theories is pressing due to the underrepresented theory-based research emphasizing key indicators in preventable crisis (such as financial crises) and reputation. In the context of a theoretical framework, several attempts had been made to explain preventable crisis such as the situational theory of publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) and image repair theory (Benoit, 1995). Another theory which has been used to understand organizational crisis is an integrated four-step symmetrical model (González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). These models, even though succeeding in analysing a crisis, have limitations in identifying the response strategies for a specific crisis such as terrorism. Weiner's (1996) attribution theory, for example, provides empirical evidence on the link between crisis and reputation, but is not able to guide crisis leaders with robust decision-making when a

crisis erupts. On the other hand, image repair theory has been applied in a context of organization reaction to a crisis which neglects another possible element in the crisis management phase. In this regard, the application of the image repair theory often is descriptive rhetorical, while causal research approach is relatively scarce (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Thus, due to theoretical and practical application on this issue, the researchers will research on a new framework to address issues on the current changes in the crisis management.

With the rising phenomena on Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the increasing dependency on the internet as a mean of communication, scholars have been given serious attention to the role of social media in managing crisis. This has led to the development of new theories in crisis communication which emphasized on the role and utilization of social media as one of its crucial elements. For example, the networked crisis communications model (NCC) and the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) has been receiving attention from scholars in investigating crisis (Austin et al., 2012). These two theories, even though suffice in explaining the role of social media in crisis management, has not been tested for strengthening national reputation by gaining public trust.

The media has always been government's number one critique toward its performance and reputation (Liu et al., 2012). For as long as its existence, the media has been playing the role of critical watchdog as a check and balance mechanism in participatory democracy country (Lee, 2008). By its nature, media has a tendency to cover controversial news and found that dramatic event as more appealing as compared to the positive ones (Kalantari, 2008) which has a potential to create a polemic situation know as polemic crisis. Likewise, the news reporting on government agencies is likely to emerge for a more natural news or policy failure. Due to its nature as a watchdog, media transparency in delivering the news offers two consequences, controversial and high risk, or establish the government legitimacy. News that has great impact on public such economic, social and political news will be attracting media attention faster than any other news (Coombs, 2018). The media's negative portrayals of public administration will not only be perceived as incompetence, but to certain extent will threaten its national stability and security. Prominent yet unfavourable media coverage of governments has experienced a transition of trends in news reporting to feature government success in public policy to merely public cries. Nevertheless, the role of media is undeniably essential to uncover any misconduct in government actions by being transparent in its reporting. Media reporting also serves as a mediator to bridge the gap between the government and the public (Luoma-aho & Makikangas, 2014).

2.1. Government communication and public trust/distrust

Public communication has been recognized as an important government public relations functions (Liu et al., 2010b). Government entities must employ public communication to communicate about the major changes that being taking place such as new laws and enforcement, public safety issues as well as matters related to international diplomacy. More importantly government communication must pay considerable attention on how these change messages can be delivered in an effective and time-sensitive manner. Ignoring the alarming sign of public distrust will put the government under close scrutiny and pressure from the public (Houston & Harding, 2013).

In the public sector, a concept of trust has usually been viewed from an external environmental or an interorganizational social perspective (Houston & Harding, 2013). Likewise, governmental crisis communication often been associated with a highly sceptical public (National Association of Government Communicators, 2008), which pose obstacles in delivering effective messages across. In addition, public with sarcasm and negative behaviour is more likely to result in declining trust and react positively to negative media coverage of government. Recent evidence has suggested that there is a direct link between improved public communication initiatives and public trust as well as the media (Fairbanks et al., 2007). However, government communication has their own constraints by which they are restricted by laws and regulations (Liu et al., 2010a). In this study, public trust will be measured through public perception toward governmental crisis communication and credibility.

2.2. Government Online Crisis Messages

Research on government communication shows that government should practice online crisis communication to rebuild trust to maintain political legitimacy. Previous research also indicated that more effective communication could lead to more favourable perception toward government authenticity that ultimately shapes citizen trust in government (Liu et al., 2012). Thus, online government communication messages in this study is operated as public relations practitioners in the public sectors engage in serious planning and programming activities to deliver effective messages to public with regards to national security and stability through the social media. Crafting a strategic online national security messages cannot be neglected in government communication because it gives power, autonomy, and access to critical resources. Government communication that is lacking concise and accuracy in its national security messages shows a signal of lacking legitimacy in public sector organizations. Thus this construct will be measured for its content, accuracy of information, medium effectiveness and frequency of messages delivery. The measurement will be made through public perception toward government online messages on crisis through social media.

2.3. Underpinning Theories in Crisis Communication

This study identifies two theories in crisis communication that focus on the usage of social media as one of the elements in describing the crisis management as a process. These two theories are the networked crisis communication model (NCC) and the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) (Austin et al., 2012). NCC is described as “challenges classical crisis communication theories by showing that the medium used affects the impact of crisis communication” (Utz et al., 2013, p. 41). This model attempt to comprehensively explain the role of social media in delivering crisis messages as more effective, impressive, up-to-date and as credible as, traditional media. Being a young and far from established however, this theory certainly has its own limitation. Rather than guiding crisis managers rebuilding reputation, the NCC more focus on mitigating reputational threats that organization might have faced should the crisis occur. While the SMCC describes the process in which government initiate the effort and prepare a platform to communicate with public and at the same time enable the public to portray their reaction through opinion sharing online (Jin et al., 2014). The SMCC posit that organization will respond according to the transmitted crisis message from public and take action from it (Liu et al.,

2012). SMCC integrates the element of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by Coombs, (2017, 2018) and rumour psychology theory (DiFonzo, 2008). This theory has been receiving critiques for being reputation-management oriented (Freberg, 2012) rather than managing crisis itself (Utz et al., 2013).

3. Research Questions

The study advances two research questions as follows:

- Is there a relationship between unfavourable media coverage, government online crisis communication and public trust?
- Does government online crisis communication mediate the relationship between unfavourable online media coverage and public trust?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of government online crisis communication to build and maintain public confidence and ensure its political legitimacy amidst public cries over unfavourable news reporting from the media toward its administration reputation. In doing so, this study aims to develop a theoretical framework for government online crisis communication to build public trust.

5. Research Methods

This study will employ a quantitative approach using survey research. The population of this study will be undergraduate and postgraduate students from four major public universities in Malaysia. The justification for selecting public universities is based on the criteria of the public universities such as homogeneous in diversity and demographic profiling as oppose to private universities. The participants will comprise Malaysian youth from age 20-40 studying in public university of tertiary education from all across demographic background.

Through stratified random sampling technique, the study exclude youth who are non-degree holders and those who are not familiar with the current issues specifically Malaysia's economic and political news to ensure a certain degree of maturity on the issue and able to provide more accurate perception toward government communication on national security messages. To determine the sample size, this study follows recommendation by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) who suggested that for a population larger than 1,000,000 Malaysian youth the appropriate number of participants is 384. However, to avoid a statistical problem tied to the response rate, many researchers agree that the bigger the sample size, the higher the power of a statistical test (Borenstein et al., 2001; Snijders, 2005). Thus, this current study relied on a statistical procedure that permitted a bigger sample size. First was the Krejcie and Morgan's 1970 table that called 384 respondents. Second, Baruch and Holton's (2008) and Salkind's (2012) recommendations will be followed by increasing the sample size by at least 40%. This figure however will be treated as a pure guideline in determining the minimum sample size. Based on this discussion, the final questionnaire will be distributed to 250 students for each selected public university in this study, with a grand total of 1000 participant taking part in the survey. Self-administered questionnaire

will be distributed to participant to ensure sufficient minimum number of participation and effective data collection within the time frame and with less missing data and higher accuracy.

6. Findings

Data gathered will be analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM-AMOS) to test the direct and indirect hypotheses and to further validate the structural model proposed in this study.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to propose and validate the new governmental crisis communication model in delivering national security messages across to public as a respond to negative economic news coverage by the international media. As such, the new framework will be developed to guide public relations practitioners in their planning and programming in crafting and delivering the national security messages. This is done by expanding the model in crisis communication through the integration of the networked crisis communication model (NCC) and the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC). This study represents the first attempt to understand government communication in strengthening national security. The finding of the study is expected to develop a conceptual model on government crisis communication to be applied by the public organisations. It is also expected to contribute in expanding and enriching literature in organisational and corporate communication.

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