

# The Effects of Utilizing Social Media Tools During Crisis from Public Relations Practitioners' Views in the UAE

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## ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in social media over the last few years all over the world, there is a lack of empirical studies on the extent to which PR practitioners in the UAE are using social media tools, and in particular, during crisis. Consequently, this study is designed to bridge this gap in research. The study aims to bring to attention the dynamics of using social media among public PR practitioners during crisis in one of the Gulf countries -countries that have different economic, social and political contexts. The current study is considered one of the pioneer studies in the public relations' field in the UAE which aims to investigate how public relations practitioners are using social media tools in crisis. It also explores public relations practitioners' perceptions and attitudes towards using social media during crisis. A random sample of 160 PR practitioners was selected from different public and private organizations in the UAE. The results indicated that PR practitioners are active and heavy social media users in their organizations during crisis. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the most commonly used communication strategies were compensation, corrective action and justification. Additionally, the study suggested that the organization's websites and Twitter were the most effective social media tools used during a crisis.

## KEYWORDS

Crisis Communication, Public Relations Practitioners, Social Media Networks, UAE

## INTRODUCTION

It is obvious, that the speedy growth and popularity of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have generated concerns among public relations scholars (e.g. Alcides & Robert, 2015; Balana, 2012; Chung, 2011; Coombs, 2011; Dufty, 2012; Yan Jin et al., 2014; Hu and Pang, 2016; Luttrell, 2015) to explore the effects, uses of social media in crisis communication. According to Wright & Hinson (2008) social media has changed the way perceptions are shaped and how relationships are built between organizations, and the public. It has also revolutionized the way information is disseminated during a crisis. Considerable studies have confirmed that the emergence of social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have changed the way public relations is practiced and the way organizations communicate. Needless to say, almost everything has become more rapid and more complicated. During a crisis, any organization needs to send messages to their public especially the external public. As Coombs (2008) suggested social media during crisis enable the organizations to monitor the external environment and facilitate the interaction between organizations and publics. He also added a strong interaction between an organization and its public improves people's expectation about an organization's reputation. As recommended by Kauffman (2001) poor handling of a crisis can destroy the credibility of an organization, damage the public

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confidence, and trust which an organization had worked years to build. Similarly, Southorn (2015) suggested that there are many examples of companies who have faced and handled the situation poorly. One of the main roles of public relations practitioners during crisis situation is to communicate with the public in order to be aware of any threat that might affect the organization. According to Oxford Dictionary (2014) social media is a collection of “Websites and applications that enables users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”. Luttrell (2015) confirmed, “Social media refers to the activities, practices, and behavior among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, video and audio (Luttrell, 2015, p. 22). Some researchers have referred to social media as “socially interactive technologies” which enable its participants to communicate with each other through messages, and other ways which allows them to practice social interaction in order to bring them together (Bryant et al., 2006). Another definition stated that social media is “an umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). Marchese (cited in Wigley & Zhang, 2011) suggested that social media differs from traditional media because of the way information is discovered, distributed and consumed. Other researchers confirmed that social media differs from traditional media because it is cheaper and more accessible (cited in Wigley & Zhang, 2011). According to Hill et al., (2013) on social media, everybody has a voice and can be heard. Although social media is already used widely across the public relations field all over the world, studies on the effects of social media during crisis situations are still scarce and new by public relations practitioners in the Arab World. Thus, it is important to conduct research that investigates how public relations practitioners in the United Arab Emirates use social media during crises in public and private sectors. The present study aims to fill the gap and enhance literature. It also provides insights for organizations to use in managing crisis communication today. Public relations practitioners consider this study one of the pioneer academic studies that focuses on the usage of social media during crisis situations in the public and private organizations in UAE.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Nowadays, the usage of social media in the field of public relations is very important. Researchers have studied the role of social media in public relations practices. Despite number of scholars from various disciplines across the globe (e.g., Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Avery, Lariscy, Amador, Ickowitz, Primm, Taylor, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Camilia et al., 2013; Eyrich et al. 2008; Ezumah, 2013; Jaskson, 2011; Yang & Kang, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009) who have conducted various and extensive studies on the use and diffusion of social media as a public relations medium, little research has been conducted to assess the use of social media by public relations professionals during crisis in the Arab World. For example, Avery *et al.*, (2010) examined the adoption and uses of social media among public relations professionals within the field of healthcare. They surveyed 281 public relations professionals in health agencies from 48 states. The findings concluded low adoption rates for social media tools among public relations practitioners. Only 49 of the practitioners actually used social media. The main common barrier practitioners attributed for not adopting social media, was the lack of home access to the Internet. A recent study was carried by Liptak (2012) who explored diffusion of social media among public relations practitioners. Based on the diffusion of the innovations theory, the study examined why public relations practitioners are slow adopters of social media. Findings indicated that public relations practitioners felt that brand recognition was the main benefit of practicing public relations through social media (Liptak, 2012). In their study, on social media adoption among Turkish public relations professionals, Alikilic & Atabek (2012) examined the social media adoption of PR professionals in Turkey and how they employ social media tools both internally and externally. The findings of this study found that Turkish PR professionals highly

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