

In a crisis situation, which public communication message strategies are best deployed using short-form social media?

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Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis communication strategies have adopted a fundamental change, emphasizing the importance of timely, accurate, and engaging public messages. A research study was conducted to investigate how the Saudi Ministry of Health utilized short-form social media, specifically Twitter/X, to communicate effectively with the public during the recent pandemic. As part of this study, the researcher seeks to determine how different communication strategies, such as awareness, warnings, risk explanations, efficiency messages, and reassurance, contributed to developing trust and engagement among the public. This study focuses on social media's role in crisis communication and provides insight into how governmental organizations can communicate strategically during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research seeks to answer a central question: How effective is social media as a strategic communication tool for creating public engagement? It addresses this question by carefully analyzing Twitter data, offering a comprehensive evaluation of Public Relations roles and communication strategies during a global health crisis.

The response of Saudi governmental organizations to the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a compelling case study of how Public Relations roles adapt to the demands of a unique global health crisis. This was particularly evident during a period of significant transformation in Public Relations and communication practices within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The analysis of 1,469 tweets from the official Twitter/X account of the Saudi Ministry of Health sheds light on the effectiveness of messaging strategies and the ways in which specific communication strategies can contribute to public health. This study, part of the expanding literature on crisis communication and public engagement in critical circumstances, underscores the pivotal role that short-form social media plays in reaching diverse audiences during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

In order to build a theoretical framework to interrogate the data, key approaches and frameworks such as Stakeholder Engagement (Nie et al., 2019), Strategic Communication (Soffer, 2019), Gatekeeping (Kyprianos et al., 2020), Persuasion (Geers et al., 2018), Key Opinion (Wang et al., 2020), and Grunig's Public Information

Model (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021) are all explored. The literature review highlights the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on crisis communication, emphasizing the use of social media for engaging stakeholders and disseminating information.

Brief Overview of Study Methodology

The study employed a qualitative content analysis of tweets from the Saudi Ministry of Health, made available between March 5 and October 5, 2020. The dataset of 1,469 tweets was meticulously categorized into five distinct themes based on the content of the tweets: Awareness, Warning, Risk Information, Efficiency Messages, and Providing Reassurance. These themes were identified based on the frequency of occurrence of content types and messaging objectives. Each theme significantly contributes to the Saudi Ministry of Health's overall communication strategy. The analysis focused on the strategic communications adopted by Public Relations and Communication professionals at the Saudi Ministry of Health. In addition to engagement metrics (such as likes, replies, and retweets) and tweet types (such as original tweets and retweets), this approach provides insights into how the Saudi Ministry of Health's strategies promote public interaction with their social media platforms and disseminate critical health information to the public.

Findings based on thematic analysis

1. Awareness

The Awareness theme accounted for nearly 30% of all tweets. This reflects the Saudi Ministry of Health's commitment to educating the public about COVID-19 through short-form social media, specifically Twitter/X. This category of messages provides general information about COVID-19, including a description of symptoms, transmission, preventive measures, and general information about the virus. A core

strategy component was consistent awareness messaging to support adherence to health guidelines and ensure they are followed. A notable aspect of communication strategies that the Saudi Ministry of Health implemented was the use of multimedia components, such as photos and videos, which made the messages more accessible and engaging. Implementing this approach was extremely important to promote preventative behaviors and facilitate widespread awareness during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Warning

Around 17% of the messages were related to the Warning theme, which focused on alerts and immediate health messages, such as increased infection rates and warnings to seek medical advice. With clear and direct communication, the Saudi Ministry of Health aimed to convey the seriousness of the health crisis to the public through short-form public communication. This theme was heavily driven by original tweets, demonstrating the Saudi Ministry of Health's priority of providing timely and accurate information directly to the public. It is evident from the high level of public engagement with these messages, shown by the number of likes, retweets, and replies, that the public is responsive to urgent updates, which highlights the importance of providing timely warnings during a crisis.

3. Risk Information

In the Risk Information communication theme, approximately 12% of the tweets contained specific responsibilities and precautions the public should take, such as social distancing and wearing a mask to prevent infection. An authoritative tone is often used in these messages, emphasizing the importance of each individual's role in preventing COVID-19 spread. The Saudi Ministry of Health conveyed the message of accountability and responsibility by utilizing hashtags such as #We_are_all_responsible to convey a

sense of shared responsibility among the public. Using this theme illustrates how governmental communication can enhance the reach and impact of health directives by providing informative content that emphasizes the public's responsibility.

4. Efficiency Messages

About 25% of tweets are Efficiency Messages, which provide updates on the Saudi Ministry of Health's actions and capabilities, such as hospital capacity and preparation. With the use of reliable statements and spokesperson announcements, the Saudi Ministry of Health provided credibility to its messages, reassuring the public that it was prepared for all scenarios. This theme was often accompanied by visual content and featured real-time information, which helped increase transparency. By demonstrating efficiency, the Saudi Ministry of Health improved public confidence in response measures and encouraged adherence to health guidelines.

5. Providing Reassurance

The messages categorized under the Providing Reassurance theme, which accounted for 16% of the data, were aimed at decreasing public concerns by offering support and acknowledging health employees' efforts. In addition to empathizing, expressing appreciation, and encouraging optimism, the tweets often included retweets from other Saudi governmental organizations' accounts. During a time of uncertainty, this theme provided a comforting presence to the public in the Saudi Ministry of Health's communication. As a result of addressing the public's emotional needs, the Saudi Ministry of Health created a sense of community and resilience in the public during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insight into the Saudi Ministry of Health's adapted approach to

crisis communication. It highlights the strategic implementation of Twitter/X to communicate with the public more effectively. Each thematic area supported different aspects in response to crisis communication, from disseminating essential health information to promoting a safe community environment. It is important to note that the Saudi Ministry of Health used original tweets for critical messages, accompanied by visual aids and multimedia elements, which helped to improve the clarity and accessibility of messages, which are critical in reaching diverse audiences.

Furthermore, the Saudi Ministry of Health's response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic crisis is evident in its engagement metrics over time. Over time, the Saudi Ministry of Health changed its focus from awareness-building to reassurance and efficiency updates as the crisis grew and progressed. The need for flexible communication strategies that evolve with the crisis demonstrates the importance of Saudi governmental organizations being able to address changing public needs and concerns as the crisis moves forward.

In addition to informing the public, the Saudi Ministry of Health also demonstrated social responsibility and built trust by linking message content with engagement objectives. The study shows that short-form social media can be a powerful tool for fostering two-way communication during times of crisis if utilized strategically and could serve as a model for other governmental organizations worldwide that want to foster two-way communication during crises.

Implications and Contributions

This study contributes unique perspectives to the field of crisis communication, especially in the context of governmental Public Relations during health crises. To begin with, it emphasizes the effectiveness of multiple thematic communica-

tions strategies, multimedia-driven engagement strategies, and other media-driven strategies to capture the general public's attention and promote behavioral compliance. Governmental organizations can take advantage of short-form platforms, for example, Twitter/X, to build trust, encourage community action, and manage public sentiment.

Findings suggest that varied message themes—ranging from awareness to reassurance—essential for addressing various public needs during a crisis. Other governmental organizations can adopt this multifaceted approach to enhance their own crisis communication strategies. By combining informational content with emotionally engaging messages, Public Relations professionals can help promote resilience and social responsibility, which are crucial in managing widespread crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of strategic flexibility. An effective communication strategy is critical to enhancing public engagement and is best achieved when the content emphasis is adapted according to the crisis stage and public sentiment variations. A framework for crisis communication can be developed based on these insights. This framework can be applied to a variety of crisis situations, and it is not limited to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

A compelling case study on the use of short-form social media for crisis communication can be found in the Saudi Ministry of Health's use of Twitter/X during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Saudi Ministry of Health effectively communicated with the public, promoted health guidelines, and built community trust during the COVID-19 pandemic by applying a thematic approach that included awareness, warning, risk information, efficiency, and reassurance.

The importance of effective, audience-centered communication strategies in crisis communication is being demonstrated increasingly in this study, which reveals how governmental organizations can use short-form social media to meet the public's needs more efficiently in crisis situations. Therefore, going forward, these insights are likely to be useful as a valuable source of guidance for Public Relations and Communication professionals looking to improve and strengthen their engagement and communication strategies and create crisis response plans.

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