

How Social Media Impacts Crisis Management in Public Relations

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### **Abstract**

Since its creation, social media platforms have controlled the internet. In more recent years platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have had a large part in the breaking and spreading of news. This ever-changing form of media release can positively or negatively impact a company during a time of a crisis. This study points out the pros and cons of the effects that social media has on crisis management. It reviews literature in order to exhibit how social media can make or break crisis management.

### **Social Media and the Concept of “Cancel Culture”**

Today, social media is a huge part of daily life. One uses it to keep up with friends from school, celebrities, and even to meet new people. Over the course of Trump’s Presidency and this past election these platforms have been used more and more for news whether it is accurate or fabricated (Norris, 2020). There has also been an increase in “cancel” culture, meaning that when a celebrity or company makes a public mistake, the internet then “cancels” them (Norris, 2020). Cancel cultures is the most important component of social media to understand in order to determined how social media can be used as a tool in crisis management (Maal, Wilson-North, 2019).

Cancel Culture in proper terms is a form of public shaming that aims to hold individuals accountable, typically for politically incorrect behaviors displayed on social media platforms (Hooks, 2020). There is however a slight difference between cancel culture and call-out culture. Call-out culture is essentially only the first step of cancel culture, one simply calling out behavior that is not okay (Hooks, 2020). Typically, this can actually be very helpful in the education of influencers and companies but, if they are called-out again it will most likely turn into cancelling (Hooks, 2020). Cancelling on the internet usually means a twitter storm, YouTube videos, and Tiktoks that are not only calling out on the present behavior of the person or company, but people will delve into the past mistakes of said company or person (Hooks, 2020).

There are five major components to cancel culture as defined by Austin Michael Hooks:

#### I. The Cancellable Offense

- a. The use of harsh language that is considered to be racist, sexist, or homophobic remarks but can extend beyond this.
- II. The Remarks Must Be Available
    - a. The accused cannot be passive on social media, if there is no post to back up the claim then there is no claim.
  - III. An Offended Party Must Come Forward
    - a. At least one individual will have to identify themselves as an offended party, which typically lead to a growth in following.
  - IV. There Must Be an Audience
    - a. The group who identifies as the offended party must sway an audience who does not (ex: POC swaying non-POC) in order to gain public support.
  - V. It is Not a Learning/Teaching Moment
    - a. The purpose is to remove the person from the place they hold, like attempting to get a journalist fired.

This can be detrimental to a company or person's perceived reputation, this has been seen in this past election (Hooks, 2020). Both parties had many crises throughout the campaign trail, a lot of which had to do with twitter and their quickness to jump to cancelling (Norris, 2020). President Donald Trump talked about it in his Mount Rushmore speech:

*“One of their (the left’s) political weapons is ‘cancel culture’ — driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees... it is completely alien to our culture and our values, and it has absolutely no place in the United States of America”*(Norris, 2020)

The over-simplification of complex issues, like an election during a pandemic, pre-dates social media but sites such as Twitter and Facebook have taken it to a new level (Ng, 2020). Twitter breaks down the complexity of an idea in order to catch the eye of users and to fit within the word count, then a post can go viral in a matter of minutes before the attacked party can even know what is happening (Ng, 2020). Facebook is similar, people share articles that are not reliable sources but because it supports the belief of the user, they will most likely take it at face value. The spiraling of partial or fabricated stories feeds into the reality of the character of social media and shows the problematic forms of online expression (Ng, 2020).

### **Company and Employee Social Media Presence**

Another prominent component to social media during crisis management is how the company and employees hold themselves on different platforms, Rokka delves deep into this in his paper “Balancing acts: Managing employees and reputation in social media”. Social media platforms have proven to be a great asset in increasing the business value of a company, but it also comes with great challenges (Rokka, 2013). The way that the company or an employee of the company responds on social media platforms during a crisis affects how easy or how hard it is for a company to recover from the crisis. An inappropriate social media post from a member of a company affects individual impressions and can cause reputational damage to organizations (Bi, Liu, et. al. 2020).

It is crucial for a company to set rules for the employees’ social media presence in order to maintain a good reputation with the public, social media is a form of consumer relations (Ng, 2020). When an employee calls out a company, reveals private company information, or posts anything that the public may perceive as inappropriate it can add fuel to the fire during a crisis or

even start a reputation crisis itself (Rokka, 2020). This is explained in Simon's case study on journalist Barrett Tryon who started a public relations crisis for the company that bought the paper he worked for when he published a slash article about the company (Patterson, Philip, et al., pg. 120, 2020).

### **Utilizing Social Media as a Component of a Crisis Management Plan**

Now that there is an understanding of how sensitive social media is as a tool of public relations, I will now analyze further literature in order to define how social media can be effectively and positively incorporated into a public relations crisis management plan.

The most important aspect of including social media in a crisis management plan is to be thinking ahead (Maal, Wilson-North, 2019). If a company includes the use of social media in a crisis plan and shares it with employees then the company can avoid further damage during a crisis and to utilize social media to be a component to manage a crisis (Maal, Wilson-North, 2019).

Another important component is being aware of what is trending on social media platforms (Dearnell, 2019). Being aware of the environment on social media is crucial to using social media in an effective way, knowing what people are talking about and think is important in order to handle crisis without causing further damage. Another important component is being aware of what is trending on social media platforms. It is possible that a company or celebrity will be totally unaware of a crisis and hear about it first through social media (Dearnell, 2019).

Through the reviewing and connecting of various literatures that look into the affect that social media had on public relations, it is apparent that social media is a very important tool in crisis

management plans. Social media can be extremely challenging to control and is extremely sensitive but, with the proper management plan it can be a huge asset to public relations.

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