Analysing the Use of Memes as a Messaging Strategy for Resilience and Crisis Communication

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ABSTRACT

This review analyses the use of memes as a messaging strategy for resilience and crisis communication. Memes utilise the viral nature to convey messages rapidly and efficiently when employed as a communications tactic. This makes memes an essential tool in marketing strategy for resilience and crisis communication. This review is underpinned with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which was developed by W. Timothy Coombs. Memes have evolved into powerful communication tools capable of conveying complex emotions, ideas, and social commentaries with remarkable speed and reach. They can quickly spread messages, counteract misinformation, and foster a sense of community among those affected. Memes have demonstrated their value in resilience communication by offering a platform for expressing shared experiences and fostering emotional connections. They empower individuals and communities to cope with adversity, using humour and relatability to make complex concepts more accessible. Memes contribute to the promotion of resilience by reinforcing social bonds and enabling people to find solidarity in difficult situations. Their capacity to resonate culturally and emotionally ensures that they remain relevant and impactful in digital communication. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the role of memes in engaging audiences, building community, and promoting resilience will likely become even more pronounced, solidifying their place as central tools in both crisis and resilience communication strategies. It was concluded that memes are essential marketing strategy tools for resilience and crisis communication.

Keywords: Memes, messaging strategy, crisis communication, situational crisis control communication

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, memes have transcended their entertainment origins to become a medium through which people express complex ideas, emotions, and social commentary. Memes are recurring cultural patterns that influence and spread a social group's behaviours and mindsets. However, with the emergence of social networks, memes have been used as a means of communication dissemination. Meanwhile, these consist of well-known songs, catchphrases, fashion trends, icons, and jingles. According to Boyle (2022), memes refer to a piece of information that is quickly reproduced and shared online by users, usually with changes. The author further expresses that this takes the form of an image, video, or text. Memes frequently capture political, social, or cultural concepts in a light-hearted or satirical manner, making them relatable to a wide range of people easily shared on social media because of their relatability and simplicity, which help to become viral and change people's opinions (Moya-Salazar et al., 2021).

Memes utilise the viral nature to convey messages rapidly and efficiently when employed as a communications tactic. Guenther et al. (2020) demonstrate that memes enhance and evoke stronger emotional responses in viewers than conventional means of communication because they frequently mirror current affairs, sensations, and trends. Concurrently, memes are being used continuously by corporations, organizations, and social movements to interact with their target audiences, foster a feeling of community, and promote concepts or behaviours (Boyle, 2022). Similar to this, memes' succinctness and eye-catching visuals enable people to express complicated ideas in a way that is simple to understand, which makes them an effective tool for opinion formation and information dissemination (Adeyemi, 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2020).

Molina (2020) noted that memes serve as an illustration of the replicability and online discourse dissemination trend prevalent in today's participatory society. Memes, as defined by the author, are funny online conversations that are repeated or modified and shared with other users. This research, however, focuses on how memes can be used as a messaging strategy for crisis communication. To support this, memes swiftly dispel false information, promote community resilience, and provide vital safety instructions during emergencies like natural disasters, pandemics, or civil upheaval (Dynel, 2021). Therefore, memes serve as a powerful instrument for fostering resilience in the face of hardship and involving a wide range of audiences because of their capacity to emotionally connect with individuals. In principle, memes frequently use laughter (a communal coping mechanism sparked by various media), parody social events, and sarcastic pictures or videos that have grown to be an effective communication tool.

Dawson-Synder (2024) noted that messaging strategies are employed as tactics to educate stakeholders on an issue. The author noted further that messaging strategy, which is commonly recognised as a component of marketing strategy, is crucial to a strategic plan. Sejigin (2019) asserts that synced advertising is a subset of messaging strategy, which is often tailored messaging based on people's past and present media behaviour which sets it apart from other strategies like online behavioural advertising (OBA). The author argued further that messaging strategy presents opportunities for information processing and message effectiveness in a hybrid media environment. Taylor (2015) established that message strategy is an understudied component of best practices and that transformational (emotional) messages are rated more effective than informational messages.

Waddock (2018) assumed that a communications strategy based on a core collection of memes that are frequently utilized is more successful than one based on a more dispersed number of memes that are difficult to recreate. Malodia et al. (2022) concluded that successful meme seeding necessitates a well-defined targeting strategy–that is, choosing the initial seeds–which encourages referrals and makes it easier for the memes to spread to a new audience. The authors established that memes are used for two messaging strategies, which include distribution strategy and comic strategy. Guenther et al. (2020) established that memes have become a main form of communication, especially on social media. It was recongnised that strategic framing with the use of memes goes beyond emphasizing pluralism. Kostygina et al. (2020) recognised that campaigns that utilised memes on social media as message sources generated more campaign-branded and sharable content.

There are five elements that determine the pattern of crisis communication, which include organizational factors influencing the response, stakeholder variables influencing the response, crisis kinds in the contemporary global context, issues and reputation management as a means of mitigation and prevention, and response elements to take into account (Diers-Lawson, 2017). Olsson (2014) noted that crisis communication primarily concerns organizational reputation and blame avoidance strategy. It was further noted that the goal of crisis communication is to minimize damage to an organization's reputation while assisting leading companies in returning to their regular operations by developing rhetorical strategies that minimise blame. Tække (2017) demonstrated that organisations must become more perceptive, reflective, and sensitive to public opinion in light of recent changes in the media landscape.

Pulos (2020) noted that, in the field of communication studies, the study of memes as cultural artifact is pertinent and salient. The author stated further that crisis memes can be useful in practice, as organisations facing a crisis may find themselves having to respond to memes that disparage their brand, offering, or efficacy during a crisis response. Wasike (2022) emphasised that meme-based communication is becoming prevalent for messaging. Thus, it has permeated practices and theoretical discussion regarding it has become widespread. Ponton and Mantello (2021) highlighted the humorous and pragmatic significance of memes. However, there is limited or no study showing the use of memes as a messaging strategy for crisis communication. This underscores the importance of discussing this gap in the literature. It is against this forgoing that this review seeks to provide insights on the use of memes as a messaging strategy for resilience and crisis communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative inquiry design to analyse the use of memes as a messaging strategy for resilience and crisis communication. This concerns narrative thinking elicited through prior knowledge and cognitive strategies, through the evidence that have been generated by others (Martinie et al., 2016). The study adopts a

critical review of literature, which makes it a secondary source type of data. The study searched literature from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, and EBSCOHost. Meanwhile, the literature search was between 2014 and 2024. This is excluding articles on the theory that was used for the study. This is because discussing theory may require consulting older literature, which may of relevance.

SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

This study adopts the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which was developed by W. Timothy Coombs (Coombs, 2004). The theory was considered because it relates to this review as it addresses crisis communication, using memes as a messaging strategy. SCCT is a theoretical framework that helps organisations manage their communication strategies during a crisis. The theory provides guidelines for selecting appropriate responses based on the nature of the crisis and the organisation's level of responsibility (Coombs, 2007). The theory demonstrates that there are five principles that discuss situational crisis communication. These principles include crisis types, crisis responsibility, crisis response strategies, stakeholder perceptions and communication, and outcomes and evaluation (Coombs, 2017). This means that organisations need to understand the type of crisis they are enmeshed into, recognise their responsibilities to communicate their responses to the crisis, choose their strategies, understand stakeholders' views and communication, and appraise the process.

Under Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), crisis types are categorised based on the organisation's perceived responsibility, which significantly influences the appropriate communication response. In this study, this concerns the usage of memes as a messaging strategy to communicate crisis. Victim crises are situations where the organization is seen as a victim of the event, such as natural disasters, product tampering, or workplace violence (Coombs et al., 2022). In these cases, the organization has little to no responsibility, and the public is generally sympathetic (Coombs, 2013). The communication strategy here focuses on using memes as a messaging strategy to manage and maintain crisis communication to reassure stakeholders (Coombs, 2020).

Accidental crises occur when an organisation is involved in an event that is unintentional, such as technical failures or accidental product recalls. The organisation has some responsibility, but the event is not seen as deliberate or malicious (Coombs et al., 2020). The response strategy typically involves offering explanations, corrective actions, and sometimes apologies to mitigate potential reputational damage. Preventable crises are the most damaging, as they result from organisational negligence or misconduct, such as legal violations or ethical breaches (Ma & Zhan, 2017). SCCT theory postulated that organisations should be highly responsible, and the communication strategy in a period of crisis needs to focus on accepting responsibility, issuing apologies, and taking substantial corrective actions to rebuild trust and repair the organization's reputation (Ham & Kim, 2019). This review, however, explores how memes can be used as a messaging strategy to assuage tension and enhance calmness during the period of crisis.

Crisis responsibility is a key element of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), determining how much blame or responsibility an organization is perceived to have in a crisis. This perception directly influences the potential threat to the organisation's reputation and guides the selection of appropriate communication strategies. SCCT categorises crises into three levels of responsibility: low, moderate, and high (Othman & Yusoff, 2020). In crises where the organisation has low responsibility, such as victim crises, the focus is on expressing empathy and providing support. In moderate responsibility situations, like accidental crises, organisations may offer explanations and corrective actions. When an organisation bears high responsibility, as in preventable crises, the response strategy involves accepting full responsibility, issuing apologies, and taking significant steps to rectify the situation (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2018). The theory postulates that organisations should align their communication responses with stakeholder expectations to ensure damage control during crisis.

Crisis response strategies are designed to align with organization's perceived level of responsibility in a crisis, helping to manage stakeholder perceptions and protect the organization's reputation (Leung et al., 2023). These strategies are categorized into four main types: deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering. Deny strategies involve rejecting responsibility or blaming external factors, suitable for victim crises. Diminish strategies aim to reduce the perceived severity of the crisis or the organisation's responsibility, often used in accidental crises. Rebuild strategies focus on restoring relationships with stakeholders through actions like issuing apologies, accepting

responsibility, and offering compensation, which is crucial in preventable crises where the organization is seen as highly responsible. Lastly, bolstering strategies support the primary response by reminding stakeholders of the organization's positive attributes or past good deeds, helping to strengthen the organization's image during a crisis (Coombs, 2022). The selection and implementation of these strategies are critical to effectively managing the crisis and mitigating potential reputational damage.

Stakeholder perceptions and communication are central to managing a crisis. SCCT emphasises that an organisation's response should be tailored to how stakeholders perceive the crisis and the organization's role in it (Coombs, 2022). These perceptions determine the potential impact on the organisation's reputation and guide the choice of communication strategies. Effective crisis communication under SCCT involves delivering clear, consistent, and transparent messages that align with stakeholder expectations, demonstrating empathy and concern where appropriate (Coombs et al., 2020). Rapid and honest communication helps manage stakeholder perceptions, reduces uncertainty, and builds trust, ultimately mitigating reputational damage. By understanding and addressing stakeholder concerns, organisations can navigate crises better and maintain their relationships with key audiences (Coombs, 2017).

Outcomes and evaluation focus on assessing the effectiveness of the crisis communication strategies employed by an organisation. The primary goal is to protect or restore the organisation's reputation, minimise the crisis's impact on stakeholders, and maintain or rebuild trust (Barkley, 2020). Evaluation involves analysing the extent to which the selected communication strategies aligned with stakeholder perceptions and whether they successfully mitigated reputational damage (Coombs, 2022). This process includes measuring stakeholder reactions, media coverage, and changes in public opinion before, during, and after the crisis (Coombs, 2017). By evaluating these outcomes, organisations can learn from the crisis, refine their communication strategies, and improve their preparedness for future crises, ensuring greater resilience and better stakeholder relations.

USE OF MEMES AS A MESSAGING STRATEGY

Frigillano (2023) investigated humorous linguistic memes as students' coping relief against COVID-19 anxiety. The study found that Covid-19 memes serve as a persuasive communication tactic that helps students to reduce anxiety during the infodemic. The study shows that memes were more engaging and amusing to students than traditional media, which helped to ease their anxiety when exposed to important topics. The finding of the study revealed that students recognised the denotative meanings provided by the memes, and they classified these messages into formats that were instructional, informative, and amusing, which had to do with government programs like lockdowns and social separation. Adeyemi and Esan (2022) established that the Internet was extensively used during the COVID-19 pandemic for information search on the disease. Meanwhile, the study also established that the use of memes in communication is prevalent among the people in online communication.

Regiani and Borelli (2017) carried out a survey on memetising and mediatising reviewing memes as an evangelical discursive strategy. The finding of the study indicated that online memes are used in Brazilian Protestant religion as discursive tools that mediate religious messages. The study revealed that 268 postings were classified as recurring discursive features, and it becomes clear that memes serve as contestation methods and spark conversations regarding religious practices. The study emphasised that memes are dual characters, which may both increase the exposure in digital culture and run the danger of defiling holy imagery. This illustrates the intricate relationship that exists in modern society between religion and media.

Meanwhile, Cuevas (2021) examined the pertinence of studying memes in the social sciences. The study recognises memes as useful communications tactic that is approachable and shareable because of their connection to modern society. The findings indicate that marketers, political campaigns, and social organizations utilise memes to humanize products and issues, create a sense of community, and change public opinion. The findings illustrate that memes and clever roasts have been used by Spotify and Wendy's Twitter to interact with the audience and it increases the followers on social media and encourages brand loyalty. Similar to the "feud" with McDonald's, Wendy's Twitter roasts have grown their fan base. The study concluded that by using memes, Spotify's Wrapped, a customized overview of users' listening preferences, turned its fans become marketers.

Wood (2020) examined policing's meme strategy, focusing on understanding the rise of police social media

engagement work. The finding of the study revealed that the use of memes and adorable photos of police animals at the new-south Wales police officers in Australia were employed as a novel social media campaign in 2017 to increase user engagement. The study shows that the use of this tactic affected Facebook's News Feed Algorithm, which made Facebook page to have one million followers. The study concluded that memes in message strategy contend with issues including cultural misconceptions, misinterpretation, and quick diffusion. Despite this, their deliberate use nonetheless shapes social narratives and affects public conversation, proving their capacity for powerful and dynamic communication.

Kulkarni (2017) examined internet meme and political discourse reviewing the impact of internet meme as a tool in communicating political satire. The finding revealed that online memes are used in political campaigns with particular attention to how they affect migrants and digital natives in India. The finding of the study disclosed that users created their own versions of the old spice "the man your man could smell like" commercial and shared their reactions, turning it into a meme. The study also revealed the scenario of Denny's use of comedy and ingenuity to engage their audience was demonstrated when their "zoom in on the syrup" tweet went viral, displaying a pancake drenched in syrup with hidden messages. The study found that memes are visual content with social, political, and religious messages, and they can develop into communication characters through a brand's tone. The results indicate that memes increase political involvement but have no discernible effect on the audience.

Woods and Hahner (2019) surveyed America's memes examining on how social media users used memes for their interactions. The finding revealed that memes spread among individuals online through instant messaging applications, social media sites, and other internet-based media sources and these memes are used for messaging strategy. The study also found that marketers have the ability to turn a commercial into a meme, which, if it becomes viral, may spark a reaction right away and naturally increase consumer interaction. The study concluded that memes are unquestionably becoming more and more important in the advertising and marketing strategies of many companies and businesses. However, despite this increasing acceptability and desire, we still don't fully comprehend the phenomena of meme-based advertising and messaging strategy.

Malodia (2022) examined memes' marketing to understand how marketers can drive better engagement using viral memes. The finding of the study showed that memes are a powerful marketing tool because they appeal to a wide range of people, particularly younger ones. The study revealed that brands become memorable and approachable because they are humanizing, relevant, and shareable. The finding of the study disclosed that Slim Jim's "Long Boi Gang" memes, which called their product a "long boi," struck a chord with the Instagram followers and helped to build a vibrant community. Meanwhile, this generates anticipation for upcoming seasons, Netflix used the memes culture already in place with its "Stranger Things" image, which starred eleven and her love of Eggo waffles. The study concluded that memes may help followers feel more connected to one another when they are used properly.

Razzaq et al. (2024) carried out a survey on meme marketing effectiveness, focusing on the moderated-mediation model. The finding indicate that timing and genuineness are paramount in memes marketing success. Meanwhile, the study revealed that brands have to be cautious to choosing or making memes that fit with their voice and beliefs, since using memes inappropriately or forcefully can backfire and harm a brand's reputation. Furthermore, memes may go out of style rapidly due to the fast-paced nature of internet culture, so marketers need to be flexible and open to new trends. The study concluded that when done correctly, it can produce organic reach and engagement by giving companies a light-hearted and relevant method to interact with their audience.

USE OF MEMES FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Pulos (2020) used rhetorical arena theory and multimodality to understand COVID-19 crisis memes. The finding revealed that crisis memes are distinct communication devices that are employed in public discourse, amid crises and have the capacity to have social and cultural ramifications for meaning-making. The study found that creators of memes use semiotic materials drawn from communication events in the rhetorical domain to create their memes. Also, the findings revealed that the intricacy of memes modes and the process by which they produce meaning were investigated using a multimodal approach. The study concluded that memes disparage an organization's reputation and cultural artefacts are essential for communication studies as well as potentially

useful in real-world scenarios.

Сара and Булгарова (2023) investigated the power of memes in crisis to order to ascertain its potential for emotional contagion. The finding shows that the use of memes in crisis communication among Iranian social media users, during the COVID-19 outbreak, are effective means of fostering social cohesiveness and building trust, particularly in trying circumstances. The finding of the study sheds light on the usefulness of memes—particularly in Iran—in crisis communication and emotional contagion. The results imply that memes were widely used in Iran during the epidemic, especially for conveying emotions and interests. The study concluded that memes have a mild and mostly mental and emotional contagion, and responders value them more than other communications. The evidence from this study suggests that memes are effective and useful in communication during crisis. This accentuates the importance of memes in crisis communication.

Wasike (2022) examined the credibility and persuasiveness of COVID-19-related memes. The finding revealed that memes have gained popularity in recent years for their quick diffusion and broad appeal as a crisis communication strategy. The finding indicates that memes' innate simplicity and shareability have been demonstrated in studies to greatly accelerate the dissemination of knowledge during times of crisis. This implies that there has been a growing popularity in the use of memes as a strategy in crisis communication, which has aided in the dissemination of knowledge or information during the time of pandemic. For instance, a study conducted by Wiggins and Bowers (2015), shows how memes may spread swiftly across social media platforms, which makes them useful for reaching a large audience with important messages. Meanwhile, when prompt communication is essential for public safety and awareness, it disseminates information that would turn out to be very useful.

Banyongen (2020) assessed the crisis communication teamwork performance during a terrorist attack, concentrating on pragma-dialectic analysis. The finding revealed that memes are essential in helping the audience find crisis communication more relevant and interesting. The finding of the study indicated that memes frequently include comedy, cultural allusions, and emotional appeal, which can aid in building a personal connection with the audience. The finding emphasises the importance of structure and operation of the crisis management team, and it affects the team's ability to communicate effectively, which contributed to the issue receiving extended public attention. The study concluded that meme increases engagement for relatability as individuals are more inclined to share material that emotionally connects with them. The evidence from Banyongen (2020) highlighted the relevance and significance of memes in crisis communication using both cultural, entertainment, and emotional perspectives.

Buchel (2012) examined internet memes as means of communication. The finding of the study revealed that memes are very significant in crisis communication because it combines text and images which can help to clarify complicated material and lessen information overload in crisis communication. The study demonstrates that memes improve audience comprehension and the efficacy of communication by simplifying difficult ideas into striking pictures. The study concluded that the comedy of memes can help to ease the stress and anxiety that frequently accompany crises, making important messages more digestible. Burkley (2022) demonstrates that COVID-19 epidemic has brought the significance light of comprehending how the public reacts to health messaging and the use of comedy in disseminating information on social media. The study reveals that humour may be an effective communication technique during health emergencies by analyzing three digital comedy artefacts. The study shows that social media participatory nature makes it possible for messages to be shared, changed, and received for companies to maintain order and focus.

Heath and O'Hair (2020) carried out a survey on the significance of crisis and risk communication. The finding indicates that memes frequently highlight common experiences, which can foster a feeling of community among crisis-affected people. The finding of the study also shows that memes may construct a common story that unites people and strengthens their ability to bounce back from adversity together. The study concluded that memes' capacity to create a feeling of community can be very effective at preserving morale and promoting harmony in the face of hardship. Wendling et al. (2013) shows that the advantages and difficulties of using social media for risk and crisis communications offer a self-assessment tool for cross-country comparison and suggests a framework for monitoring patterns across nations, from passive to dynamic use. The finding shows that memes can be useful in crisis communication, overly simplistic, trivializing significant problems and perhaps sparking

a backlash on social media. Meanwhile, memes must be considerate of the seriousness of the issue and appropriate for the setting in order to be used effectively.

USE OF MEME FOR RESILIENCE COMMUNICATION

Houston and Buzzanell (2020) demonstrates that memes are advancing and it is more acknowledged as an effective resilience communication tool, particularly for crisis management and mental health awareness. The finding shows that memes promote comprehension and constructive coping strategies by demystifying difficult concepts and making them understandable to a larger audience. Meanwhile, the study indicated that several facets of resilience, include catastrophe preparation, cancer patients, emotional counseling for adolescents, family relationships, and political leaders can all be communicated through the use of memes. Lahey-McCoy (2022) revealed that memes have the capacity communicate complicated feelings and in a relevant manner that makes them useful for resilience communication. The finding revealed that memes provide a sense of connection with those going through similar struggles and can help people digest stressful or challenging situations by employing comedy or satire.

Wilson (2021) revealed that communication theory of resilience (CTR), reintegrate five interconnected processes: creating a new normality, establishing alternative logics, asserting identity anchors, preserving communication networks, and emphasizing constructive action. The finding of the study establishes that memes foster community participation by disseminating messages of resilience throughout social media platforms, and fostering a sense of oneness among users. The findings from the study demonstrate how communication theory of resilience for explaining the dissemination of messages. Meanwhile, the importance of situational crisis communication theory has been established by different scholars (Coombs, 2017; Coombs, 2020; Coombs et al., 2022). This accentuates the relevance of understanding the use of memes for crisis communication. Chewning et al. (2013) revealed that memes' efficacy as resilience communication tools has the capacity to demonstrate resilience messages, which may be widely disseminated due to the quick spread of memes on social media platforms. The study shows that these memes empowered collective resilience that is durable and adaptable.

Sterbenz et al. (2010) carried out a survey on resilience and survivability in communication networks, focusing on strategies, principles, and survey of disciplines. The finding revealed that memes frequently contain humour which has been demonstrated to dramatically lower tension and anxiety. Meanwhile, the finding of the study also shows that amusing memes offer psychological comfort and support people in keeping a good attitude in the face of hardship. The study demonstrates that these memes contribute to the preservation of mental health and offer emotional benefit for essential component of resilience communication. The study concluded that resilience communication may be made more appealing and accessible through the use of comedy in memes which broadens their appeal and impact. The findings buttressed the importance of adopting humourous and emotional approaches to communication.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of memes as a messaging strategy for resilience and crisis communication reveals the transformative role in modern digital interactions. Initially rooted in entertainment, memes have evolved into powerful communication tools capable of conveying complex emotions, ideas, and social commentaries with remarkable speed and reach. Their viral nature, combined with emotional resonance and relatability, which makes them highly effective in disseminating critical information during crises. Memes can quickly spread messages, counteract misinformation, and foster a sense of community among those affected. Meanwhile, by blending humor and satire, they provide a unique means to address serious issues, helping to alleviate fear and anxiety while encouraging collective action. The ability to bridge the gap between formal communication and public discourse positions memes as indispensable in shaping public opinion and behaviour.

Moreover, memes have demonstrated their value in resilience communication by offering a platform for expressing shared experiences and fostering emotional connections. They empower individuals and communities to cope with adversity, using humour and relatability to make complex concepts more accessible. Memes contribute to the promotion of resilience by reinforcing social bonds and enabling people to find solidarity in difficult situations. Their capacity to resonate culturally and emotionally ensures that they remain relevant and

impactful in digital communication. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the role of memes in engaging audiences, building community, and promoting resilience will likely become even more pronounced, solidifying their place as central tools in both crisis and resilience communication strategies.

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