

Ethical Corporate Communication in the Age of Digital Misinformation: Examining KPLC's Responses to Fake News on Facebook and Twitter

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest post-COVID-19 outcomes is the rapid adoption of digital communication by institutions and organizations, both within institutions and with consumers and other stakeholders. Despite this positive trend, communication in the digital space also brought forth prevalent sharing of fake news and misinformation, as well as new ethical dilemmas regarding digital communication. In order to determine if corporate communication ethics are upheld, this study examined the prevalent types of fake news that target KPLC and the different reactions by KPLC. The study's objectives were to: identify the kinds of misinformation and fake news that target KPLC on Facebook and Twitter; analyze KPLC's communication response tactics to false information and fake news on Facebook and Twitter; and determine whether KPLC's responses to false information and fake news on Facebook adhere to ethical corporate communication principles. The research was grounded in gatekeeping theory and social media responsibility theory. A thematic content analysis that employed stratified purposive sampling to identify content made up of posts on KPLC's Facebook and Twitter official pages as well as online reports from fact checking agencies on data that related to fake news targeting KPLC were analyzed. The study determined that popular fake news and misinformation targeting KPLC include fake recruitment posts, false notices on power outage, and fake digital accounts. Further, the study established that dominant KPLC communication responses entail warnings, creating awareness, and clarifications. The study also concluded that KPLC upheld ethical principles like timeliness, reducing harm, and transparency. The findings confirm that, indeed, social media is full of fake news and misinformation, and corporations have a duty to ensure they tackle the fake news ethically to maintain brand reputation.

Keywords: Fake news, misinformation, ethical principles, gatekeeping, social responsibility

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital channels has made knowledge readily available. However, not every piece of information shared is useful, and many users cannot discriminate between truth and lies. Njagi (2025) discovered that disinformation in Kenya is primarily transmitted online by organizations, individuals, and influencers who create fictitious social media accounts for hidden purposes (Njagi, 2025). Social media platforms foster misinformation and deception because of their speed and interaction (Maisiodo & Ong'ong'a, 2025). Research has concentrated on identifying and halting hoaxes and disinformation (Arun, 2019), primarily on social digital platforms (Shu & Liu, 2019; Yang et al., 2019), but consensus remains elusive (Shu et al., 2020). The surge of counterfeit news presents a significant challenge for social media crisis communication, highlighting a need for effective strategies to address this prevalent issue (Jahng, 2021)

Fake news is defined as 'fabricated information that resembles news media content in form but differs in organizational process or intent' (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). This paper examined fake news in the form of misinformation and disinformation targeting Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC)'s official Facebook page and X (Twitter).

Many individuals obtain their news from social media, where platform-driven dissemination that prioritizes user interaction is the primary source of misinformation. These platforms lack efficient vetting procedures. The fact that exposure to false information might undermine faith in the truth itself is a major worry. Through the "truth effect," repeated messaging—whether true or not, gradually increase perceived credibility, allowing misinformation to endure long after it has been corrected. Because of this, it is challenging to identify accurate and truthful information in a setting where false information is prevalent and persistent (Ecker et al., 2017).

In an attempt to solve the above problem, this paper analyzed: prevalent forms of fake news, response strategies and the ethical responsibility of corporations in mitigating fake news, with an aim to offer solutions that can be used to minimize harm done by fake news on digital platforms.

Statement of the Problem

In the digital age, fake news is ubiquitous and presents serious problems for businesses, undermining crisis communication and reputation management. While existing research has explored strategies in these areas, a notable gap remains regarding how organizations address the specific threats posed by misinformation. Jahng et al. (2020) stated that there has been little research on how false news may be disastrous for business brands, and that public relations experts have begun to use a variety of strategies to combat fake news.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by analyzing the intersection of crisis communication and reputation management within the context of fake news, with an emphasis on identifying effective ethical strategies and best practices to mitigate reputational harm. The lack of empirical data and theoretical frameworks specifically focused on the influence of fake news on these strategies underscores a critical research gap that this study seeks to address (Gasana, 2024)

Study Objectives

This study was guided by the following three objectives

1. To identify the types of fake news and misinformation targeting KPLC on Facebook and Twitter.
2. To examine KPLC's communication response strategies to fake news and misinformation on Facebook and Twitter.
3. To assess whether KPLC's responses to fake news and misinformation on Facebook reflect principles of ethical corporate communication.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Gatekeeping Theory

The study draws on gatekeeping theory invented by Kurt Lewin in 1943 and defined as filtering information before public dissemination. It envisions social structures as exerting power or pressure that eventually influence the bulletin produced by journalists (Vos & Russell, 2019). In traditional media and productions of organizations' messages, this involves media personnel and corporate communication managers serving as gatekeepers selecting, editing, and approving news before publication (Oputa et al., 2025). However, internet media and user-generated content have weakened these systems allowing unverified and often inaccurate content to spread widely due to limited editorial oversight and questions of accountability as users, platforms, and algorithms now act as gatekeepers (Almakaty, 2025; Oputa et al., 2025).

Social Responsibility Theory

The study was further guided by social responsibility theory amended in 2010 by McQuail, given its proposition that the media's responsibility is to avoid journalism-related controversies such as prejudice, invasion of privacy, misinformation, and violations of public taste through censoring material (Asemah, et al., 2017). Its basic notion is that media and communication have an ethical commitment to serve society

responsibly by upholding ideals such as truthfulness, accountability, and public interest rather than economic or political considerations (Cobbe, 2021). Social responsibility theory therefore illustrates why gatekeeping is important in a misinformation-rich world. Practically, digital settings impede the successful execution of the ideal ethical frameworks provided by social responsibility theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON FAKE NEWS AND CORPORATIONS

Defining Fake News

Fake news is defined as "false or inaccurate information, particularly that which is purposefully intended to deceive, confuse, manipulate, or influence public opinion." It has an intentional dimension, a hoax, or a misleading element that sets it apart from usual human blunders (Frank, 2015; Terian, 2021). According to Zuckerman, it is a broad and confusing word that encompasses anything from fake news that does not warrant our attention to propaganda and disinformation. (Zuckerman, 2017)

Causes of Fake News

Currently, digital platforms serve as important sources of news, but the task of confirming news trustworthiness falls on the public, who are frequently untrained in authentication (Kim et al., 2019). Social media's news stream automatically aggregates content from friends, prior actions, and marketers, making it difficult for users to identify trustworthy sources (Kim & Dennis, 2019). Research indicates that false information travels more swiftly and extensively on social media than true information across all categories (Vosoughi et al., 2018), raising concerns about social media's detrimental effects, often referred to as its "dark side" (Talwar et al., 2020).

The internet's free-access model has weakened traditional publishers' subscription revenue, leaving no current replacement for print advertising revenue (Sehat, 2022). In 2016, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter added cautions such as "Misleading Information" and "Disputed Claim," which may include links to outside sources for additional information, in response to worries about fake news (Lazer et al, 2018). These methods aim to identify unreliable content and boost news credibility in the face of widespread misinformation. (Twitter, 2020)

Algorithms drive platform news transmission, with far-reaching consequences. Online news products use algorithms for prioritizing, classification, and filtering (Montaña-Niño, 2020). News algorithms have an impact on creators, or the number of channels that can be fiscally compensated, by recognizing and ranking newsworthy content for distribution. They also influence the topics that increase grip in the media and civic discourse in general. (Baum, 2020).

Characteristics and Elements of Fake News

Fake news makes bogus accusations or opinions without supporting proof. It lacks distinct sources and is based on unknown ones (M & Hairunnisa, 2023). It uses intriguing and provocative features to catch the interest of readers and viewers. Catchy names, ludicrous charges, or spectacular incidents are regularly used to catch public attention and elicit strong emotional responses like surprise, disgust, and fear thus encouraging sharing (Kaplan & Mazurek, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Fake news articles spread quickly on social media misleading huge audiences, leading to bad decisions and undermining the credibility of critical information. This viral dissemination of false tales incites controversy and emotional reactions, undermines public understanding of topics, personalities, and brands and limits distribution of accurate information in digital settings (Jahng, 2021; Shin et al., 2018).

Crisis Communication

Organizations use crisis communication as a strategic method to manage and lessen the impact of unforeseen events that endanger their operations, stakeholders, or reputation. In order to provide correct information, lower anxiety, and direct responses to lessen the impacts of a crisis, effective crisis communication is essential

to emergency management (Coombs, 2014). It entails promptly disseminating trustworthy information, actively involving stakeholders, and taking immediate action to effectively manage emergencies. Its primary objective is to prevent false information and maintain confidence, both of which are necessary for a successful response (Boman & Schneider, 2021; Chen & Cheng, 2023; Kim & Lim, 2023). Crisis communication has historically relied on human knowledge and physical procedures, which have been successful over time (Ozanne et al., 2020). However, contemporary crises pose difficulties that call for the real-time, multi-channel dissemination of information, rendering conventional approaches inadequate. (Coombs, 2014)

Role of AI In Crisis Communication

AI has become a groundbreaking instrument that improves communication. It is essential for crisis management because of its ability to quickly examine massive volumes of data from news, social digital platforms, and other sources (Rane et al., 2024). Organizations can react proactively because of their ability to identify new risks, measure public sentiment, and forecast crises (Farrokhi et al., 2020). AI is important in crisis communication at several phases (Cheng et al., 2024). In California, for example, AI systems recognized high-risk fire zones and sent out early alerts.

Despite its great characteristics, AI confronts various hurdles such as algorithmic bias, which can sway opinions about news reliability, favoring or opposing specific articles, themes, or sources. Algorithmic bias has received less attention in content moderation (Cheng et al., 2025). Furthermore, in complex applications like fake news identification, the test data frequently does not reflect the real-world distribution. (Bengio et al., 2021). Standard accuracy results are based on the assumption that the deployment environment matches training settings, which is improbable owing to socially impacted, ever-changing information and intrinsic variations (Hutchinson et al., 2022). Addressing these issues is critical for creating effective and equitable AI applications.

Effects of Fake News

Consuming and sharing broadcast content online puts people at risk for a variety of reasons. First, control over news sources is limited, as algorithms promote content from many outlets, some of which could be fraudulent. (Kim & Dennis, 2019). Second, the huge volume of circulating news can overwhelm users, leaving them unsure of what to believe (Moravec et al., 2019). Third, sharing fake news can damage personal relationships and harm credibility with others (Duffy et al., 2020). Finally, relying on false information can lead to harmful decisions in investments (Ullah et al., 2014), purchasing (Visentin et al., 2019), and politics.

Methods Used to Mitigate Fake News

To counteract fake news, corporate communication officers may employ strategies such as exposing erroneous claims, giving cautionary messages, and evaluating sources and publications (Ecker et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2019; Moravec et al., 2019). While warning messages appear on social media concurrently with the news, debunking communications typically happen after a story has been published, often as retractions (Gwebu et al., 2022). Gwebu et al. 2022 further advise that simple warnings don't stop people with strong emotional trust from disseminating false information and only work when the news goes against the viewers' ideological beliefs, suggesting that not every user should receive the same warning messages. Other ways include teaching staff about communication standards and procedures, as well as signing contracts to ensure compliance (Isiaka et al., 2023).

Responsibilities of News Platforms and Organizations

To guarantee the accuracy of the information given to the public, news platforms and organizations must take responsibility for preventing the dissemination of incorrect information. They must have a strong procedure in place to check the authenticity of material before making it available to the public. They must implement journalism procedures that comply with high ethical and professional standards. (M&Hairunnisa, 2023). This includes extensive research and fact checking before publication to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of material.

Ethical Obligation of Corporate Communication Managers in Combating Fake News

Corporate managers must always keep an eye on any news pertaining to their brands and create plans of action and management strategies to address false information and protect brand reputations (Teichmann et al., 2023). To tackle false news situations, practitioners must first establish themselves as trusted counselors, and in the event of a crisis, they must establish an independent decision-making process and movement (Lambert et al., 2024). In addition, they should do fact checking, which may encourage negations of disinformation and decrease users' inclination to propagate misinformation (Schuetz et al., 2021).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative design to explore KPLC's responses to fake news on Facebook and Twitter. Understanding KPLC's responses to fake news on Facebook and Twitter (X) requires grasping the gist, context, institutional logistics, and ethics rather than quantitative data; thus, a qualitative approach was more suitable (Creswell, 2014). The research adopted the interpretivist paradigm, treating reality as a social construction created through human connections, communication, and institutional practices (Creswell, 2009). The study therefore conceptualized KPLC responses as mediated by ethics, institutional culture, and audience or consumer expectations. Consequently, from an interpretive approach, the study treated fake news as mediated by social context, hence the focus on the period between 2020 and 2026.

The research particularly used a qualitative thematic content analysis design employing stratified purposive sampling to select data from reports published by independent fact checking organisations (Africa Check and Pesa Check) as well as posts on KPLC's official Facebook and Twitter pages as digital platforms prevalently used to spread fake news on corporations in Kenya. According to Nowell et al. (2017), with reference to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves identifying, evaluating, arranging, describing, discussing and documenting themes found in the collected data. Stratified purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that user-level deception and other forms of disinformation were identified on KPLC social media pages, to enable researchers to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014). The strata were classified as official pages and external brand impersonation. Under the official page, the study examined user postings and tweets that directly addressed official Kenya Power updates, while under external brand impersonation, posts that featured Kenya Power's keywords or visual brand identifiers, as posted by external accounts, were examined.

The posts flagged as fake were grouped under the following categories (fake job adverts, fake blackout alerts, and scam tokens). The posts that were selected for the study had misinformation indicators such as fabricated adverts bearing the KPLC logo, posts that were directing consumers to alternative sites to purchase tokens, for example, giving unverified M-Pesa pay bills, and content that was debunked by Kenya Power accounts using their official “#FakeNewsAlert.”

The data was studied using comparative verification, which involved researchers cross-referencing sampled fake reports with actual corporate communications and independent fact-checking records to map out the anatomy of the company's deception and reaction techniques.

In view of the study's interpretive nature, the researchers used both emerging codes and predetermined codes drawn from existing literature and fact-checking agencies like Africa Check and Pesa Check. Additionally, the study also used concepts outlined in situational crisis communication theory regarding crisis response strategies to code data. (Mower, 2015). The coding process was done in stages, where the first author coded the data (first-order analysis), trying to ensure reliability; then the code list was revised collaboratively while short notes were written on the observed patterns and findings. Afterwards, the researchers constructed themes for the fake news and responses (second-order analysis) before proceeding to analyse the ethical principles that were reflected in the responses. This approach was akin to Gioia, Corley and Hamilton's (2013) coding procedure.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDY FINDINGS

The findings are based on a thematic analysis of Africa Check and Pesa Check reports as well as purposely selected relevant misinformation cases and KPLC responses between 2020 and 2026 speak to the three research objectives: identifying the types of fake news and misinformation targeting KPLC on Facebook and Twitter; examining KPLC's communication response strategies on Facebook and Twitter and assessing the extent to which KPLC's responses reflect principles of ethical corporate communication.

Types of fake news and misinformation targeting KPLC on Facebook page and Twitter

The study determined that the most common types of fake news and misinformation targeting KPLC on Facebook and Twitter were related to recruitment; services or products offered; reputational attacks and impersonation. Fake recruitment posts portray the company's name, available positions and contact information. For instance, one post on Facebook stated *kplc kapsabet jobs available followed by a Kenyan mobile number*. Fake news content on services and products revolve around power outages, token discounts and price changes. On Twitter, a tweet read *Kenya Power announces 8-Hour Blackout in 10 Counties*. Similarly, a fake Facebook post offered the public discounted token prices which they were to obtain by contacting the provided number through WhatsApp.

The research indicates that fake news regarding KPLC's reputation are mostly based on corruption claims. For example, a Facebook post in 2022 had a memo that suggested that KPLC intended to fire staff from the Luo community implying KPLC practices nepotism. The study further determined that KPLC is a victim of impersonators. Impersonation in the digital space takes the form of fake accounts and counterfeit branding. A case in point was a tweet shared with a logo that had a slogan 'SISI NDIO TUKO' yet the official logo does not have a slogan. Also, KPLC responded to a tweet *Please ignore power-kenyXXXX it is a parody account*. These amongst other digital conversations demonstrate that KPLC faces challenges of fake power outage messages, reputational attacks, impersonation as well as fake recruitment adverts.

This corroborates the findings of Mule (2025) on a study conducted on Safaricom where it was established that fake news targeting Safaricom on Twitter normally revolve around deceptive information on changes in price and advertising messages as well as claims that the service was disrupted or the company has encountered security breaches or unauthorized access.

The deliberate use of *SISI NDIO TUKO*, the claim on firing the Luo Community and the promotional message on reduced token prices all conform to the nature of fake news maximizing on catch phrases and spectacular incidents to elicit strong emotions from the audience (Kaplan & Mazurek, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Although outside the study's focus, the paper also established an interesting theme that fake news targeting KPLC are sometimes satirical as in the slogan mentioned above and a memo that seemed to promise compensation and gave users instructions to compute their losses during a power outage then once they were done they were to trash the computed list.

KPLC's responses to fake news and misinformation on Facebook page and Twitter

The study reveals that KPLC responds to fake news both preventively and reactively. Although the study established that responses can be categorized into different themes, generally, preventive responses are cautionary in nature and aim at informing the audience to prevent them from falling victim of fake news while reactive messages are largely corrective aimed at dealing with fake news and misinformation after they have been shared. KPLC responses collected include but are not limited to: *Kindly note that there are no planned power interruptions dated tomorrow; Fake Beware of Fraudsters; Ignore above number we don't give such instructions; Fake News Please Ignore and Verify that you are using our official communication channels to ensure secure and effective service*.

From coding these responses and other responses similar in nature, the research concluded that KPLC responses to fake news and misinformation were mostly given as warnings, clarifications or educational

information meant to create awareness. The use of educational information is equally supported by Eriksson (2018) who argues that informational or educational messages help avoid “information vacuum” and create a positive impression of the corporation dealing with misinformation. KPLC’s utilization of warnings, informational messages and clarifications is further supported by Lu and Jin (2024) who contend that clarifications should be accompanied by elaborations and prebunking through educational messages and warnings which serve as “inoculation”.

Ethical principles reflected in KPLC’s responses to fake news and misinformation on Facebook and Twitter

PRSA Code of Ethics (2011) indicates that ethics is a very vital element of public relations. This study analyzed KPLC responses against ethical principles of protection from harm, timeliness and transparency which were found to be common in literature related to ethical corporate communication (Kim, 2015; Combs, 2007) KPLC posts and tweets that made clarifications on false claims enabled the researcher to deduce that KPLC responses tried to uphold transparency which Kim (2015) defines as entities giving a meaningful and correct version of themselves or situations in which they are involved. Further the study noted that KPLC adopted timeliness as most of the posts or tweets reporting false misinformation or sharing false information were responded to within the same day. This substantiates the suggestion by Kim (2015) that crisis communication requires corporations to say everything and say it fast as this helps stop rumours faster.

Lastly warning and educational responses echo the arguments by Coombs (2007) that during any crisis, in this case a fake news incident or the general prevalence of fake news and misinformation on social media, the priority should be protecting stakeholders from harm. The study thus discloses that in its response to social media misinformation, KPLC attempts to uphold common ethical principles. The attempts by Kenya power to uphold ethical corporate communication through protecting stakeholders as well as offering clarifications aligns with the company’s core values on putting the customer first and upholding integrity and accountability as outlined in Kenya power’s strategic plan 2023/24- 2027/28.

Overall, the study ascertains a global trend where institutions and organizations are adopting and utilizing social media to communicate with shareholders as well as manage reputation in the digital age, characterized by misinformation (Mule, 2025; Mabweazara & Mano, 2020). In a study by Chege (2025) on the role of digital corporate communication in enhancing customer engagement and building trust in KPLC, using social media to report power outages recorded the highest percentage followed by its use to get updates. Based on Chege’s findings, this study echoes the vitality of credible information on digital platforms as it is evident that false information may seriously impact consumers

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Through an examination of the various forms of fake news and responses on KPLC, the results demonstrate how corporate institutions are susceptible to fake news and misinformation which may have drastic social and economic impacts. Additionally, by portraying the fake news and misinformation narratives along with the responses and the ethical principles adhered to, the study shows the role and disadvantages of social media in the market sector. The study’s results indicate that social media may damage corporate reputation and affect market dynamics owing to fake news and misinformation shared about them. Conversely through practicing ethical digital communication, institutions and corporations can use digital media to engage with the audience as well as consumers and correct and manage fake news and misinformation thus building their brands. The results further point to the necessity for creating awareness on cautionary considerations while sharing information as well as how to maneuver around information available on social media to filter out fake news and misinformation. In addition, the study suggests that there is a need to develop and implement more stringent measures and policies to mitigate the misinformation menace on social platforms.

This research recommends that more studies should be conducted on corporations and the strategies they employ to manage or curb fake news and misinformation on social media. Additionally, future studies can incorporate the effect of corporations’ response strategies on the audience trust and perception of the company and also delve into fake news that are satirical in nature. The study advises that corporations should invest in

internal specialists responsible for monitoring and handling misinformation and effect prompt counter misinformation responses. Lastly, the study advocates for the strategic use of evidence, hashtags, influencers and fact checking agencies to strengthen corrective responses.

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