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Social Media And Firm Absorptive Capacity In Crisis Communication Preparedness

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Abstract

Each organization is vulnerable to any crises. A proper method to handle such event is important as it reflects organizations' reputation. However, limited studies were conducted on crisis communication preparedness in the hotel industry even though there are many inevitable events that make the industry vulnerable. Social media is commonly used to spread information on these events. However, the emphasis on its usage by the organizations is not widely discovered. In addition, capability of understanding and applying the knowledge to deal with any potential crisis situation would require further investigation on the firm. This research examined the relationship between social media usage and absorptive capacity in enhancing crisis communication preparedness. A total of 169 of questionnaires were distributed in the hotel industry, West Malaysia. The findings revealed different dimensions on the crisis communication preparedness and indicated the significant relationship between these variables. The findings help practitioners to engage in effective communication in dealing with crises.

INTRODUCTION

Each organization or industry is susceptible to any unexpected events which arise from external and internal environment. Crisis may threaten and affect the sustainability of the businesses and firms'. During a crisis, lots of information may reach the public. Some of the information is inaccurate which can tarnish firms' reputation. Hence, through crisis communication preparedness, firms' are able to maintain their image by providing accurate information to various stakeholders before, during and after a crisis (Coombs, 2014).

Generally, crisis is perceived as a situation that has a potential to occur and will give negative impacts either directly or indirectly. When a crisis occurs, firms should clearly inform and respond to their stakeholders soonest possible as failure to do so will result in negative views of various parties (Holmes, 2011; Rousaki & Alcott, 2006). Therefore, every firm should prepare themselves in managing their crisis plans in an appropriate manner. Effective communication is necessary to deliver the information available during any crisis (Penrose, 2000) and to rebuild tourist confidence aftermath of the crisis (Law, 2006). Without it, an organization is unable to deliver and communicate the information to their stakeholders' effectively as well as to retain their reputation.

As tourism is a one of the industry sub sectors in Malaysia, the hotels have significantly contributed to the nation economy (Sumarjan & Arendt, 2011). However, Wang & Ritchie (2013) discovered the level of crisis preparedness in hotel industry is low even though this industry is prone to many external crises. Previous studies on hotel industry have used specific crises such as health, safety and nature environmental issues to explain on organization communication preparedness towards the crises. As these studies have been context specific, it is important to take a broader look at the situation that affects the industry. Since there are limited studies on the crisis management particularly in crisis communication preparedness at the tourism industry in Malaysia (Ghaderi, Soma & Henderson, 2012), this study seems appropriate.

Moreover, in order to handle the issue of crisis communication, several methods are suggested especially on the use of proper channel and firms own strength to deal with the situation. However, despite Hamann (2012) and Liu, Kim & Gray (2015) suggestion on the usage of social media as a tool in crisis communication, many companies do not make an effort to utilize its existence. Gray, Kaplanidou & Schroeder (2013) also reveal that there are relatively few studies that examine the usage of social media in service industry as compared to other industries. Furthermore, firm needs to continuously acquire and search new knowledge or information. In order to be well prepared for any situation, Paraskevas & Altinay (2013) suggest that tourism industry must learn from the previous experience to deal with the unexpected crises in future. However, there are limited studies that attempted to investigate the firms' learning effort in their preparedness on crisis communication. One of the methods to learn and re-learn is to improve in firms' absorptive capacity (Zahra & George, 2002). As the study on absorptive capacity is under explored in crisis communication preparedness, this study also intends to investigate the influence of firm absorptive capacity in enhancing crisis communication preparedness at the hotel industry. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

1. To determine the relationship between the usage of social media and crisis communication preparedness
2. To determine the relationship between firm absorptive capacity and crisis communication preparedness

This paper is arranged as follows. After the brief introduction on the issues and the objectives of this study, review of literature will be presented follows by research method and findings of this study, finally, discussion and conclusion will be elaborated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Communication Preparedness

According to Carmeli & Schaubroeck (2008), crisis communication preparedness involves a process to monitor and analyze any factors that may disrupt their operations and businesses. The existence of a proactive planning includes development of procedures and policies to be complied during a crisis (Penrose, 2000). Palttala & Vos (2011) believe that preparedness in the crisis management process helps the firm to reduce the impact of the crisis. Therefore, effective crisis management is beneficial in order to mitigate the impact of crisis by focusing on planning and preparation (Selart, Johansen & Nesse, 2012).

Preparedness towards crisis should also emphasize the way firms respond and communicate to the public or stakeholders with respect to the events. Any firm which is unable to inform and respond towards on any crisis will cause public confusion due to probability of inaccurate information (Carvell, 1996). As mentioned by Ritchie et al. (2003), crisis communication preparedness should be seen as an integral part in managing communication in an organization. Crisis communication does not only focus during and aftermath of crisis, but also before the crisis happens. Thus, it is an ongoing process that helps an organization to respond effectively and efficiently to the public or stakeholders (Holmes, 2011). Based on the existing literature, there are several key dimensions on the level of crisis preparedness in the organization. Most also have investigated the role of organizational spokesperson in three different situations which are before; during and after occurrence of crisis (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006; Heide & Simonsson, 2014).

They discover that an organizational internal aspect is significant but these spokespersons only response when the information's are required and sadly, their practices are not clear. Therefore, this study focuses on the strength of firm internal function, with two dimensions namely tactical preparedness and maintenance of contact lists. Moreover, it is important for the firm to periodically update their stakeholders' details in order to let them know on the latest news or information (Pollard & Hotho, 2006). As suggested by Caponigro (2000), a firm is required to retain details of their stakeholders to respond effectively. Employees are also one of the firm stakeholders'. Through updating and maintaining their details, a firm can identify an employee that possess valuable skills and abilities that may help to achieve firm goals.

Usage of Social Media and Crisis Communication Preparedness

The usage of social media is important in preparing for crisis communication as it is able to facilitate the communication process and accelerate access for information (Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013). Meanwhile, Holmes (2011) discovered some companies have installed an integrated social media and utilize it as their tool for crisis communication. Further, he suggests that a crisis communicator or spokesperson of the organization can spread the messages or crises news by using the online application available in the organizations. Similarly, Shin & Cameron (2005) propose public relations practitioners are the key person who communicate and deliver precious information to the stakeholders' when crisis happen. This allows the public to receive quick response from the firm that is involved in the crisis situations. Most importantly, public perception towards the firm depends on how the firm communicates with them (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Therefore, media play an important role because they have the power to shape the perception of the public towards organization through the information that will be disseminated.

According to American Public Health Association (2013), firm's can employ social media as a tool to acquire knowledge that can help improve their crisis preparation to interact and deliver the critical information to external peoples. Social media usage is also useful to tourism and hotel industry because the management can update any news to the potential tourists and their stakeholders prior, within and after the crises (Gray, Kaplanidou & Schroeder, 2013). It is because the nature of social media itself that is directly and quickly reaches anyone who requires the information.

Therefore, in preparing for crisis communication, an organization should consider utilizing of social media not only as one of the sources to get knowledge but also to update the information (Young, Flowers & Ren, 2011). From that, the manager may use the information to plan and prepare for the unexpected events. Besides that, Vasquez and Velez (2011) highlight the important on usage of social media in order to improve an organization's crisis communication.

Previous work on social media investigated the importance to use it as a medium to respond quickly when information needed by public on the crises issues that occur (Bharati, Zhang & Chaudhury, 2013; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). They found slow responses to the public directly effectuate the negatives view of people towards the organization, indirectly, tarnish their reputations.

Firm Absorptive Capacity and Crisis Communication Preparedness

In addition to using the social media as a tool to reach to their stakeholders, firms must equip themselves with internal capabilities. Cohen & Levinthal (1990) introduced the concept of absorptive capacity from organizational level perspective. They define the term absorptive capacity (ACAP) as "an ability of firm to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it and apply it to commercial ends" (p. 128). Meanwhile, Zahra et al. (2002) describe the absorptive capacity as a "set of organizational routines and processes by which firms acquire, assimilate, transform and exploit knowledge to produce a dynamic organizational capability" (p. 186). Besides that, they proposed two subsets in an absorptive capacity study which are potential absorptive capacity and realized absorptive capacity. According to Lane & Lubatkin (1998) potential absorptive capacity (PACAP) refers to the capability of the firm to acquire and assimilate external knowledge while realized absorptive capacity (RACAP) refers to how these external knowledge can be utilized by the firm which includes knowledge transformation and exploitation. Similarly, Zahra et al. (2002), propose there are four dimensions of absorptive capacity which are acquisition, assimilation, transformation and exploitation.

Previous study confirmed that resource based is one of the attributes which influences firm crisis communication preparedness for tourism industry (Kerlin & Bussy, 2006). Parakevas, Altinay, McLean & Cooper (2013) highlight the importance of acquiring knowledge to enhance detection of crisis. Therefore, firms are able to update and communicate the crisis information appropriately. Furthermore, managing intangible knowledge is more vital as compared to tangible resource for the firm to sustain in their current businesses (Paraskevas et al. 2013). In addition, generating the knowledge acquired not only give an advantages to the tourism destination manager, but also to the hotel industry in order to manage and prepare their crisis plan effectively (Bouncken & Sungsoo, 2002). When a crisis happens, the firms have to provide relevant information to the public immediately. It is important for the spokesperson of the firms to continuously acquire knowledge and information because they are responsible to manage the communication flow between the firms and public before, during and after the crisis (Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

These representatives are also required to explain the crisis occurrence by responding to the questions asked by various parties. Therefore, the external knowledge that has been acquired should be understood and analyzed in order to communicate to the public. It can help maintain the organization's image by providing the proper information. Subsequently, firms have to evaluate their performance whether they have achieved the goals through current strategies. The managers' assess the external knowledge acquired and merge with the current strategies in order to strengthen the organizational internal capability (Lane et al. 1998). As mentioned by Paraskevas & Altinay (2013) one of the most critical aspects in managing knowledge of crisis is the communication. As tourism industry encountered with various types of crises, knowledge is important in order to adapt and respond to crisis situations.

As supported by Ritchie et al. (2003) better preparedness for crisis communication is influenced by acquiring and managing of knowledge (Ritchie, 2004). Other than knowledge, learning also is an essential part of the firm's absorptive capacity. Several authors have verified the relationship between firm absorptive capacity with organizational learning (Young et al. 2011; Lane et al. 1998; Lane et al. 2006). Therefore, this study will focus on how the firm absorptive capacity influences the crisis communication preparedness through a learning process. As suggested by Lane, Koka & Pathak (2006), three dimensions are related to the learning process namely acquisition, assimilation and transformation. Hence, this study will use only use these three dimensions.

The Kidnappers of Pulau Sipadan in 2000, the September 11th in 2001, Bali Bombing incident in 2002 and the current issue of Middle East respiratory syndrome corona virus (MERS-CoV) infection gives an impact to the tourism and hotel industry. Realizing this, the managers of these industries understand the significance of preparedness towards crisis particularly in crisis communication. It also indicates how the organization can learn from the past crises to create better strategies (Blackman & Ritchie, 2010). It is because through learning process, firms are ready to adapt the changes in external environment (Carmeli et al. 2008). Besides that, Blackman et al. (2010) also highlight the importance of learning that may encourage the organization to revise their communication strategies to improve preparedness of crisis communication and maintain rapport with the public and stakeholders through keeping their details for communication purpose (Blackman et al. 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population for this study comprised of hotels located in West Malaysia. In total there are 303 hotels with rating of three to five stars operating in West Malaysia (Official Website of Tourism Malaysia, 2014). Accordingly Krejcie and Morgan (1990), with such size, the sample is 169.

For this study, questionnaires were distributed to three to five stars hotel that was randomly selected in West Malaysia. The unit of analysis for this study is organizational level. The questionnaires were answered by the public relations practitioners or human resource practitioners as the hotel representative. Only 156 of respondents returned the completed questionnaires.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Profile of Respondents

The respond rate for this study is 92%.Majority of respondents' location are hotels from Selangor (23.1%), followed by Kuala Lumpur (19.2%)and the lowest participation are hotels from Perlis and Terengganu with 1 hotel respectively (0.6%). In term of the number of years in operation, the result showed 52.6 % has been in operation for more than five years, 28.8% for three to five years, and 18.6% has been operating their business for one to three years. Most of the respondents that involved in this study are three stars hotels (37.8%), followed by four stars hotels (35.9%). The remaining 26.3% are participated by five stars hotels. The result shows 60.3% of the respondents who answered the survey questions are public relations practitioners and 39.7% as human resource practitioners.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted in order to summarize the information contained in a large number of variables into a smaller number of factors (Zikmund, 2002).The result would help the researcher to ascertain whether the same dimensions for each variable would remain consistent to earlier suggestion or whether a reduction or addition of dimensions. Varimax rotation was done in order to simplify complexity of factors by maximize variance of loadings on each dimension (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

From the factor analysis, several items were dropped while there are items that load into a different dimension. Initially, under crisis communication preparedness, there were two dimensions. However, after the rotation, the

items load into three dimensions. The first component, tactical preparedness (TP) has only three items from the original four. One of the items is not taken into account as it is extracted into the third components. Meanwhile for maintenance of contact list (CL), the items load into two components producing two dimensions. The first components consist of three items but due to cross loading of item CL3, it is drop for further analysis, leaving only two items. This component is re-labelled as maintenance of employees' contact list. Three more items load well into another component which is labelled as maintenance of stakeholders' contact list. While for social media, all items load well into one dimension.

Under absorptive capacity, the items load into different components for acquisition (AC) and assimilation (ASM). From the original four items, only three items under AC remains with an inclusion of one item from ASM. While for assimilation, only two items remain under that component. All items remain as it is under transformation (TRM). The Cronbach's Alpha analysis was conducted to indicate the reliability of an instrument. The Cronbach's Alpha values ranges from 0.63 to 0.86 which indicates acceptable reliability and can be used for further analysis. The details are presented under Table 1.

TABLE 1
FACTOR ANALYSIS ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION PREPAREDNESS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY

Items	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<u>Tactical Preparedness (TP)</u>							
$\alpha = 0.81$							
TC1	.85	.13	.14				
TC2	.73	.13	.11				
TC3	.84	.12	.21				
TC4	.36	.09	.55				
<u>Maintenance of Contact Lists (CL)</u>							
$\alpha = 0.78$							
CL1	.17	.10	.82				
CL2	.11	.18	.80				
CL3	-.09	.58	.52				
CL4	.00	.83	.12				
CL5	.33	.77	.14				
CL6	.41	.70	.10				
<u>Social Media Usage (SM)</u>							
$\alpha = 0.86$							
SM1				.87			
SM2				.80			
SM3				.80			
SM4				.79			
SM5				.71			
SM6				.64			
<u>Acquisition (AC)</u>							
$\alpha = 0.65$							
AC1					.40	.40	.26
AC2					.53	.04	.09
AC3					.81	.11	.00
AC4					.73	.18	.08
<u>Assimilation (ASM)</u>							
$\alpha = 0.63$							
ASM1					.54	.16	.28
ASM2					.12	.06	.83
ASM3					.14	.21	.79
<u>Transformation (TRM)</u>							
$\alpha = 0.66$							
TRM1					.07	.71	.24
TRM2					.05	.77	.08
TRM3					.11	.58	.04
TRM4					.40	.59	.00

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation test was conducted in order to achieve the objectives of this study. The dimension of crisis communication preparedness significantly correlated with one another and with all the variables. The relationship among tactical preparedness and absorptive capacity dimensions produce significant relationship. The correlation between tactical preparedness with assimilation indicates low relationship ($r=.29$, $p=.01$), acquisition ($r=.39$, $p=.01$) and transformation ($r=.41$, $p=.01$) indicates moderate relationship, while, the correlation between tactical preparedness with social media shows the strong relationship ($r=.72$, $p=.01$).

In the meantime, the maintenance of stakeholders' contact lists also indicates significant relationship with social media and all dimensions of absorptive capacity. There is a moderate relationship with social media ($r=.42$, $p=.01$) and transformation ($r=.33$, $p=.01$), however the correlation with acquisition ($r=.29$, $p=.01$) and assimilation ($r=.19$, $p=.05$) shows low relationship. The results also reveal that there is a significant relationship between employees' contact lists' with usage of social media and absorptive capacity. The results also revealed the moderate relationship between maintenance of employees' contact lists with social media ($r=.46$, $p=.01$), acquisition ($r=.35$, $p=.01$) and transformation ($r=.43$, $p=.01$). While, low relationship between assimilation and maintenance of employees' contact lists ($r=.19$, $p=.05$). However, it is still significantly and positively correlated. The results of the correlation analysis of all variables are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS STATISTICS FOR ALL VARIABLES IN THE STUDY FRAMEWORK

	TP	MSCL	MECL	SM	AC	TRM	ASM
<u>Dependent Variable</u>							
Tactical Preparedness	1						
Maintenance of Stakeholders' Contact Lists	.41**	1					
Maintenance of Employees' Contact Lists	.41**	.40**	1				
<u>Independent Variable</u>							
Social Media Usage	.72**	.42**	.46**	1			
Firm absorptive Capacity							
Acquisition	.39**	.29**	.35**	.36**	1		
Transformation	.41**	.33**	.43**	.34**	.41**	1	
Assimilation	.29**	.19*	.19*	.29*	.32**	.34**	1

DISCUSSION

The result of this study reveals different dimensions of crisis communication preparedness as compared to the previous studies. Initially, they were two dimensions namely tactical preparedness and maintenance of contact lists'. However, after factor analysis was conducted three dimensions emerge. There are tactical preparedness, maintenance of stakeholders' contact lists and maintenance of employees' contact lists. Meanwhile, for social media, there is no change on the dimension of items. Simultaneously, with absorptive capacity where the dimensions remain three, but the items load into different dimensions.

Additionally, this study revealed all three dimensions of crisis communication preparedness have a significant relationship with social media usage. The findings are consistent with study by Hamann (2012) and Liu et al. (2015). Hamann (2012) discover that social media usage have a high and positive relationship with crisis communication preparedness while Liu et al., (2015) also report that hotel industry needs to strengthen their social media tools as a platform to interact with stakeholders'. As suggested by Gray et al. (2013), social media usage is able to assist the hotel industry get latest information and alert with crisis which occurring surrounding them. By that, they can enhance their preparedness and be ready to respond as require by stakeholders'. Moreover, study carried out by Vasquez and Velez (2011) showed that there is positive relationship between

social media usage and crisis communication preparedness in the context of stakeholders' details. As such, organizations need to regularly update the contact information such as phone number and e-mail.

This study also found that three dimensions of crisis communication preparedness significantly related to the absorptive capacity. The findings are also consistent with the previous studies as mentioned by Paraskevas et al. (2013; Bharati et al. 2013). As stated by Wigley et al. (2011) knowledge is vital to hotel industry because through knowledge they are able to respond to the crises appropriately. Furthermore, the result by Paraskevas et al. (2013) verified the important element to manage a crisis is communication preparedness. An organization needs to have not only sufficient but also accurate information to deliver proper information when required by their stakeholders'. Good communications strengthen a rapport between them (Blackman & Ritchie, 2010).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed significant relationship between social media, absorptive capacity with crisis communication preparedness. The findings contribute to organizational renewal theory as it encourages organization to use external knowledge. Simultaneously with effective use of social media and learning, the organization can prepare themselves for future events. The practitioners are encouraged to use social media and accumulated knowledge to benefit their organization. Social media helps in monitoring the public perception and on the organization and industry as a whole. Meanwhile, the accumulated knowledge is gained through the organizational interaction with external parties, employees, and these knowledge sharing and dissemination help in seizing opportunities. These activities enhance the organizational value.

However, there are few limitations whereby the study can be enhanced further by incorporating a larger sample size especially those prone to crisis area. It is suggested that future studies engaged a similar method to test at a different location.

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