

HOW VIETNAMESE ORGANIZATIONS PERCEIVE THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Social media has proliferated into everyday life of Vietnamese people. As a result, in the past years, Vietnam has seen many organizational crises that started on this platform. Social media has proven to be able to foster crises, thanks to open platforms that allow for relatively free discussion among strangers with common interests. Nonetheless, Vietnamese organizations have often ignored or underutilized these channels in their crisis communication efforts. Organizations prioritize using traditional media in their crisis communication efforts and paid little to no attention to social media outlets, even if the crisis had started on social media channels. Through a survey with experienced Vietnamese PR practitioners, this research aims to understand this trend of crisis management and explore the perception of Vietnamese organizations toward the use of social media in crisis communication.

Keywords: social media, adoption, crisis communication, crisis response, Vietnam

ABSTRAK

Media sosial telah menjamur ke dalam kehidupan sehari-hari rakyat di Vietnam. Akibatnya, dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, Vietnam telah melihat banyak krisis organisasi yang dimulai pada platform ini. Media sosial telah terbukti mampu menumbuhkan krisis, berkat platform terbuka yang memungkinkan diskusi bebas untuk kepentingan bersama. Meskipun demikian, organisasi di Vietnam sering mengabaikan atau kurang memanfaatkan saluran-saluran ini dalam upaya krisis komunikasi yang mereka alami. Organisasi lebih memprioritaskan menggunakan media tradisional dalam upaya menanggulangi krisis komunikasi mereka dan sedikit memberikan perhatian kepada outlet media sosial, bahkan jika krisis telah dimulai pada saluran media sosial. Melalui survei yang dilakukan oleh praktisi PR di Vietnam yang berpengalaman, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami tren manajemen krisis ini dan mengeksplorasi persepsi organisasi di Vietnam terhadap penggunaan media sosial dalam komunikasi krisis.

Kata kunci: media sosial, adopsi, komunikasi krisis, respons krisis, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

More than 48 percent of the country's population can be found on social media, with even higher percentages among younger demographics with whom it has become the most popular means of communication (Kemp, 2017). As a result of its proliferation into everyday life of Vietnamese people, it makes sense that more business crises are spreading there. Social media has proven itself more than capable of fostering crises, thanks to open platforms that allow for relatively free discussion among strangers with common interests. Easy sharing, powerful influencers, and the tendency of negative posts to gather attention have led to numerous stories which began on social media to become viral and escalate into full-on crises.

Despite its prevalence, Vietnamese companies generally fail to fully take advantage of social media in crisis response, preferring traditional media outlets such as press releases and press conferences, even when the crisis is born on social media. The public relations field in Vietnam has historically focused on marketing and reputation management, neglecting crisis response (Van, 2013). This study is intended to focus on the underreported topic of how organizations use social media during a crisis, and why so many still do not.

2. Literature Review

Differences of opinion on the trustworthiness of social media are not new. Study results have differed on whether social media is as credible as traditional media (as supported by Austin *et al.*, 2012 and Procopio & Procopio, 2007) or less credible (as in Richter, 2014). The Vietnamese Ministry of Information and Communication's Media Department has stated that Vietnamese people now trust social media more than traditional

media, but cited no studies leading to this conclusion (Bao Dien Tu DCSVN, 2012).

In 2017, Vietnam had an estimated 46 million social media users among its population of 93 million, a number that has surely grown considering that the country is listed among the fastest for digital growth (Kemp, 2017). Studies have found that social media is useful for offering stakeholders a convenient channel to communicate with organizations during a crisis (Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015). They emphasize its ability to keep stakeholders up to date and offer community and support (Austin *et al.*, 2012; Procopio & Procopio, 2007).

Nonetheless, in the author's review of published media articles on previous crises from 2010-2015, social media received little attention from Vietnamese organizations, even if a crisis had started on social media, and traditional media was always a preferred communication platform. Not only have social media in Vietnamese crisis communication received little attention, but so has research in public relations (PR) in the country in general. Among the few literature on this topic, One of a very limited number of studies on the Vietnamese PR industry is by Van (2013), where she found that that Vietnamese PR practice is under-developed and Vietnamese organizations have preferred using traditional media during crises.

2.1. Social media is a useful tool for crisis communication.

Organizations can use social media tools during a crisis to update stakeholders, keep them in the loop, and work together to find a satisfactory solution (Ulmer *et al.*, 2015). Speed, ease of access, and a personal communication are the most recognized advantages of social media. Schultz *et al.*, (2012), in their review of the existing literature, iterate these as its key advantages. Taking advantage of these aspects can make organizations appear

more caring, concerned and committed, improving its reputation during and after a crisis (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Kerkhof *et al.*, 2011).

Crisis communication literature and practice tends to emphasize the importance of a quick response to meet the needs of stakeholders and media. A too-slow response tends to lead to speculation, rumor, and critical voices dominating the conversation, hampering the vital task of controlling the narrative. For these reasons, social media's near-instant communication makes it an appealing medium (McLean & Power, 2009; Coombs, 2014). Social media allows organizations to enter the conversation and create a response that can be easily shared by members of the target audience. Stronger, earlier participation on social media creates improves the organization's crisis communication options (Jaques, 2014).

2.2. Downsides of social media.

In Vietnam, Van's (2013) research found that companies with previous crises used very little social media to communicate and concluded that traditional media is a preferred platform for crisis communication. Further, a recent research on crisis communication in Vietnam concluded that while a crisis response on social media can lead to better perception of an organization, it does not lead to any supporting action or cease to talk badly about an organization (Ly-Le, 2018). In brief, social media is not highly regarded by both Vietnamese organizations and stakeholders.

Examining the characteristics of social media in more depth, studies found that despite its many strengths, social media has some weaknesses to watch out for. Some literature showed that in general communication, social media has many disadvantages, such as being uncontrollable, and having limited reach

(Jacques, 2014; Coombs, 2014). More specifically, in crisis communication, its main disadvantages are speed, visibility, and limited reach.

The speed that makes social media so useful for spreading a message also allows crises to escalate – and end – faster than other forms of media. Stakeholders can use it to spread critical comments and negative content as fast or faster than the organization's intended message (Coombs, 2014). For organizations, the price of using social media is the need for vigilance to protect their reputations.

Another disadvantage of social media is the constant exposure of an organization to the public in the online world. Even when a crisis seems to be over, information and responses to it tend to linger on social media platforms, waiting to be linked to a new crisis and inflamed again. It is not only difficult to remove the information that began a crisis, it is unwise to do so. Stakeholders expect crisis management to be as public as the crisis itself, and to provide information on what organizations do to address complaints and other warning signs. (Coombs, 2014). Continued neglect of warning signs that are visible to stakeholders can build into a crisis of its own.

3. Research Design

This research used a survey to discover factors that encourage and discourage organizations in Vietnam from using social media to communicate during a crisis. The first section of the survey consisted of demographic questions to confirm the respondents' qualification for the survey. The second section asked respondents how often their organizations engaged in crisis communication on the provided channels. The options included "always," "often" and "never" for each engagement. The third section asked respondents for their agreement or

disagreement level to the provided statements regarding PR practice in Vietnam within a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” In addition, respondents were given an opportunity to elaborate on their previous responses and offer more insights to the crisis communication current practice and trends in Vietnam in the final open-ended section. The measuring items were randomly mixed together.

It was distributed online to PR practitioners who have at least two years of experience in the Vietnamese PR industry and understood and had knowledge about social media, crisis communication and crisis response. It also used the paired Wilcoxon test to examine differences in the results for social media and traditional media.

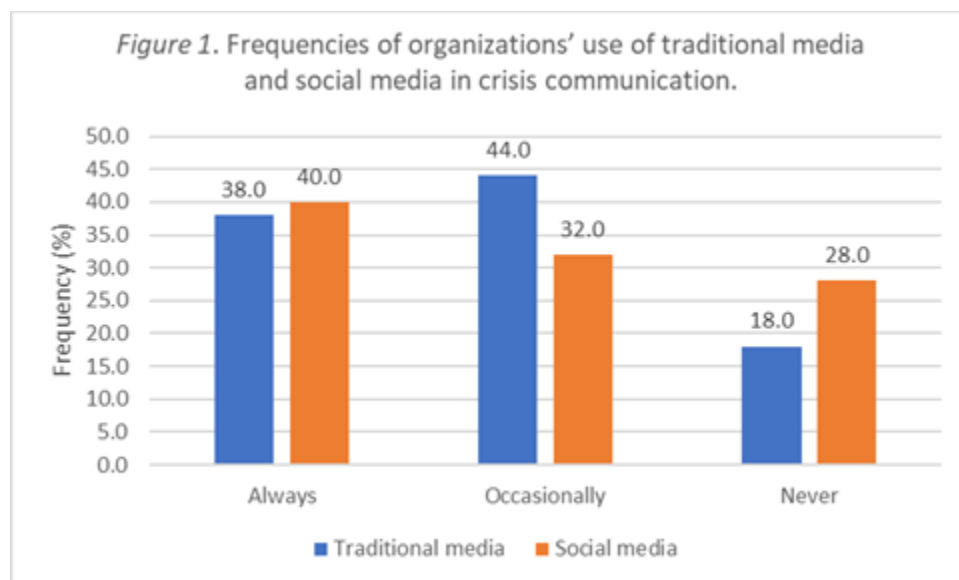
The survey used the snowball sampling method to recruit suitable experts from among PR practitioners in the country’s PR hubs of Ho Chi Minh and Ha Noi. Each potential participant had their

LinkedIn profile or professional reference checked to ensure they had suitable profile and relevant experience. Early respondents were encouraged pass on the survey to qualified acquaintances, until the survey had 50 respondents. These consisted of PR practitioners ranging in age from 22 to 46 (mean: 28, standard deviation: 5.3). The respondents were 36.0% male (N=18) and 64.0% female (N=32). The respondents were a mix of agency and in-house practitioners with a wide range of experience levels.

4. Results

4.1. Organizations in Vietnam use social media as frequently as traditional media channels to communicate with stakeholders during crises.

The first set of questions asked respondents how often their organizations used traditional media (media conferences and media releases) to communicate about crises and how often their organizations used social media to communicate.



Source : Data Analysis (2018)

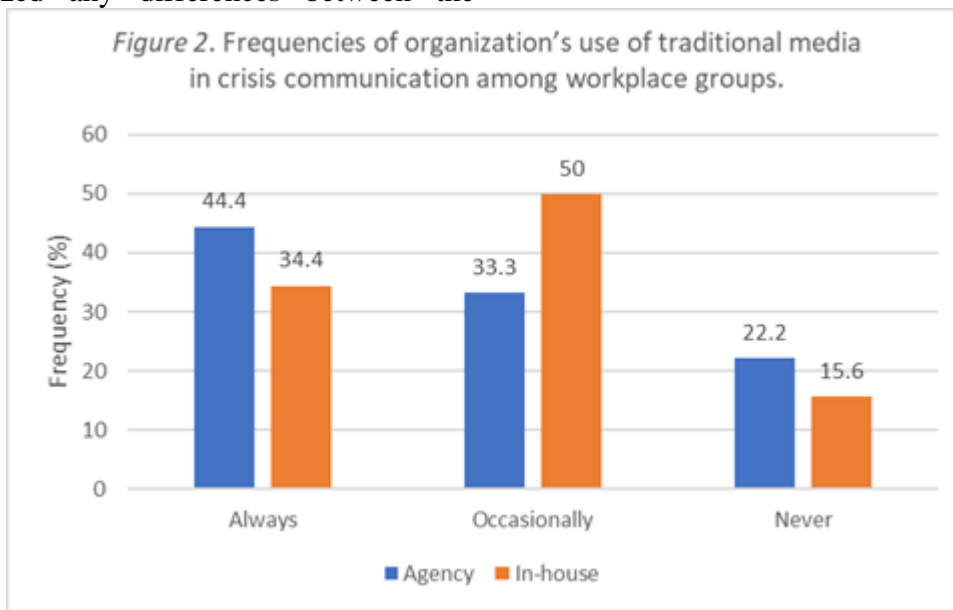
Figure 1 presents the frequencies of organizations’ use of each platform for crisis communication purposes. The overall results indicate very similar choices of traditional media and social

media for crisis communication across all respondents’ organizations. 82% answered that their organization uses traditional media in crisis communication at least some of the time, and 72% answered that

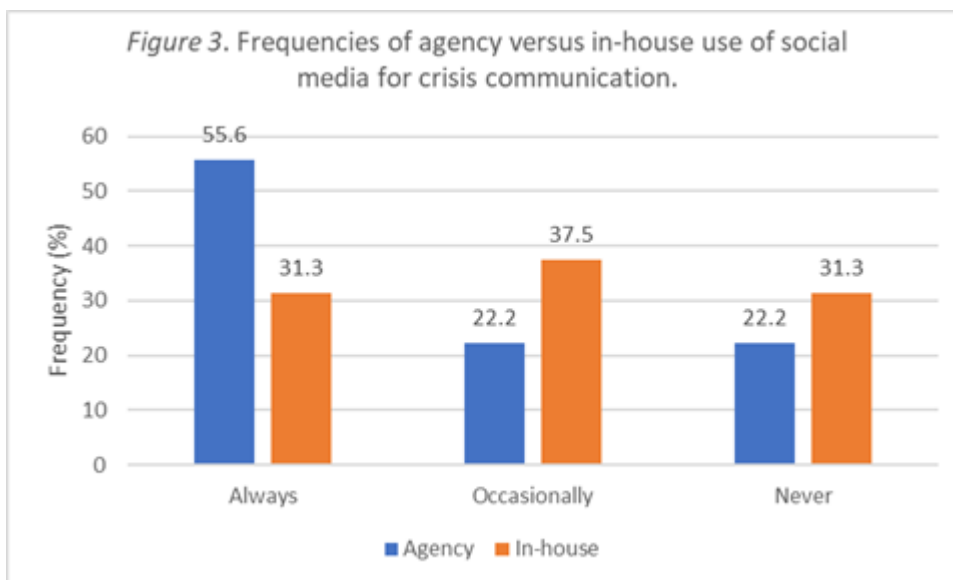
their organization uses social media at least some of the time. Although there were some differences in using traditional media and social media in crisis communication, the differences were statistically insignificant ($p = 0.661$).

The results were used to further analyzed any differences between the

perceptions of agency practitioners and in-house practitioners. Figure 2 compares the use of traditional media among agency versus in-house respondents, and figure 3 compares the use of social media among these respondents.



Source : Data Analysis (2018)



Source : Data Analysis (2018)

The results between agency and in-house respondents were quite similar in their use of traditional media for crisis communication. 77.8% of agency

respondents and 84.4% of in-house respondents answered that their organizations at least occasionally use traditional media for this purpose.

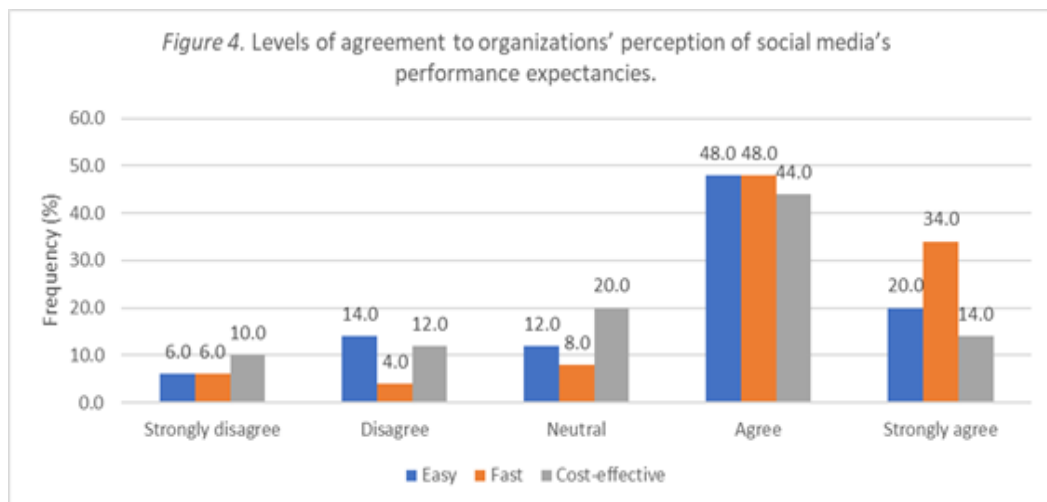
Nonetheless, agency respondents showed a greater commitment than in-house respondents to using traditional media. 44.4% of agency respondents answered that their organizations always use media conferences and releases (traditional media tools) in crisis communication, while the most frequent answer of in-house respondents was that their organizations occasionally use this platform (50%).

Figure 3 presents that agencies use social media more frequently (77.8% had used) than their in-house counterparts (68.8%). While 55.6% of agency respondents mentioned that they always use social media in crisis communication, only 31.3% of in-house respondents answered that they always use it. Noticeably, 31.3% of in-house respondents answered that their organizations never use social media in crisis communication activities.

4.2. Organizations in Vietnam perceive that social media is less useful than traditional media in crisis response.

The objective of the next set of questions was to compare the performance expectancy of social media to that of traditional media with three characteristics: ease of communication, speed and cost-effectiveness, and compare the usefulness of traditional media and social media.

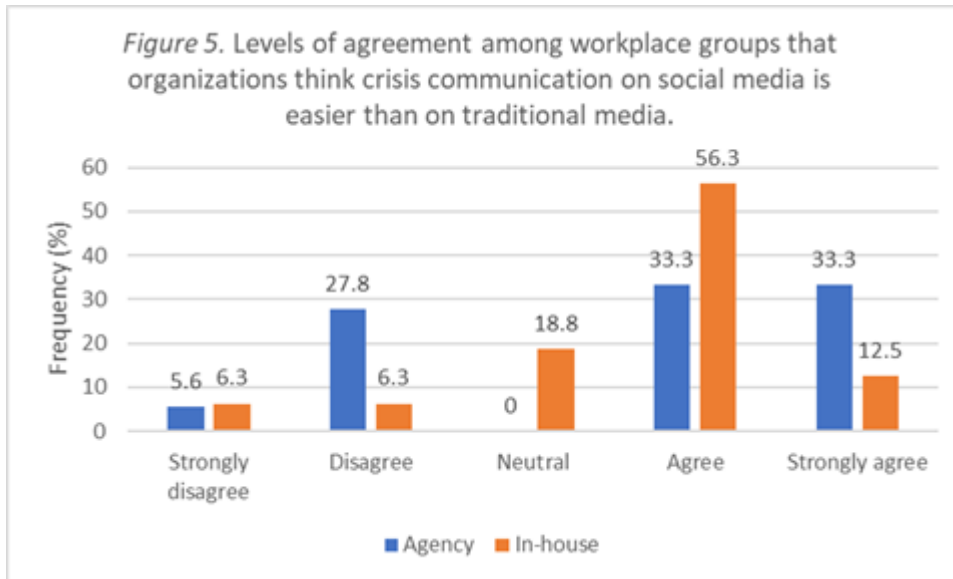
Figure 4 below presents organizations' perception of social media's performance expectancies through three aforementioned characteristics. The results show that respondents were mostly in favor of social media's performance. Communication on social media is considered easy (68.0% at least agreed), fast (82.0% agreed) and cost-effective (58.0% agreed). Overall, the survey showed that social media is expected to perform as well as traditional media in terms of ease of communication, speed and cost-effectiveness.



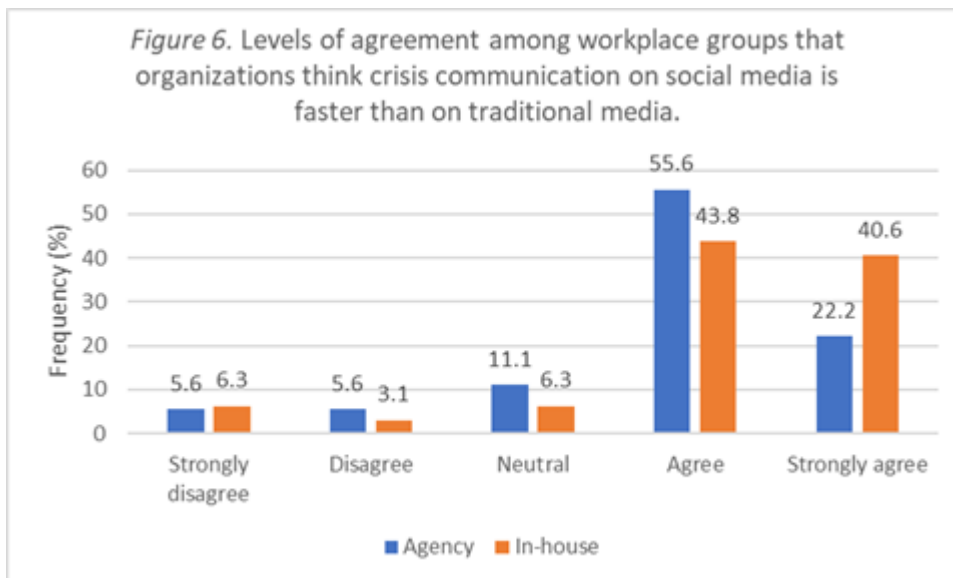
Source : Data Analysis (2018)

Figures 5 through seven present the levels of agreement to each expectancy among agency versus in-house respondents. Overall, a cross-category analysis showed that while respondents from both agency and in-house groups had

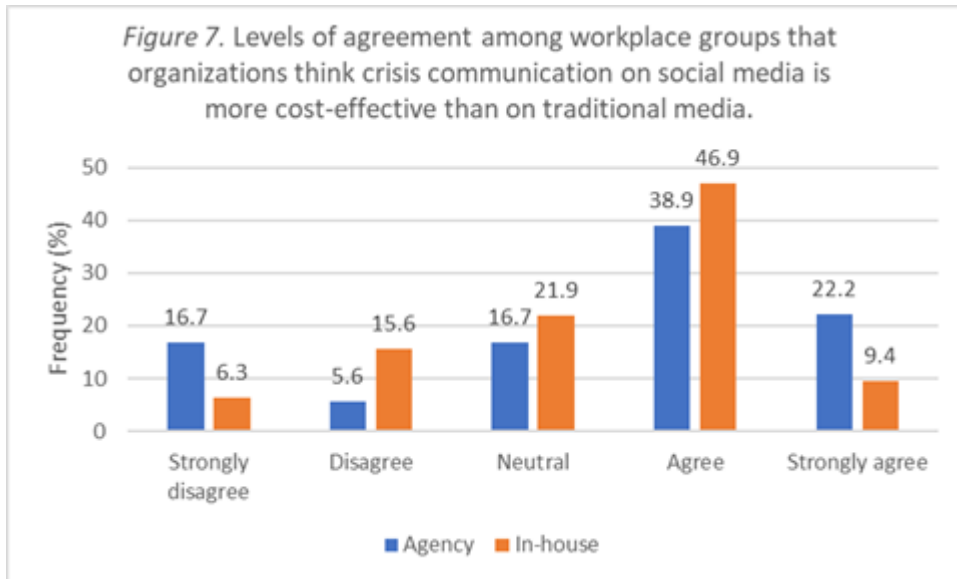
high performance expectation of social media, the agency respondents did not think as highly of social media's performance expectancy as their in-house counterparts in all three examined dimensions.



Source : Data Analysis (2018)



Source : Data Analysis (2018)

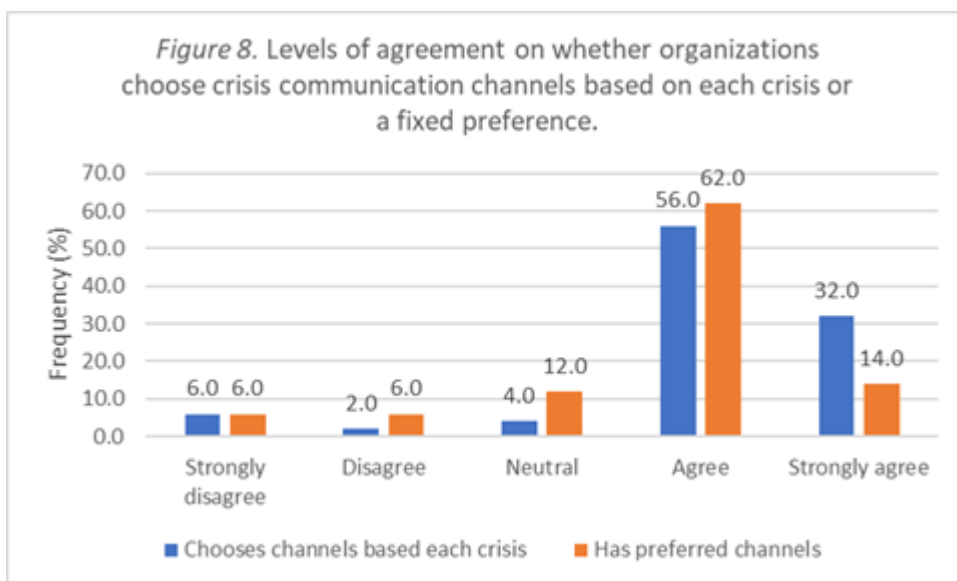


Source : Data Analysis (2018)

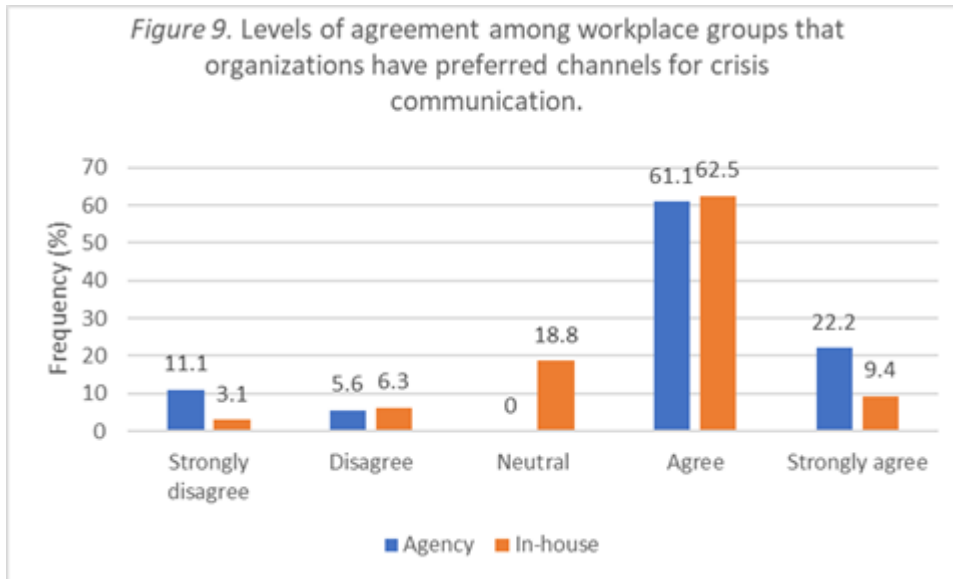
4.3. Vietnamese organizations tend to choose crisis communication platforms based on the characteristics of each crisis.

Going into more depth regarding the use of media for crisis communication, the next questions aimed to see if PR practitioners had preferred communication channels (traditional media or social media) during crises, or if the channels were chosen case-by-case.

Figure 8 presents the levels of agreement on organizations' overall preference of crisis communication channels. Respondents indicated that Vietnamese organizations choose channels based on the characteristics of each crisis (88% at least agreed), rather than having fixed channels for all crises (76% agreed). The difference was statistically significant ($p = 0.009$).



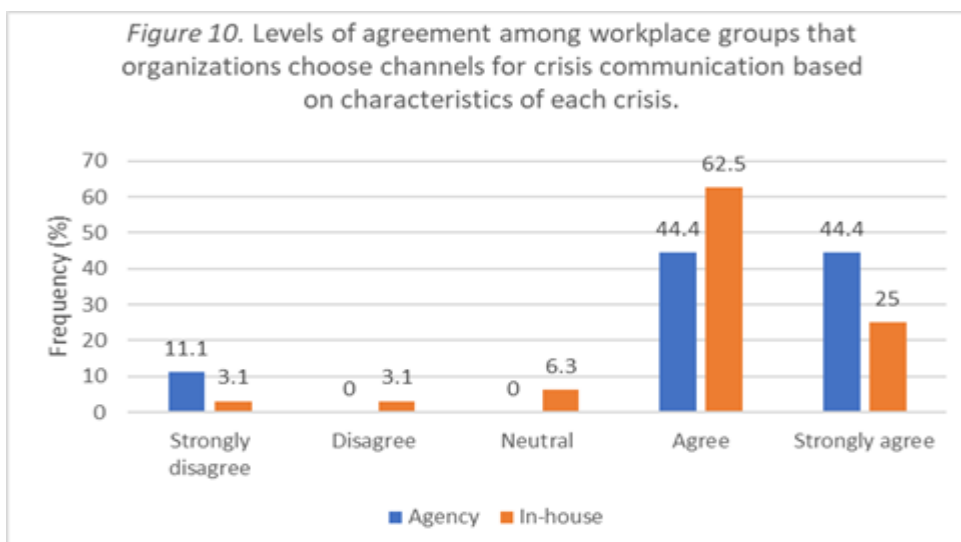
Source : Data Analysis (2018)



Source : Data Analysis (2018)

Figure 9 presents the levels of agreement that an organization has preferred channels for crisis communication among agency versus in-house respondents. Figure 10 shows the levels of agreement that an organization chooses channels for crisis communication based on characteristics of each crisis. Both figures indicate that when assessing whether their organizations choose crisis communication channels from a preferred

selection or based on each crisis, agency and in-house respondents had similar opinions. A slightly higher percentage of agency respondents said that they have preferred channels than in-house respondents (83.3% and 71.9% respectively), while there were comparable percentages of respondents in each category who choose the channels on a case basis (88.8% and 87.5% respectively).



Source : Data Analysis (2018)

The author then turned to compare preferences across the two workplace groups. Among agency respondents, 83.3% at least agreed that they have preferred channels, which is slightly lower than the 88.8% at least agreed that they choose the crisis communication channels on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, the percentage of agency respondents who strongly agreed that they have preferred channels was half of the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed about making a case-by-case choice (22.2% and 44.4% respectively). The difference was statistically significant ($p = 0.034$).

The in-house results show that more in-house respondents chose the crisis communication channels on a case basis (87.5%) than on a fixed preference (71.9%). However, the difference here was not statistically significant ($p = 0.060$).

4.4. Social media should be used together with traditional media in crisis communication.

The survey respondents were provided an open-ended portion to address their perceptions about social media use in crisis communication in more details. The survey respondents stated that depending on the nature of the involved organization, the scale of a crisis and the demographics of the key stakeholders and involved groups, social media or traditional media should be chosen as the main channel for communication:

We need to analyze a crisis carefully to decide on a suitable communication channel. For example, my target customers are farmers with limited use of social media, so I have to use traditional media to reach them. – An in-house practitioner with two to five years of experience.

Social media is an important crisis communication channel... However, I think it depends on the nature of the organization and the crisis to decide. I work for a state company and [our crisis

communication procedure] only uses one spokesperson and limited response on social media. We use traditional media to respond and to build the relationship with the media at the same time. – An in-house practitioner with six to eight years of experience.

The open-ended answers included the main crisis characteristic that influences the use of each platform in crisis communication. There were three main responses: the origin of a crisis (on which platform it started), the stakeholders of a crisis (people who are affected or care about a crisis, not necessarily the key stakeholders of the responsible organization in normal times) and the need for an immediate reply. The respondents generally agreed that if a crisis starts on social media, the involved groups are younger people and the crisis scope is small, social media can be used for crisis response. For crises on a larger scale or for negative news that is spreading too fast, traditional media was said to be the main channel for communication.

It depends on the crisis. If a crisis starts on social media, I'll use social media to respond and reach out to the involved stakeholders [on social media] to negotiate or stop the negative comments. – An in-house practitioner with two to five years of experience.

If a crisis starts on social media and has not had big impact yet, we can use social media to respond. We don't want to publicize the issue to a bigger public [by responding on another platform, in this case, traditional media]. However, if a crisis is escalating fast, traditional media is the main platform to offer official response and action. – An agency practitioner with two to five years of experience.

Nonetheless, in both cases, the survey respondent indicated that social media should be used together with traditional to increase the efficiency.

Crisis communication needs a thorough approach. While social media and traditional media don't have an apparent advantage compared to the other, it's better to combine their strengths for better coverage and more complete reach to the stakeholders. – An in-house practitioner with six to eight years of experience.

4.5 Discussion

In the reviewed studies, some researchers appreciated the benefits of social media for crisis communication while others discussed its drawbacks. On one hand, Taylor and Kent (2007) assessed that social media is an essential part of crisis communication efforts and Ruehl and Ingenhoff (2015), Coombs (2014), and Kerkhof *et al.*, (2011a) expressed that social media is appreciated in crisis communication for its speed, ease of reach and personalization. In contrast, other research showed that social media has many disadvantages in crisis communication such as being uncontrollable, and possessing limited reach (Jacques, 2014; Coombs, 2014; McDonald *et al.*, 2010). However, in this research, it was found that social media is used as frequently and considered as useful as traditional media in crisis communication.

Comparing social media and traditional media, the survey results showed that organizations in Vietnam use social media channels as frequently as traditional media to communicate with stakeholders during crises. While the integration of social media in crisis communication can be expected from the reviewed studies on the emergence of social media in crisis communication, it is a surprising finding about the practice in Vietnam, as the preliminary research did not observe a frequent use of social media in crisis communication by Vietnamese organizations. The finding that social

media is used as frequently as traditional media in crisis communication may indicate that Vietnamese organizations have gradually noticed the benefits of this platform. Another possible reason is that not all PR practitioners surveyed in this study had encountered a crisis. Practitioners reported that social media was mentioned in their organization's crisis communication plan or used more in the precrisis stage, rather than during the crisis response. Thus, the results could show an intention to use social media during crises, not an actual use.

The survey results found that public relations practitioners in Vietnam generally think social media is as useful in crisis response and performs as well as traditional media. This finding was unexpected. This may indicate that social media is still diffusing in Vietnam and its advantages are being more recognized among Vietnamese organizations.

Besides, the survey results indicated that Vietnamese organizations consider the preference of their stakeholders and the characteristics of each crisis to pick appropriate communication channels. A combination of traditional media and social media use in crisis response was also believed to strengthen a crisis response. This practice is in line with the perception of stakeholders about social media, as study found that stakeholders consider information on social media as not trustworthy and show few supportive reactions to organizations responding on this platform. A combined use of social media and traditional media in crisis communication could be a mutual expectation of Vietnamese organizations and stakeholders. This practice should be continued in future crisis communication activities.

This study has an inherent limitation due to its snowball sampling approach. The sampling techniques suggest the shortcoming of representativeness and

generalizability in both main participant groups. Future research should consider probability sampling techniques to overcome the limitations of this study and create broader generalizations of the results. Nonetheless, despite the limitations, this study sheds light on how organizations should communicate during a crisis in this social media age.

4.6. Managerial implications.

The findings of this study can provide more insight into both organizations' and stakeholders' perspectives on the use of social media in crisis communication, helping close the gaps between the two perceptions. These findings are expected to be of interest to communication scholars and public

relations or communication professionals in Vietnam. Further, although the study is focused on the Vietnamese market, the results may be applicable more broadly and useful in analyzing the same topics in other markets.

5. Conclusion

This study suggests that although social media is not as appreciated by Vietnamese organizations as traditional media, it is still used as frequently in crisis communication efforts, and is expected to be combined with traditional media. The diffusion of social media in organizational crisis communication may be still ongoing and social media is anticipated to be used more in actual crisis responses, not just in plans or during precrisis phase.

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