# HOW ORGANIZATIONS ADAPT TO GLOBAL CRISIS: SHIFTING THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION APPROACH

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*Abstract*
*From now on, 2020 will be known as the coronavirus pandemic year. During this time of social distancing and social isolation, people are spending more time at home, consuming online content, streaming video, and increasing overall screen time. In this context of global crisis, organizations are forced to adjust their communications strategies and explore channels they may not have previously prioritized, like stepping up their social networking sites by increasing social presence or adapting the content strategy. This research aims to assess the way organizations adapt to the global crisis and shift the overall communication strategy to a more social approach through social networking sites. We are interested in analyzing the way organizations react to a global crisis, like the one caused by COVID-19 if there exists a communication action plan to get in touch with online communities, or even if the overall workload tends to increase. Also, we would like to take a closer look at the way communities reacted during the time of the pandemic, if they were more present in online, or even if they had different questions to ask organizations and brands. To contribute to a better understanding of the topic, this exploratory study applied a survey instrument based on theories about social networking sites adoption and crisis communication management. Therefore, we have invited Romanian Social Media Managers to be a part of the survey and provide input regarding the use of social media by organizations during the global crisis caused by COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. While no approach could be considered a communication strategy, organizations, in general, and social media managers, in particular, need to realize that there is an opportunity in the global crisis and should re-evaluate what communities need and how can they best provide that to them.*

*Keywords*
*Uses of social media; crisis communication strategies; global crisis.*

## Introduction

On 31st of December 2019, Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, China, reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia (WHO, 2020b). Shortly after, the Chinese authorities identified a new type of coronavirus, COVID-19, followed by the decision of the Director-General of the World Health Organization to declare *the novel coronavirus outbreak* (2019-nCoV) a public health emergency of international concern, also known as PHEIC (WHO, 2020a). On the 11th of March 2020, concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of infection, the World Health Organization characterized the COVID-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). In Romania, on 26th of February, the officials confirmed the first recorded case of COVID-19 (CNSCBT, 2020), and on 16th of March 2020, due to the increased number of COVID-19 recorded

cases, the president of Romania declared a State of Emergency extended to 15th of May 2020 (ONRC, 2020).

During the lockdown (16th of March to 15th of May 2020), Romanians were forced to move their activities to an indoor environment as much as possible, from work tasks and school courses to hobbies, physical training, and socializing. Therefore, people were spending more time at home, scrolling down on Facebook, swiping right on Instagram Stories, streaming video on Netflix, and increasing overall screen time. In April 2020, the New York Times published an analysis of Internet usage in the United States of America as the virus spread. The article titled "The Virus Changed the Way We Internet" revealed that American's behavior shifted and pushed people to devices for work, play, and connecting (Koeze & Popper, 2020). Due to the first U.S. COVID-19 death, on the 29th of February, to 24th of March, the traffic numbers on Facebook increased by an average of 27%, while the consumption of YouTube videos increased by 15.3% on average. Meanwhile, video platforms like TikTok increased in traffic with an average of 15.4% and it has continued its steady ascent ever since. Therefore, with the rise of social distancing, people were seeking out new ways to connect, mostly through social networking sites (Koeze & Popper, 2020).

In the context of a global crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, organizations around the world were forced to adapt in real-time to the impact of COVID-19; marketers and public relations specialists were constrained to adjust the communication strategies and explore channels they may not have previously prioritized. Due to the increased amount of time people spent on social media, brands stepped up their social networking sites, increased social presence, or adapted a new content strategy.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is a benchmark in online communication and an important point of reference in crisis communication strategies. Therefore, we consider as mandatory a close-up analysis of the way organizations used social media communication during the lockdown. This study examines how Romanian organizations responded to the 2020 pandemic lockdown through the adoption of social networking sites. Based on the conceptual framework proposed by Sinclaire and Vogus (2011), we asked Social Media Managers to answer some questions about brand communication during the lowdown to find out either they were passive or active, reactive or proactive, tactical, or strategic (Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011). Also, the study identifies the social-mediated crisis management tactics Romanian brands applied during the lockdown (Cheng, 2016; Kim & Liu, 2012). Ultimately, we consider that our findings are valuable for academics and communication practitioners trying to understand how organizations adapt to the global crisis and how the historical moment of COVID-19 shifted the social media approach and redefined crisis management.

## Literature review

Over the last two decades, many academics have addressed the crisis, what it is, how organizations apply different strategies to manage crises, and what tools can be used to measure the effectiveness of a crisis communication strategy. As Newsom (2010) stated, a crisis is an event that dramatically interrupts the normal activity of an organization

(Newsom et al., 2010). Coombs (2015), on the other hand, defines crisis as an unpredictable event, threatens important expectancies of stakeholders, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes (Coombs, 2015). In the particular case of coronavirus pandemic, organizations all over the world faced a communication crisis caused by a disaster. Based on Quarantelli's (2006) definition, disasters are events that are sudden, seriously disrupt routines of systems, require new courses of action to cope with the disruption, and pose a danger to values and social goals (Quarantelli, 2006). For public relations specialists, a crisis is characterized by an interruption in the normal communication process between the organization and its internal or external publics (Chiciudean & David, 2011, p. 49). As Chiciudean and David (2011) stated, when an organization is facing a crisis, its internal and external communication is more reactive, unplanned, incoherent, and ambiguous (Chiciudean & David, 2011, p.50).

In the past decades, academics developed several theories and models of crisis management to help organizations minimize the damage endured through a crisis. In 1995, Coombs developed situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). According to its theory, when crises occur, stakeholders involved in the crisis made attributions about the crisis responsibility; basically, depending on the level of responsibilities (high, medium, or low), different situations would match with the adopted crisis communication strategy (CCS) (Coombs, 2007). For example, attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoat, excuse, justification, remind, ingratiation, compensation, and apology are the crisis response options listed by the author. As the academic stated, organizations should prioritize protecting the public from harm through instructing and adjusting information; instructing information notifies the audience what actions they should take to protect themselves from physical threats generated by the crisis while adjusting information helps the public cope with any psychological threats generated by crisis and includes corrective action (Coombs, 2007). However, the SCCT is focused on the perspective of organizations and uses the general term "stakeholders" to describe the other key parties (Cheng, 2016). Also, the SCCT doesn't fully investigate the influence of new technologies that limit the organization's ability to control the information flow (Kim & Liu, 2012) and the impact of the social media adoption in communication crisis strategies.

### The adoption of social media in CCS

The popularity of social media and the increased number of content generation websites shifted the power balance from organizational to consumer power (Clemons et al., 2007). The consumers can now express themselves negative or positive impressions about organizations on social media, without taking for granted what organizations are posting on Facebook, for example. Thus, social media have shifted the power of expert and the power of sanction from organizations to consumers, online audiences, communities, and to people that are spending time in the virtual space of the society.

In this context, Sinclaire and Vogus (2011) have described the adoption of social media by organizations through a trichotomy perspective: passive or active, reactive or proactive, tactical or strategic (Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011) (see Figure 1). Therefore, the two authors have identified eight reasons why organizations are using social media in their communication strategy for (1) protecting the organization against assaults (reactive); (2) reinforcing the consumers or stakeholders loyalty to the organization

(proactive); (3) promoting the company, the brand or the product (proactive and tactical); (4) collecting feedback about a product (strategic); (5) building external communities (proactive and strategic); (6) building internal communities (proactive and strategic); (7) promoting a social cause (proactive and strategic); (8) educating consumers about new products or technologies (proactive and strategic) (Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011). Based on the conceptual framework proposed by Sinclaire and Vogus, the adoption of social media implies a dynamic relationship between an organization and its consumer: if at an individual level the adoption rate of social media increases (increase the consumer power), then at the organizational level the adoption rate of social media also increases to outweigh the power won by the consumer.
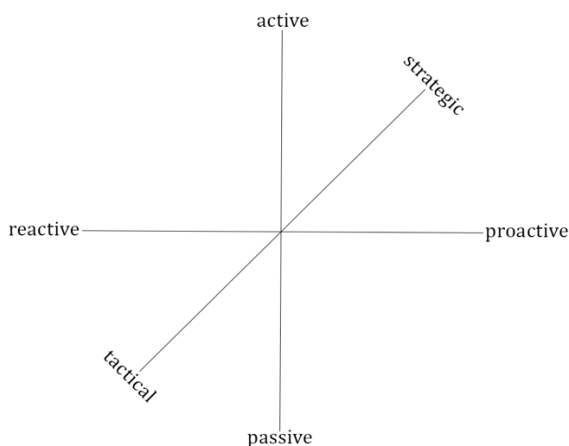


**Figure 1. Classifications of uses of social media**
*Source: Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011, p. 305*

In organizational crisis management, social media was more frequently used than the traditional one (Kim & Liu, 2012). In their study, Brown and Billings (2013) empower the function of social media in CCS as being more accurate, transparent, accommodate, and dialogic (Brown & Billings, 2013). Scholars suggested the following online CCS: (1) utilize the interactivity of social media by creating dialogues with stakeholders; (2) paying more attention to citizen-generated content; (3) adopting stakeholder desired strategies; (4) cultivating opinion leaders on social media; (5) creating texts, pictures or videos online in the same way for organizational legitimacy (Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Maline, 2009; Veil & Yang, 2012).

From an organizational perspective, Taylor and Perry (2005) proposed the following five best practices in social-mediated crisis management: online chatting, dialogic communication, connecting links, real-time monitoring, and multi-media effects (Taylor & Perry, 2005). On the other hand, Kim and Liu (2012) revised the instructing and the adjusting information crisis responses proposed by Coombs (Coombs, 2007) and added the following two new strategies: (1) *enhancing* as telling stakeholders about an organization's "current" instead of past good works and (2) *transferring* as used to transfer third party credibility onto organization themselves by supporting a credible third party crisis responses (Kim & Liu, 2012).

Reviewing crises and CCS in the social-mediated crisis management (SMCM), Cheng (2016) proposed an interactive crisis communication model on social media by integrating five main crisis responses: base, denial, evasion, justification, and concession (Cheng, 2016). Based on this framework, social media channels are the binder between an organization and its stakeholders and work as interactive platforms for both parties during a crisis; a long-time "positive dialogue" is recommended between organization and stakeholders by connecting links with the third credible party and expecting that the more positive dialogue is, the more likely a high level of crisis communication strategy effectiveness can be achieved (Cheng, 2016).

Crisis communication theories provide a comprehensive framework for organizations to effectively respond to crises. All basic strategies are required for all crises because they meet the organization's fundamental ethical responsibilities for crisis responses (Coombs, 2007). On the other hand, monitoring, analyzing, and understanding stakeholders' needs and desires in crisis might be the first step before making any decision of crisis responses (Cheng, 2016). Also, crises often create opportunities for organizations for the rapid adoption of new communication technologies (Kim & Liu, 2012), driven by the desire to outweigh the power won by the consumer in using social media communication during lockdown times, for example. Therefore, to identify how organizations adopted social media channels during the COVID-19 lockdown communication crisis, we ask:

> RQ1: During the lockdown crisis, Romanian brands have been passive or active in adopting social media communication?
> RQ2: During the lockdown crisis, Romanian brands have been reactive or proactive in adopting social media communication?
> RQ3: During the lockdown crisis, Romanian brands have been tactical or strategic in adopting social media communication?

Our intent for this study is to create a *liaison* between crisis communication strategies (Brown & Billings, 2013; Cheng, 2016; Coombs, 2007; Kim & Liu, 2012; Taylor & Perry, 2005) and the adoption of social networking sites theory through the conceptual framework proposed by Sinclaire and Vogus (2011). Finally, we pursuit to bring a new perspective on the theory of social media adoption impact on crisis communication strategies.

**Methodology**

To find the answers to our research questions, we developed a survey instrument based on the function of social media in crisis communication strategies and the derived list of purposes in the adoption of social media generated in the study of Sinclaire and Vogus (2011, p. 300). Because there is no previous study applying the purposes in the adoption of social media to a situational crisis, this study operationalized the purposes of social media organizational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown based on the following characteristics of the social media use: passive or active, reactive or proactive, and tactical or strategic (Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011) (see Table 1). Nineteen items were included in the survey to measure these three complement variables.

An extensive search on LinkedIn of Romanian Social Media Managers resulted in 61 valid names of people having a current position as a social media manager, head or coordinator of the social media department, social media specialist, social media content manager or social media community manager, working in public relations agencies, advertising agencies or coordinating the social media communication from within the organization. These social media managers were invited by LinkedIn private messages to complete the survey and provide input about the use of social media channels by their managed brands during the Romanian lockdown (16th of March – 15th of May 2020).

*Table 1. Purposes in the adoption of social mediaduring pandemic lockdown*

| Passive | Active | Reactive | Proactive | Tactical | Strategic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Didn't communicate about COVID-19 | 1. Increase reputation management | 1. Defend the brand against attacks | 1. Encourage consumer to stay home | 1. Promote brand and products | 1. Support medical staff & system |
| 2. Stopped the communication during the lockdown | 2. Info about brand's activity during the lockdown | 2. Support brand's stand towards COVID-19 pandemic | 2. Educate consumers to protect themselves by using masks, washing hands, etc. | 2. Promote the benefits of the products | 2. Support victims and the families of the victims |
| | 3. Info about brand's protective measurements | 3. Support brand's stand towards a generated situational crisis (e.g. the lack of yeast) | | 3. Timeline contests, gift cards, giveaways | 3. Info about future plans |
| | 4. Info about the safety in using brand's products | | | 4. Encourage consumers to buy online | 4. Third party communication through influencers |
| | | | | 5. Info about past CSR campaigns | 5. New CSR campaigns |
| | | | | 6. CTA for picking the favorite product | |

The results are reported in the section below. 35 top-level social media managers responded to survey questions, cumulating 157 brands from industries like food and drinks, fashion and beauty, technology, health, entertainment, financial, automotive, or education. Additionally, we mention IBM, Ikea, Heineken, Ford, Nestle, or Dr. Oetker as the top brands whose social media communication was managed by our respondents during the pandemic lockdown.

## Findings and discussions

As shown in *Table 2*, 97.1% of respondents have declared they used Facebook, 94.3% used Instagram, 60% of them used LinkedIn and 60% used YouTube in maintaining the

communication with strategic publics during the pandemic lockdown, while Twitter, Pinterest, and TikTok were the least used social media channels.

*Table 2. Adoption of social media channels during the pandemic lockdown*

| SM channel | N = 35 (157 brands) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Facebook | 34 | 97.1% |
| Instagram | 33 | 94.3% |
| LinkedIn | 21 | 60% |
| YouTube | 21 | 60% |
| Twitter | 3 | 8.6% |
| TikTok | 1 | 2.9% |
| Twitter | 1 | 2.9% |

As Socialbakers data report revealed at the end of Q1 (Socialbakers, 2020), many people were forced to stay indoors and, as a result, spent more time online, generally, and on Facebook and Instagram, particularly. For example, Socialbakers reported that the peak usage time on March Friday nights compared to February increased by 13.2% and on Saturday nights it increased by 14.8%. These numbers are also reflected in the data provided by this study's respondents, who stated that, during the pandemic lockdown, brands have focused their social media communication actions on Facebook.

> "Facebook was the main communication channel, while Instagram was lower-ranking." – Respondent 12

> "Facebook was more used than Instagram; it was the first channel communities used in searching for official information and brand statements." – Respondent 22

As declared by this study's respondents, during the lockdown, Facebook has become an important news source; communities and people were searching for official information about the coronavirus outbreak and the protective measures against COVID-19 taken by organizations. As a result, Romanian brands paid increased attention to communication with strategic publics through their Facebook pages.

*Table 3. The volume of community management during the pandemic lockdown*

| Volume | Received private message | Received comment | Reply private message | Reply comment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Decreased | 2 (5.7%) | 4 (11.4%) | 1 (2.9%) | 2 (5.7%) |
| Unchanged | 7 (20%) | 14 (40%) | 15 (42.9%) | 17 (48.6%) |
| Increased | 26 (74.3%) | 17 (48.6) | 19 (54.3%) | 16 (45.7%) |

Before answering the research questions, we consider it important to highlight the increased work volume during the pandemic lockdown. As shown in *Table 3*, 74.3% of respondents declared that the volume of private messages received by brands increased considerably, while the volume of comments received by brands on their social media channels also increased, as 48.6% of respondents declared.

These numbers are strengthened by the answers given by respondents to the open-ended question about the impact of coronavirus on social media content creation and community management. As they reflected, the overall work volume increased during the lockdown; because people spent more time online, brands increased the content

volume (total number of posts in social media), the rate of engagement through private messages or comments, the communication strategy was adapted to the new global crisis context and brands revised their overall messages addressed to strategic publics through social media channels. Basically, the coronavirus global crisis forced brands to change the way they use to reach communities and adopt real-time communication, more dynamic and unpredictable.

> "Brands confidence in the power of social media communication increased. Before the lockdown, there were some reservations about promoting some financial products on Facebook. During the pandemic lockdown, Facebook became the main communication channel. Overall, the total number of private messages increased by approximately 300% compared to the previous period, November 2019 – March 2020." – Respondent 5

> "Brands adapted the monthly content plan to the lockdown context and encouraged consumers to stay home." – Respondent 30

> "This period shifted the brands' attention from content creation to customer support." – Respondent 6

Therefore, social media engagement rates increased for both communities and brands. During the lockdown, brands adjusted their communication and started posting more about the coronavirus context, while users approached brands more through private messages and comments, forcing organizations to quickly address the publics' primary needs and reassure stakeholders that their safety is a priority.

### Adoption of social media during the pandemic lockdown

The following tables present results on how brands adapted and used social media communication during lockdown (see Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6). Few social media managers declared their brands chose to adopt passive communication during the lockdown (8 out of 35), mainly preferring to provide consumers information about the brand's activity during the lockdown and the overall safety measurements in using the brand's products. The data collected suggests as a first conclusion that brands primarily adopted an active communication in social media during the pandemic lockdown, choosing to view the coronavirus pandemic outbreak as an opportunity to build stronger relationships with strategic publics.

Additionally, *Table 5* reflects a more reactive approach by brands in using social media communication during the lockdown. As previously suggested, the coronavirus pandemic was an unprecedented moment in the history of global crisis communication strategies. Due to the overwhelming global outbreak and the decision to lockdown, brands were constrained to react quickly and release an official statement to inform the public about how brands plan to solve or prevent problems caused by the pandemic crisis.

### Table 4. Passive vs. Active approach

| Passive/Active | N = 35 (157 brands) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| slightly passive | 27 | 77.1% |
| passive | 8 | 22.9% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| slightly active | 12 | 34.3% |
| active | 23 | 65.7% |

*Table 5. Reactive vs. Proactive approach*

| Reactive/Proactive | N = 35 (157 brands) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| slightly reactive | 11 | 31.4% |
| reactive | 24 | 68.6% |
| slightly proactive | 15 | 42.8% |
| proactive | 20 | 57.2% |

*Table 6. Tactical vs. Strategic approach*

| Tactical/Strategic | N = 35 (157 brands) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| slightly tactical | 13 | 37,2% |
| tactical | 22 | 62.8% |
| slightly strategic | 16 | 45.7% |
| strategic | 19 | 54.3% |

Finally, in contrast to the strategic use of social media during the pandemic lockdown, respondents declared a tactical, less integrated approach in the brand's adoption of social media communication (see Table 6). Consequently, brands posted about products and the benefits of the products encouraged consumers to buy online and have done little to establish a two-way dialogue with communities. By contrast, 19 out of 35 respondents declared brands adopted a strategic social media approach during lockdown by expressing sympathy and support for medical staff, victims, or families of the victims. Besides, 18 of the respondents declared their brands launched new CSR campaigns during the lockdown, mostly by donating money for hospitals and NGOs to enhance brand position to the situational crisis caused by a coronavirus. As a final conclusion, it's not improper to admit that, during the pandemic lockdown, Romanian brands tended to focus mainly on reputation management.

## Conclusions

As mentioned before, the historical moment of the coronavirus pandemic shifted the social media approach and redefined the way brands respond to crisis management. During the lockdown, people spent more time online, building relationships with families, friends, work colleagues, brands, or institutions through social media channels, streaming video, and increasing overall screen time. Forced by the increased expert power and sanction power gain by consumers using social media sites (Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011), brands tried to counterbalance the shifted communication through a more active approach.

Through this study, 35 Social Media Managers provided input about the use of social media channels by 157 brands active in Romania during lockdown (16th of March – 15th of May 2020). As the results showed, Facebook was the most used social media site, followed by Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. During the Romanian lockdown, Social Media Managers reported an increased work volume, including tasks as content creation, community management, monitoring, and reporting. This increased volume of work for all social media managers can be easily correlated with the overall social media insights, which reported higher engagement numbers on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok during the pandemic lockdown (Koeze & Popper, 2020; Socialbakers, 2020).

Therefore, the coronavirus global crisis forced brands to change the way they used to reach communities and adopt real-time communication, more dynamic, and unpredictable.

To answer the research questions (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3) and because there was no previous study applying the purposes in the adoption of social media to a situational crisis, this study operationalized 19 purposes of social media organizational communication during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown based on the following three complement characteristics of social media use: passive or active, reactive or proactive, and tactical or strategic (Sinclaire & Vogus, 2011). As the results showed, during the pandemic lockdown, Romanian brands generally used active, reactive, and tactical approaches in their communication with strategic publics. Thus, brand communication was led more by the pressure to react instantly and to reduce psychological stress (Coombs, 2007) and less by their genuine desire to reassure stakeholders that their safety is a priority and that all necessary actions are taken to provide comfort and security during these unprecedented times. Even so, by increasing the use of social media communication during the lockdown, Romanian brands tended to focus more on reputation management by enhancing their own good deeds during coronavirus pandemic.

The historical moment of COVID-19 forever changed how social media managers reach communities and redefined crisis management for many organizations from many industries. In this pandemic context, organizations and brands should prepare today for tomorrow, for the unpredictable road ahead.

## Limitations and future perspectives

A few limitations to the current study must be mentioned. A first potential limitation refers to the sample structure. As reported in the above sections, only 35 Social Media Managers responded to our survey, cumulating a total number of 157 brands (an average of ±4.5 brands managed by each responded). This could be a potential problem as the respondents might have preferred to choose a general answer to the questions and therefore lose sight of some specific aspects of the matter. However, the purpose of this study is to report an overview of how organizations have managed communication with their online communities during the lockdown. By and large, we consider the purpose of this academic research paper to be achieved.

The second limitation refers to the necessity of approaching a more complex evaluation of the responses. As mentioned before, the results of this study provide answers only to the research questions. But we consider it important to mention the fact that some other correlations with the domain of activity or other characteristics of the brands could be integrated into the research instrument to provide an extended discussion and implications. We will consider this aspect as a future research perspective to add value to the way organizations have adapted their communication strategy to the pandemic global crisis.

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