

**Department of Political Science**

**Master's degree in International Relations – Major in Security**

**Chair of Crisis Communication**

**Social Media and Crisis Management: Best Practices from COVID-19 Crisis**

**Prof. Matthew  
Hibberd**

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Thesis Supervisor

**Prof. Michele  
Sorice**

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Thesis Co-supervisor

**Martina  
Alberghetti,  
644792**

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Candidate

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## 1. Introduction

The increasing importance of social media in the field of communications have called on many experts and academics to reconsider their role during crisis management. Indeed, they are closely connected to the response of a company, government or international organization to the contingencies of an emergency. With the advent of social media, the crisis communication teams have specific experts that dedicates their work to the analysis of social media during all stages of a crisis, in order to formulate a correct response following a specific communication strategy. If used in an effective way, social media may allow the crisis-affected institution to recover from the damages more quickly and to restore the reputation in front of stakeholders. However, there are various cases in which social media management actually harmed the image of the company or organization, having an opposite effect from what was envisaged. For this reason, some governments are still reluctant to totally incorporate social media in their crisis management plans, in order to avoid the negative effects deriving from online platforms. Nonetheless, experts underline the relevance of social media as a tool for surveillance, control and communication with online users.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, health crises have significantly damaged several countries and had the potential to impact the whole world with the rapid spread of diseases. Pandemics do not affect only citizens and the national government dealing with the crisis, but companies and economic activities that have to counter the consequences of the emergency while trying to maintain their operations stable. Thus, public health crisis are extensive phenomena that affect multiple sectors and from which it is difficult to recover. The introduction of social media during health crises drastically changed the way in which information was delivered to citizens and enabled people to connect directly with institutions, their family and friends. Nevertheless, due to the huge amount of uncontrolled messages and posts, the spread of fake news leads to the phenomenon of misinformation, according to which people rely on falsified content to acquire details of the crisis and share it with other online users, creating a chain of unreliable content. This mechanism is highly detrimental for

crisis managers who have to work on two sides, dealing with the evolution of the crisis and contain its damages, and update citizens about the emergency while preventing the spread of false information that could mislead them. The most recent public health crisis was the COVID-19 pandemic, which erupted in early 2020 and brought unprecedented consequences for society and global economy. Moreover, due to social distancing and lockdowns, the use of social media drastically increased during this crisis, becoming a relevant factor to analyse when evaluating the pandemic management. Indeed, due to its proximity in time and its peculiarity, the COVID-19 crisis was examined by scholars under different perspective, even if it is not present in the literature a comprehensive analysis of social media application in crisis communication for this specific emergency.

The present research proposes to analyse the role of social media in crisis management and to understand how to effectively use them as a proactive form of communication to handle a crisis. In particular, this study wants to answer to the question “what are the best practices for the use of social media in crisis management?”. In the first chapter, the process of crisis management will be presented, providing general definitions and theoretical models, and explaining the phases of crisis management (prevention, preparation, management, recovery, learning). This theoretical framework will be employed in the second chapter that will examine the role of social media in crisis communication and crisis management. Here, the analysis will shift to a detailed evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media by both the public and the institution affected by the crisis, presenting the best practices and the challenges identified by the literature. Finally, the third and final chapter of this research will be devoted to the analysis of a case study, the COVID-19 crisis. The analysis will be carried out by examining the relevant literature in order to understand the importance of this public health crisis in the framework of social media crisis communication. The presentation of a case study will further support my thesis that social media have become a key factor to include in crisis management considering the benefits deriving from their use that may reduce the emotional and material damages of the crisis.

## 2. The process of crisis management

The literature has widely examined crisis management in different sectors and through its diverse characteristics and features. As a crucial part of this analysis, it is important to define crisis management and the procedures related to it. At the same time, the present research will highlight the importance of crisis communication, as a necessary mean to better deal with crises. In this section, both crisis management and crisis communication will be reviewed following the prominent literature that provided an exhaustive and detailed explanation of the two concepts. After defining the key issues of the research, the second part of the chapter will be devoted to the description of the different phases of crisis management, with a particular focus on reputation and the relevance of stakeholders.

### 2.1 General definitions

Following Coombs' analysis in "The Handbook of Crisis Communication"<sup>1</sup>, it is important to define three terms before going further with the discussion. First of all, the definition of crisis must be provided in order to specify the boundaries of the present research. However, in the literature, there is not a common and general definition of the term, due to the different interpretations given by each scholar<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of this research, crisis will be analysed from a broad perspective, rather than using a narrow or specific definition that is not generally applicable. Coombs is certainly one of the most prominent scholars studying crisis management and, in his works, he provides similar definitions of crisis although they differ in some regards. First, he gives a general idea of what a crisis is, describing it as "a challenge to the organization's character"<sup>3</sup>. Coombs, in his later studies, expanded this definition underlining the importance of organizational reputation and stakeholders. In various papers, he defines crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important

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<sup>1</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Coombs, W. T. (1999). Information and compassion in crisis responses: A test of their effects. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11(2), 125-142.

expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes"<sup>4</sup>. This detailed definition of crisis is complete and accurate, and it highlights that crises are sudden and extremely unpredictable, calling for a proper and immediate management of the situation. The relationship between stakeholders and the organization is at the centre of a crisis, which poses a threat to the organizational reputation. Indeed, when the latter is damaged, the interaction between organization and its stakeholders is often affected and changed<sup>5</sup>, if there is no proper management of the crisis. The use of the term "negative outcomes" is functional to include different types of damage to the stakeholders (financial, physical and psychological)<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, Coombs further emphasizes that a crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event and not the event itself. This distinction underlines once again the key role of stakeholders for the outcome of a crisis. Indeed, the preparedness of an organization to respond to an unpredictable crisis may lead stakeholders to judge the crisis management positively.

Other scholars adopted similar definitions that entailed the organizational nature of crises:

- Fearn-Banks posits that a crisis is "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as publics, products, services or good name. It interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization"<sup>7</sup>;
- Mitroff & Anagnos define a crisis as "an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole of an organization... it must exact a major toll on human lives, property, financial earnings, the reputation, and the general health and wellbeing of an organization"<sup>8</sup>;

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<sup>4</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (2nd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage.

<sup>5</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2007b). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of Situational Crisis Communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.

<sup>6</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>7</sup> Fearn-Banks, K. (1996). *Crisis communication: A casebook approach*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>8</sup> Mitroff, I. I., & Anagnos, G. (2001). *Managing crises before they happen: What every executive and manager needs to know about crisis management*. New York: AMACOM.

- Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer view crisis as “a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals”<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, some scholars have focused their research on other types of crises. Thus, there is the need to find a more general definition that is not restricted to the organization level. Pauchant and Mitroff, for example, defined crisis as “a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core”<sup>10</sup>. Venette, instead, provides a more general description arguing that “crisis is a process of transformation where the old system can no longer be maintained”<sup>11</sup>. Both these definitions and the previous ones concerning organizational-level crises share the same underlying concept: a crisis is a drastic and unpredictable event that affects and threatens the stability of a system and its core components., This definition of crisis will be helpful to guide the analysis of the present research.

After having defined what a crisis is, it is essential to have a first look into crisis management, which will be investigated more in depth in the next part. There have been several attempts to define crisis management by several authors. Even in this case, Coombs provided an accurate and exhaustive definition of the term. According to him, crisis management is “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted by a crisis”<sup>12</sup>. This process is aimed at preventing or reducing the harm caused by a crisis to an organisation, its stakeholders or the general public<sup>13</sup>. It is also important to underline that crisis management does not consist of a single activity, but it is rather a process with many parts including, for instance, prevention, planning and post-crisis evaluations.

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<sup>9</sup> Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (1998). Communication, organization and crisis. In M. E. Roloff (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 21* (pp. 231–275). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>10</sup> Pauchant, T.C. and Mitroff, I.I. (1992). *Transforming the crisis prone organization*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

<sup>12</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>13</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

The last component useful for the purpose of this research is crisis communication, that could be generally defined as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation”<sup>14</sup>. Effective communication is a crucial component during a crisis. In fact, the distribution of information to crisis response organization is fundamental in order to minimize the damage. Crisis communication aims at successfully addressing the crisis by means of establishing a cooperation process and a connection between the crisis response organization and the public<sup>15</sup>. As for crisis management, crisis communication is not only important during the crisis, but also in its initial phases and the final evaluation.

## 2.2 The models of crisis management

As defined above, crisis management is a process, and as such, it is composed by distinct factors and phases. In the literature, it is possible to find numerous models of crisis management, which differ in the number of phases and in their characteristics. Nevertheless, there are three models that are considered the most accurate and exhaustive in explaining the functioning of crisis management. The first and earliest model was developed by Fink, who was the first scholar to consider a crisis as a process with different phases. His model consists of four stages:

1. The prodromal stage considers the period from the first hints of a potential crisis to its appearance.
2. The acute stage is characterised by the crisis breakout and the activation of crisis managers.
3. The chronic stage includes the recovery period, with the management of the crisis effects.
4. The resolution stage comes at the end of a crisis, with an analysis of what has been done<sup>16</sup>.

Fink proposes a model that follows the event of a crisis, by focusing on the importance of crisis managers for the activities of prevention, planning and resolution. The second model, that is

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<sup>14</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>15</sup> Fischer, D., Posegga, O., & Fischbach, K. (2016). *Communication Barriers in Crisis Management: A Literature Review*.

<sup>16</sup> Fink, S. (1986). *Crisis management: Planning for the inevitable*. New York: AMACOM.



considered as prominent in the crisis management literature, is developed by Mitroff. He proposes a five-stage model, composed by:

1. Crisis signal detection, to determine warning signs;
2. Probing and prevention, to search and reduce risk factors;
3. Damage containment, when the crisis occurs;
4. Recovery, to return to normality;
5. Learning, reviewing the crisis<sup>17</sup>.

This model differs from the previous one because Mitroff dedicates a separate stage to the learning phase, while before it was included in the resolution stage. This underlines the importance that Mitroff gives to the efforts in managing the crisis, not on the evolution of the crisis itself. Moreover, the Mitroff model is cyclical, meaning that the review performed in the learning phase will be later incorporated in the organizational philosophy and used to mitigate or to prevent future crises<sup>18</sup>. Finally, the three-stage model is the most used and recommended approach to crisis management. It provides a general analytical framework that is able to integrate Fink's and Mitroff's stages into a single model<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, the three-stage model allows the inclusion of different sub-stages, which can be identified with the three macro-categories provided in the model: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis. Unlike the previous models, the three-stage approach was not developed by a single scholar and its uniqueness lies in the fact that it emerged from multiple research efforts combined<sup>20</sup>. Coombs was one of the scholars who made an extensive use of this model for several analyses and adapted it to different types of crises. Due to these reasons, the three-stage model will be explained in detail in the next section in order to be used in this research as the framework for the main analysis.

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<sup>17</sup> Mitroff, I. I. (1994). *Crisis management and environmentalism: A natural fit*. Emmitsburg, MD: National Emergency Training Center.

<sup>18</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Seeger, M.W., Sellnow, T.L., and Ulmer, R.R. (2003). *Communication and organizational crisis*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

### 2.3 The phases of crisis management: the three-stage model

According to the three-stage approach, there are five elements that represent an essential part of crisis management: prevention, preparation, response, revision, and learning<sup>21</sup>. From these factors, it is possible to note certain similarities with Mitroff's model. Indeed, both are cyclical and acknowledge the importance of the learning phase as a solution for preventing future crises. To briefly conceptualize this crisis management approach, Coombs presented a short overview of the process. During the pre-crisis stage, three actions are performed by the crisis management team: signal detection, prevention, and preparation<sup>22</sup>. All these steps entail a proactive role of managers that have to plan ahead to deal with a possible incoming crisis. The crisis stage is characterised by the recognition of the occurring crisis and by the procedures taken to respond to it. Finally, the post-crisis stage refers to a situation when operations have returned to normal<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, the crisis management team has to reassure the stakeholders and the public of the proper functioning of the organization, and it also has to perform a review of the crisis in order to learn from it. All things considered, the three stages present several nuisances and particular complexities. For this reason, the next section will be devoted to analyse them more in depth.

#### *2.3.1 Pre-crisis stage*

Many scholars pay particular attention to this phase because it is fundamental in order to minimise the damage that a crisis may provoke. The role of crisis management team is critical to this stage is because it has the function to overview the three stages of pre-crisis. First, it has to detect signals and warnings of a potential crisis. Second, an important task is the prevention of a potential crisis by anticipating it. Last, if it is not able to prevent the crisis, it has to prepare for it by visualising every

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<sup>21</sup> Coombs, W. T.; Laufer, D. (2018). Global Crisis Management – Current Research and Future Directions. *Journal of International Management*, 24(3), 199-203.

<sup>22</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

possible scenario. Indeed, Coombs underlines the importance of setting up a crisis management team, whose main task is to design a management plan that will be enacted in a crisis event<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, a crisis management team has other crucial functions, such as “detecting the early signs of a crisis; identifying the problem... encouraging the employees to face problems; and solving the crisis”<sup>25</sup>. For this reason, the members of the team need to possess creativity and flexibility to counter every possible situation. The composition of the team varies according to the type of crisis and to the type of organization, depending on its essential functions and what is required to respond to the crisis. In order to prepare for a crisis, the crisis management team should meet on a regular basis during the year<sup>26</sup>. This practice has several objectives: training the members to work on a team-basis, performing under stress and maintaining a flexible mindset, reviewing the procedures that will be enacted during a crisis (even performing simulations), preparing a detailed crisis-management plan and predicting all possible scenarios during a crisis, in order to be organized for every eventuality. Although an important task of crisis managers is signal detection, they may prove unable to identify the early signs of a crisis, and thus, to take immediate action. Indeed, by performing an environmental scanning and analysing the information obtained, an organization may use it to formulate a strategy to better deal with a crisis<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, organizations should utilise an early warning system, which is a life-changing support for the crisis management team due to the fact that it provides an immediate forecast of the crisis<sup>28</sup>. Recognizing early signals is the first step of the pre-crisis phase because it may help preventing or minimising their impact<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (2nd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage.

<sup>25</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (2010). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>28</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

<sup>29</sup> González-Herrero, A.; Pratt, C.B. (1996). An integrated symmetrical model for crisis-communication management. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8(2), 9-105.

The crisis management team should prevent these warning signs to transform into a crisis or, if not possible, to at least reduce the damage to the organization. The prevention activity is strictly connected to the preparation plan, because if the team is not able to prevent a crisis it must put all its efforts to anticipate it<sup>30</sup>. Top managers of the organization need to accept the possibility of a crisis occurring. Indeed, their acceptance would mean a readiness to deal with the crisis itself, while at the contrary, a failure to recognize the existence of a potential crisis would entail them to be held accountable for their responsibilities in case of reputational damage to the organization. In some cases, the top management may decide not to act, hoping for the crisis to resolve itself. However, in the long run, such decision will not prevent the re-occurrence of the crisis in the future, even in a stronger form<sup>31</sup>. The aim of prevention is clearly to avoid a crisis, but in case of failure the team has to adopt procedures in order to act rapidly and efficiently. To be able to do so, the crisis management team must possess adequate support and resources which can be only granted by the top management. In this way, it is possible to design a specific response strategy that safeguards both the essential core of the organization and the interests of its stakeholders<sup>32</sup>.

The last phase of pre-crisis is preparation, which consists of creating or updating a crisis management plan, testing it to improve the management procedures and taking into account the flaws of previous crisis managements. Even if developing such plans requires both time and resources, it is all functional to minimise the damage of the crisis both on financial resources and on the reputation of the organization. These plans serve as a guide for the whole organizational staff while responding to a crisis. In fact, they describe all the procedures that have to be followed during a crisis, which are detailed but flexible in order to adapt to the possible emerging contingencies<sup>33</sup>. As explained above, crises can happen suddenly and preparing for them mitigates their unpredictability. During this phase,

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<sup>30</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

issue management plays a significant role, helping the crisis management team to identify in advance the possible risks for the organization<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, several studies have shown that a proactive crisis management will minimize the damage provoked by a crisis<sup>35</sup>. Apart from determining the crisis management procedures, the preparation phase enables the crisis management team to carry out simulations of crises, training its members to perform under stress and with a limited time and assessing the individuals' capabilities to better assign positions inside the team<sup>36</sup>.

All the procedures performed during the pre-crisis stage do not ensure a complete protection from the crisis and its damage. However, the end goal of the crisis management team is to reduce all the negative consequences to the minimum. The evaluation will be done at the end of a crisis by the team itself, that will be reviewing its own performance. The same activity will be done also by the stakeholders, who will consider the reputational damage, and by the public as well. Having terminated the explanation of the pre-crisis stage, the analysis will continue with the description of the crisis stage.

### *2.3.2 Crisis stage*

The crisis event starts when a crucial change occurs. The crisis management team's task is to resolve the crisis as soon as possible with the minimum damage to the organization. The crisis cannot be considered resolved until the organization returns to perform its normal operations. The response must be fast, effective, and precise to tackle the problems that have arisen. Two phases can be identified in the crisis stage: the crisis acknowledgement, when the crisis management team recognises the existence of a crisis and follows its evolution while trying to counter it; and the crisis response, which, according to the type of crisis, requires different procedures (included in the

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<sup>34</sup> González-Herrero, A.; Pratt, C.B. (1996). An integrated symmetrical model for crisis-communication management. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8(2), 9-105.

<sup>35</sup> Penrose, J.M. (2000). The role of perception in crisis planning. *Public Relations Review* 26(2), 155-171.

<sup>36</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

management plans) to effectively reduce the effects of the crisis on the organization. As for the prevention phase, the acceptance of the crisis existence by the top management is essential to proceed with the management of the crisis to minimize the damage<sup>37</sup>. The denial of a crisis may seriously impair the capacity of an organization to recover or to regain the trust of stakeholders and the public. In assessing a crisis, the crisis management team has to consider two aspects. First, it must identify the type of crisis they are dealing with, which varies according to the amount of responsibility that the stakeholders attribute to the organization and consequently the degree of reputational threat<sup>38</sup>. Second, the crisis management team has to reconsider its assessment of the reputational threat, taking into consideration the crisis history of the organization, the relationship history with stakeholders, and the severity of the damage created by the crisis<sup>39</sup>.

During the crisis, the crisis management team has the task to select the appropriate strategy to effectively respond to it. The strategies formulated in the pre-crisis stage differ based on their outcomes: the first type leads the organization to a positive variation, be it maintaining its stability or having a development; the second type of strategy may result in the failure of safeguarding the organization's existence<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, the strategy indicates the practices to follow during the response phase in order to attenuate the crisis. The crisis team intervenes using three types of tools:

- Tools for the immediate recovery of operation to ensure the maintenance of the organization's basic function after the crisis breakout.
- Strategic instruments that change the organization position in relation to its stakeholders and the general public.

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<sup>37</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (2nd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage.

<sup>38</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2004). Impact of past crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication theory. *Journal of Business Communication*, 41(3), 265-289.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

- Tactical instruments for the internal structure of the organization to improve its economy and its functional systems (e.g., the strategic planning system, the communication system, etc.)<sup>41</sup>.

The crisis stage ends with the termination of the crisis and the re-establishment of the normal operating conditions. The crisis management team has then to analyse the outcome of the crisis, by carrying out a review of the crisis and by examining the merits or flaws of the response strategy.

### *2.3.3 Post-crisis stage*

Post-crisis is considered by many scholars as a fundamental step for handling future crisis. As explained above, a crisis is a cycle that does not merely end when the crisis is terminated, but it enters its most interesting phase where the analysis and learning activities take place. Coombs affirmed that “each crisis is a lesson”<sup>42</sup>, a source of knowledge and learning both for the crisis management team and the organization as a whole. Indeed, even in this phase, scholars underline the importance of the proactive role of crisis managers, who have to help the organization recover and, at the same time, must prepare for potential future crises. As well as the other two stages, post-crisis can be divided in sub-stages, that include actions that should be performed at the end of every crisis. It is possible to identify three main phases: recovery, revision of crisis management and learning.

The first step, recovery, is actually a process initiated at the end of the crisis stage, when the organization has returned to its normal operations. The duration of the recovery phase depends on the gravity of the consequences of the crisis, thus requiring a varying amount of time to be solved. Additionally, in this phase, the top management takes several actions to restore the functioning of organization and to repair the damage of the crisis, both substantial and reputational. Indeed, regaining credibility and restoring the organizational reputation is one of the main objectives of the post-crisis stage. Organizations aim at increasing their level of credibility after a crisis in order to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (2nd edn.). Los Angeles: Sage.

regain the support of their stakeholders that, as a consequence of the crisis, feels that their interests have been disregarded. Thus, a decrease in credibility results in an unfavourable reputation<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, since the return to normalcy of an organization may depend upon the financing and the resources coming from stakeholders, a low level of credibility of the organization may result in a higher probability of failure to recover. It is essential for the organization to prove its ability to satisfy its obligations vis-à-vis stakeholders<sup>44</sup>. In fact, Coombs defined reputation as “an aggregate evaluation stakeholders make about how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviours”<sup>45</sup>. This underlines the importance of crisis history, through which stakeholders will evaluate an organization performance based on past crises and on the ability of the organisation to communicate their intentions to them. An organization which possessed a positive reputation before the crisis and that has always managed to meet the interest of stakeholders will likely have a stronger reputation after a crisis<sup>46</sup>.

The second step of the post-crisis stage is the revision and the evaluation of the crisis management process. An initial examination should include the reasons for the occurrence of the crisis and why the team was not able to prevent it in the first place. This consideration will be useful in the future to know how to avoid it or to minimise its effects. After having analysed the causes of the crisis, the crisis management team should perform a self-evaluation, reviewing the work of the team members and the procedures adopted during the crisis response, to eventually change the crisis plan<sup>47</sup>. Through this process, crisis managers are proactively learning from the crisis and will implement the acquired lessons during the responses to a future crisis.

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<sup>43</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of Situational Crisis Communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Mikušová, M., & Horváthová, P. (2019). Prepared for a crisis? Basic elements of crisis management in an organisation. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32(1), 1844-1868.



Indeed, the third and last step of post-crisis is learning, which is the factor that symbolizes the cyclicity of crisis. The lessons learned during a crisis need to be integrated into the normal operations of the organization as well as into the process of crisis management<sup>48</sup>. Crisis managers cannot afford to be inactive, and their task is to prepare for a possible future crisis immediately after the end of the previous one. In fact, it is essential to update the crisis response plan with the new information obtained, to disregard obsolete and ineffective procedures, to always keep the stakeholders informed of the decisions taken to prepare for an eventual new crisis. In this respect, news and social media especially will play a decisive role, which will be examined in the following chapter with a particular focus on the crisis communication perspective.

### 3. The role of social media in crisis communication and crisis management

In a short period of time, social media has become an essential tool in every aspect of modern life. Since their advent in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they have facilitated online connection and communication between people around the world. Indeed, social media are generally intended as “a form of new media that facilitates social interaction and communication through the use of online internet-based platforms”<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, social media are applications that rely on Web 2.0 technologies and websites, which are characterised by the possibility of sharing content and collaborating with users, underlining the dynamic structure of the online platforms<sup>50</sup>. For this reason, social media has drastically changed the way in information is shared between people, who do not depend anymore on the passiveness of traditional media but may interact with others by exchanging content and opinions<sup>51</sup>. In fact, despite still being an important tool, traditional media are gradually

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Chan, J. C. (2013). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Preparedness, Response and Recovery. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/risk/The%20role%20of%20Social%20media%20in%20crisis%20preparedness.%20response%20and%20recovery.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Civelek, M. & Çemberci, M. & Eralp, E. (2016). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Communication and Crisis Management. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 5, 111-120.

<sup>51</sup> Saroj, A.; Pal, S. (2020). Use of social media in crisis management: A survey. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 48, 101584.

being surpassed by social media as a more effective mean for communication between an organization and the public. This change is particularly evident for young people, who highly rely on social media for collecting and spreading information as well as for connecting with other users. Nevertheless, to fully understand reasons for the pervasiveness of social media in communication systems, it is essential to analyse the characteristics of these online platforms, which may include both advantages and disadvantages.

Contrary to traditional media, social media are able to overcome communication barriers thanks to their peculiar characteristics<sup>52</sup>. In particular, four features can be identified to explain the importance of social media. First, social media are collective, meaning they are able to connect people beyond space and time, creating communities that discuss on topics and share interests, by collecting information and giving feedback to diverse contents<sup>53</sup>. Indeed, social media enable people from different countries to interact and to form a sense of belonging even online. Second, connectivity is highly important for social media because it allows people to easily collect information by connecting to different sources of knowledge<sup>54</sup>, including both social networks and wikis. At the same time, this characteristic is related to the instantaneity of messages, which is one of the main features of social media<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, through online platforms, news and information are shared immediately with the public, while traditional media are not as efficient in promptly delivering messages. Third, messages on social media can be modified and changed, or even deleted if the information given does not reflect the reality<sup>56</sup>. This function is particularly useful for organizations and authorities to rectify previous statements or to quickly correct any mistake in the text. This possibility is not given to traditional media that, when information is shared, can only try to remedy by creating new messages. Finally,

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<sup>52</sup> Chan, J. C. (2013). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Preparedness, Response and Recovery. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/risk/The%20role%20of%20Social%20media%20in%20crisis%20preparedness,%20response%20and%20recovery.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Civelek, M. & Çemberci, M. & Eralp, E. (2016). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Communication and Crisis Management. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 5, 111-120.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

one of the key components of social media is interactivity, both among users and between organization and users. Indeed, on social media, the communication is two-way because people are both recipients and producers of content or messages on social media. While the one-way communication of traditional media is directed at masses, social media tries to include both individuals and masses<sup>57</sup>. Through social media, people are encouraged share their views, knowing that someone will see them and perhaps support their message. This is possible because social media allow everyone to participate in the process of interactivity, without the requirement of being professional journalists as for traditional media<sup>58</sup>. The inclusiveness of social media also allows people from different social backgrounds to interact and talk in an open and direct way.

However, these characteristics are to be considered together with the negative consequences that they may bring. The main disadvantage of social media is certainly the spread of misinformation. While on one side social media is inclusive and allows everyone to share content, at the same time information sources and reliability are uncontrolled and may lead to the dissemination of fake news. Moreover, the increasing amount of content produced on online platforms is perceived as an obstacle for users that want to find trustworthy information<sup>59</sup>. People encounter problems in distinguishing reliable sources of information from the untrustworthy, and, as a consequence, they risk sharing valueless content in an uncontrolled manner. Despite the inaccuracy of these contents, social media allow for the negative and distorted messages to be quickly spread and consequently getting accepted by the majority. The mechanism is that the more some news is shared thanks to social media functions (e.g., hashtags on Twitter), the more people will give credit to such information and share it themselves. This spread of fake news is deemed a consequence of the lack of professionalism on social media<sup>60</sup>. This disadvantage is exacerbated when dealing with organizations and official authorities. Indeed, false claims regarding a company or a certain institution may influence the opinions and the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

behaviours of the public, which is led to believe untrustworthy information. It is difficult for organizations to constantly check for negative content regarding their performance and services, and at the same time, it is complicated to verify the truthfulness of messages<sup>61</sup>.

For these reason, social media have changed the functioning of organizations and institutions, requiring them to take into account the new digital channels in a more effective way and considering both benefits and challenges<sup>62</sup>. In fact, organizations can take advantage of social media to actively interact with stakeholders and the public in general by listening and reacting to their complaints and by creating a more direct contact through online communities<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, organizations will be able to monitor the stakeholders' activity on social media and acquire information to readjust their marketing strategies<sup>64</sup>. Finally, social media are a useful tool for organizations in delivering messages to a wider public and with the possibility of having a direct and prompt response from its stakeholders. These advantages must be balanced by the negative sides of social media described above. Organizations have to face the possibility of fake news being spread about them, which can highly damage their reputation and ability to properly function. Moreover, misinformation cannot be controlled, and organizations have to adopt strategies to promptly respond to unpredictable messages. Given the rapid exchange of fake and uncontrolled information, organizations face a higher risk of damage from social media during crises. For this reason, it is important to analyse the role that social media play in crisis management through the examination of the best practices of crisis communication, which have been adapted to the social media framework.

### 3.1 Social media use in crisis communication

With the advent of social media, organizations and institutions deemed essential to integrate this tool in their crisis communication strategy. Indeed, scholars have pointed out the increasingly important

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Roshan, M., Warren, M., Carr, R. (2016). Understanding the use of social media by organisations for Crisis Communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 350–361.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

role of social media in both crisis communication and crisis management. The growing public participation on social media cannot be ignored by crisis managers, who have to consider the possible effects of such participation in the eventuality of a crisis<sup>65</sup>. As an example, several scholars have studied the importance of social media in the midst of natural disasters, during which people were able to report on the status of the situations and connect with each other to provide support<sup>66</sup>. Nevertheless, this research is focused on organizational crisis, thus it is important to understand the behaviour of organizations and institutions when using social media to deal with crises. Organizations have utilised social media to both diffuse and acquire information in a rapid and effective way, carrying out a two-way communication with the public. In particular, organizations have used social media to directly communicate with stakeholders, by responding to their concerns, providing clarity regarding the crisis, and increasing the organizational reputation<sup>67</sup>. However, despite the capacity of social media to control the unfolding of a crisis, organizations have to take into account the possible repercussions resulting from social media<sup>68</sup>. Indeed, the effects of a crisis may be worsened by the creation of a negative image of the organization on social media, through misinformation and spread of fake news. Analysing past crises, it appears clear that, in most cases, organizations encountered difficulties in effectively utilizing social media as a powerful tool<sup>69</sup>. For this reason, public relations officers still value traditional media as a more accurate and reliable source of information during crises<sup>70</sup>. Nevertheless, it is essential for future crisis management strategies to fully incorporate social

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<sup>65</sup> Jin, Y., Liu, B. F., Austin, L. L. (2011). Examining the role of social media in effective crisis management. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 74–94.

<sup>66</sup> Saroj, A.; Pal, S. (2020). Use of social media in crisis management: A survey. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 48, 101584.

<sup>67</sup> Roshan, M., Warren, M., Carr, R. (2016). Understanding the use of social media by organisations for Crisis Communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 350–361.

<sup>68</sup> Chan, J. C. (2013). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Preparedness, Response and Recovery. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/risk/The%20role%20of%20Social%20media%20in%20crisis%20preparedness.%20response%20and%20recovery.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Roshan, M., Warren, M., Carr, R. (2016). Understanding the use of social media by organisations for Crisis Communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 350–361.

<sup>70</sup> Jin, Y., Liu, B. F., Austin, L. L. (2011). Examining the role of social media in effective crisis management. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 74–94.

media in order to respond to crises, by following the public's concerns and collaborating with stakeholders to prevent detrimental damage to the organization.

According to some scholars, the characteristics of social media easily adapt to the practices of crisis communication, due to the medium's interactivity, the wide public, and the direct response to stakeholders<sup>71</sup>. However, to be able to perform an effective crisis communication, the organization must promptly inform stakeholders via social media about the current crisis, in order to prevent negative messages and fake news to spread<sup>72</sup>. Nonetheless, crisis communication is not confined to the crisis response phase, but it is particularly important in the pre- and post-crisis. Indeed, organizations should be constantly active on social media to prevent a possible crisis or to prepare people through risk messages, which will establish the perceptions and expectations of stakeholders regarding a future crisis<sup>73</sup>. Before analysing the best practices and the challenges to social media crisis communication, it is worth mentioning the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model developed by Austin, Liu & Jin<sup>74</sup>. Deriving from the blog-mediated crisis communication, the SMCC model is a refined and more accurate version of the predecessor that includes the characteristics of this new form of media. The renaming and redefinition of the model was aimed at incorporating social media into the picture of crisis management, since different studies noted that crises could easily spread through these platforms. In particular, survey research found that both Facebook and Twitter were becoming more relevant than blogs for effective crisis management<sup>75</sup>. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the model to conceptualize the main components of social-mediated crisis communication. The model distinguishes three main types of publics in social media: the influential

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<sup>71</sup> Roshan, M., Warren, M., Carr, R. (2016). Understanding the use of social media by organisations for Crisis Communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63, 350–361.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Lachlan, K. A., Spence, P. R., Lin, X., Najarian, K., & Del Greco, M. (2016). Social Media and Crisis Management: CERC, search strategies, and Twitter content. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 647–652.

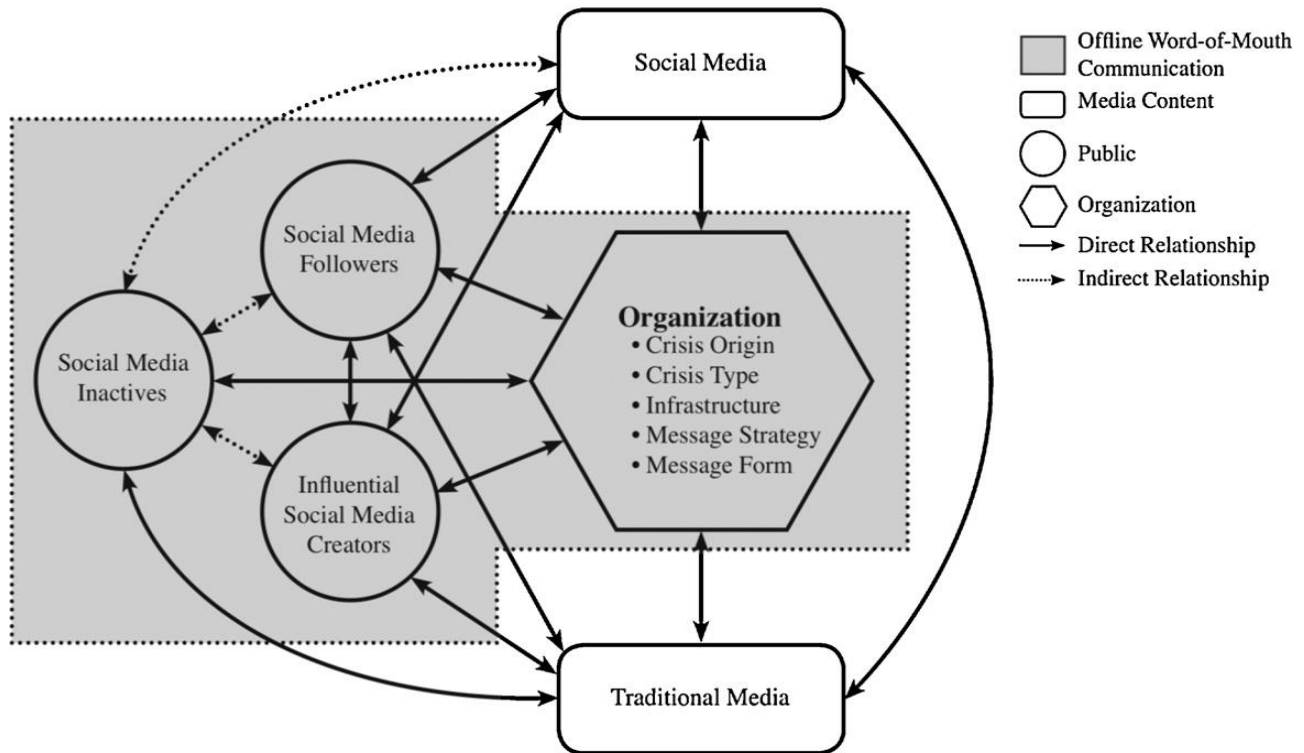
<sup>74</sup> Jin, Y., Liu, B. F., Austin, L. L. (2011). Examining the role of social media in effective crisis management. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 74–94.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

social media creators, the social media followers and the social media inactives, who access information from other sources but are indirectly exposed to social media content<sup>76</sup>.

Figure 1. The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model<sup>77</sup>.

**Social-mediated Crisis Communication Model**



This identification may be helpful for organizations to delineate a more accurate crisis communication strategy, in order to reach all types of publics. The SMCC model indicates both the direct relationship between social and traditional media in covering a crisis, and the indirect relationship between inactives and followers<sup>78</sup>. Thus, crisis communication officers are better equipped during emergency situations to reach all types of publics. Moreover, the model also takes into account the importance of offline word-of-mouth that takes place among the organization and the three types of publics. However, the most essential addition that the model has made is the introduction of five factors that influence the crisis communication strategy: crisis origin (internal or external to the organization), crisis type (victim, accident, or intentional), infrastructure (centralized or localised message), message

<sup>76</sup> Jin, Y., Liu, B. F., Austin, L. L. (2011). Examining the role of social media in effective crisis management. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 74–94.

<sup>77</sup> Liu, B. F., Jin, Y., Briones, R., & Kuch, B. Managing turbulence online: Evaluating the blog-mediated crisis communication model with the American Red Cross. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, in press.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

content (information for the public), and message form (how the message is delivered)<sup>79</sup>. While crisis origin will be fundamental in the attribution of responsibility and consequently for the reputational threat, content and form are a fundamental part of the crisis communication strategy because, apart from providing information, the message should be able to provide the necessary emotional support to the public<sup>80</sup>. Indeed, these factors are becoming more recurrent in many crisis communication mechanisms and in the best practices, because they deal with the ability of communication officers to convey a message and to gain the trust of stakeholders.

### *3.1.1 Best practices*

In the literature, several scholars have conducted analysis to test the effectiveness of crisis communication mechanisms when applied to social media. The results from these case studies have then been gathered to produce a comprehensive list of best practices for crisis communication officers. Nonetheless, only some recommendations will be considered in order to restrict the scope of the research, by reviewing articles based on their completeness and their specificity. Through the analysis of more than a hundred quantitative research papers, Eriksson found some connections that led him to delineate five guidelines for effective social media crisis communication<sup>81</sup>:

- The first lesson he acquired from his analysis is that “effective social media crisis communication is about using the potential for dialogue and choosing the right message, source and timing”<sup>82</sup>. Crisis managers should engage in an active online dialogue with the public during crises, listening to concerns and answering to requests in a timely manner<sup>83</sup>. Indeed, after the breakout of a crisis, social media become an arena for public discussion which can potentially lead to increased damage and worsening of the crisis for the organization. Crisis managers should be able to

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Lin, X., Spence, P. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Lachlan, K. A. (2016). Crisis Communication, learning and responding: Best practices in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 601–605.



distinguish the important information to effectively provide assistance to the victims and promptly resolve the crisis. For this reason, organizations and government agencies should adopt a two-way communication with the public, leaving the dialogue open in every phase of a crisis. This should be done in order to both monitor the online activity and to provide reliable information regarding the crisis evolution<sup>84</sup>. However, in order to engage in an interactive dialogue with the public, crisis managers should be able to choose the appropriate messages to be delivered on social media<sup>85</sup>. During the years, organizations have used different strategies, sometimes preferring to apologize directly to the public as soon as a crisis emerged. Nonetheless, scholars have underlined that informational messages may be more effective in the long-term because they give a precise picture of the situation to the public that will likely have a more positive attitude towards the organization<sup>86</sup>. Although informational messages are deemed to be the optimal strategy in general, crisis managers should evaluate the choice of the message based on the type of crisis and on the public feelings. Nonetheless, social media provides the possibility for corrections of the published messages in order to follow the crisis unfolding<sup>87</sup>. This is substantial difference compared to traditional media, that does not allow for frequent updates or revision of official statements. Moreover, it is also important to correctly choose the source of the message since it is related to the credibility of the organization and to the spread of the message on social media<sup>88</sup>. Indeed, public relations officers usually have a greater credibility, and as employees, their messages might affect the public opinion in a stronger way compared to an organization's message<sup>89</sup>. Finally, this first guideline highlights the importance of the timing of messages. Social media are rapid and chaotic, thus organizations should provide fast and timely messages, to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>88</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

quickly update the public and stakeholders with new information<sup>90</sup>. Indeed, online users perceive fast communication as a sign of increased credibility, relevance of the crisis situation, and they feel more involved in the dialogue with the organization<sup>91</sup>. Nonetheless, some scholars underlined that fast communication becomes ineffective if the speed comes at the cost of the execution of the message itself<sup>92</sup>. Although crisis managers should adopt a fast and up-to-date communication strategy, they should be able to maintain the quality of the message high, so that online users do not perceive the messages as inaccurate or confusing. Both organizations and government agencies should have dedicated teams, whose aim is to frequently update their status on social media, especially during a crisis when people search for information.

- The second guideline is “being prepared, understanding social media logic, and making friends before you need them”<sup>93</sup>. The first step for organizations is to fully integrate social media into crisis decision-making and policy development<sup>94</sup>. Indeed, as explained in the previous chapter, the policies for crisis management should be prepared and planned in advance, and in this case, they should also incorporate the social media tool. Thus, there is the need of adaptation of traditional policies to counter the new challenges posed by social media to crisis management<sup>95</sup>. Crisis managers should understand the social media logic in order to design policies that will cope with the mechanisms of social media, in order to be prepared for any eventuality. Indeed, this second guideline provides also for the need to plan ahead a social media strategy before the crisis breakout<sup>96</sup>. The preparation phase will decrease the possibility of mistakes and contingencies during the crisis, a possibility which is greater if we add social media to the equation. Moreover,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Lin, X., Spence, P. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Lachlan, K. A. (2016). Crisis Communication, learning and responding: Best practices in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 601–605.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>94</sup> Lin, X., Spence, P. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Lachlan, K. A. (2016). Crisis Communication, learning and responding: Best practices in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 601–605.

<sup>95</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

adapting crisis communication strategies to include social media may increase the opportunities to communicate with the public, which might be a game-changing factor when the crisis occurs<sup>97</sup>. In general, an organization should be present on social media on a regular basis, not only in times of crisis, in order to reassure the public and stakeholders of its intention to divulge information, rapidly communicate about crisis situations, and listen to rising concerns<sup>98</sup>. In this way, it is also possible to prevent the spread of fake news and negative opinions, because the establishment of an organization on social media increases its credibility as a trustworthy source. Another tactic to prevent the phenomenon of misinformation is to prepare during pre-crisis phase informational material and messages to fill potential communication vacuums during the crisis. Furthermore, organizations should constantly update information, regarding similar crises, social media opinions, and they should as well prepare a detailed contact list, to quickly reach stakeholders who require a timely response and communication of information during the crisis<sup>99</sup>. Due to the diversity and quantity of social media platforms, social media managers should be prepared to deal with an immense amount of data during a crisis and to adopt different strategies based on the intensity of the damage that social media may produce.

- The third lessons derived from the analysis is that “effective social media crisis communication is about using social media for monitoring”<sup>100</sup>. Indeed, monitoring is one of the main tasks of social media managers, which in times of crisis becomes even more important to correctly choose the crisis communication strategy. As explained previously, organizations use social media to listen to public concerns and engage in an active dialogue, and this could be done thanks to the monitoring activity that detect the debate area where there is the need to intervene. In fact, the

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<sup>97</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>98</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>99</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>100</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

monitoring of procedures is especially useful to check the emerging issues on social media, both to prevent an online crisis by looking for warning signs or to understand the public opinion through comment analysis to better prepare the strategic crisis plan. Several studies support the idea that monitoring helps organizations to understand the public feelings during a crisis, by studying the reactions of people on social media<sup>101</sup>. Nevertheless, the first step in the monitoring procedure is checking what is being said about an organization through the feeds provided in platforms like Facebook, that allows for mass monitoring<sup>102</sup>. Twitter as well is an effective social media tool for monitoring public perceptions<sup>103</sup>, through the analysis of tweets having the same hashtags concerning the organization or the crisis. Moreover, crisis managers should monitor social media to search and prevent misinformation, in order to stop the spread of false rumours about the crisis<sup>104</sup>. The monitoring procedure during the crisis is used to prevent fake news to cause reputational damage to the organization. Indeed, the last aim of monitoring is online reputation management. Since the advent of social media, organizations have become more visible and potentially vulnerable to negative comments<sup>105</sup>. However, social media managers do not have to check only stakeholders and consumers messages, but they have to also control the behaviours of organization's employees on social media, whose message, if not well formulated, may pose an actual reputational threat<sup>106</sup>. To perform such procedure, organizations avail themselves of specific tools for the management of numerous social media accounts, such as Google Alerts. Certainly, the monitoring procedure is fundamental in all stages of a crisis: before to check for emerging issues, during to control misinformation and the emotional reactions to the crisis, and after to search for comments affecting the organizational reputation.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Lin, X., Spence, P. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Lachlan, K. A. (2016). Crisis Communication, learning and responding: Best practices in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 601–605.

<sup>105</sup> Stenger, T. (2014). Social Media and online reputation management as practice. *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction*, 10(4), 49–64.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

- The fourth rule is that “effective social media crisis communication is still about prioritizing traditional media”<sup>107</sup>. Despite the increase in popularity of social media, traditional media is still deemed as a more valuable source of information during crisis, without the risk of misinformation. Social media do not possess the same level of credibility, and content is not produced only by professionals with expertise like in traditional media<sup>108</sup>. For this reason, crisis communication managers should develop strategic plans that consider both traditional and social media, evaluating their characteristics to benefit from their use during crisis<sup>109</sup>. In general, crisis managers utilize traditional media to reach a much wider audience<sup>110</sup>, while on social media they try to directly connect with people in order to have feedback on the crisis situation, which mainstream media cannot provide. Furthermore, after having failed to produce detailed and relevant information on their own websites, traditional media organizations are starting to create their own social media profile<sup>111</sup>. In this way, social media have become a crucial component also for traditional media outlets to position themselves on online platforms. The permanent characteristic of traditional media is its source credibility, which is an essential consideration for crisis managers. However, some scholars noted that organizations have recently started to work with other credible and official sources via social media in order to reach a wider public and gain more credibility<sup>112</sup>. In fact, non-trustworthy information may undermine the crisis communication strategy, which in turn may increase the possibility of damage to the organization<sup>113</sup>.
- The last guideline provided by Eriksson is that “effective social media crisis communication is just about using social media”<sup>114</sup>. As explained above, social media need to be considered as a

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<sup>107</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Lin, X., Spence, P. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Lachlan, K. A. (2016). Crisis Communication, learning and responding: Best practices in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 601–605.

<sup>114</sup> Eriksson, M. (2018). Lessons for crisis communication on Social Media: A systematic review of what research tells the practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(5), 526–551.

crucial component of crisis management plans. This tool allows for a prompt transmission of crisis information to a wide audience, who itself can share the information received to others<sup>115</sup>. Moreover, scholars analysed the huge impact that social media have on society, also due to the figures of influencers. While in the past bloggers were quite important for generating trends, similarly, on social media people identify and engage with influencers and their opinions, thus they may become allies during a crisis, by sharing important information and influence stakeholders' view<sup>116</sup>. For the same reason, experts suggest that government agencies and organizations should create their own profile on social media to be perceived as a present and physical entity when communicating and conveying messages to the public<sup>117</sup>. Indeed, the more crisis managers and organizations are involved in these media, the more they seem open and credible sources in the eyes of the public, and by consequence from the stakeholders' perspective. Moreover, the access of organizations to social media allows for the possibility of collaborating with the public, the stakeholders, and other entities involved in the crisis. Crisis managers should use social media to find partners and allies to fight the crisis, and not view other organizations as competitors<sup>118</sup>. In the same way, the public on social media is to be regarded most of the times as a resource for gathering and spreading information. The direct interaction between an organization and online users also affects the relationship with stakeholders. In fact, the latter value positively the use of social media by crisis managers, who accurately and timely communicate information, both before and during a crisis<sup>119</sup>. However, if an organization poorly manages social media crisis communication, especially with stakeholders, the latter may decide to direct their interest elsewhere, to have more credible and easily accessible information<sup>120</sup>.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>117</sup> Lin, X., Spence, P. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Lachlan, K. A. (2016). Crisis Communication, learning and responding: Best practices in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 601–605.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Veil, S. R., Buehner, T., & Palenchar, M. J. (2011). A work-in-process literature review: Incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 19(2), 110–122.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

Several scholars agree that using social media as tool for crisis management will likely prevent or at least minimise the crisis, through listening and engaging with the public and providing them with accurate and timely information<sup>121</sup>.

The guidelines provided by Eriksson are quite comprehensive and allow for the inclusion of other analyses in their framework. Although there are numerous best practices for social media crisis communication, these five appears to better fit in the context of the present research. After having analysed these rules to follow for using social media during crisis management, it is important to briefly discuss some challenges to crisis communication.

### *3.1.2 Challenges of social media crisis communication*

Despite the numerous advantages brought by social media to crisis management, crisis communication officers are continuously challenged in their work by new emerging issues, due to the constant changes and modification of the social media environment. In this section, only two challenges will be analysed, due to their relevance: communication barriers and the issue of privacy.

Scholars have noted that social media can be considered as a technological barrier for crisis managers<sup>122</sup>. Indeed, they have distinguished four factors that prevent organizations to massively and constantly use social media during crisis. First, social media might propagate rumours, produced by online users without any credibility and with the intent to damage the organization. During the crisis phase, these rumours create a problem for crisis managers, who have to deal with an incredible amount of information and have to try to distinguish valuable from non-valuable one<sup>123</sup>. The inaccurate information of rumours would negatively affect the response of crisis managers, which would then have to remedy in order not to increase the damage of the crisis. Second, connected to the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Fischer, D., Posegga, O., & Fischbach, K. (2016). Communication Barriers in Crisis Management: A Literature Review.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

first barrier, social media do not provide any mechanism for verifying the truthfulness of the produced content, which will facilitate the spread of misinformation. Due to the enormous load of social media content, which further increases during an emergency, crisis managers struggle to effectively select the information that they need and they risk that the information they share will be lost in an overload of content<sup>124</sup>. Third, after having verified the source of online information, crisis managers should also check its reliability and whether it is useful or not for the crisis response<sup>125</sup>. Most of the times the content is produced by common people, who do not have an adequate competence and knowledge of the matter, thus their messages lack the quality necessary to manage a crisis. Finally, organization may fail to adequately understand the potential of social media for crisis management and may decide to stick with the use of traditional media<sup>126</sup>. This decision may be due to the inability of the organization to acknowledge the importance of social media in global communication, or because they do not have established a social media management department that could support the crisis managers. As explained above, social media should be integrated in the communication system of an organization, which may use them during crises as a complement to traditional media.

The second important challenge to social media crisis communication is the issue of privacy, which nowadays is becoming even more pressing. The COSMIC project (Contribution of Social Media in Crisis Management) was funded by the European Union (EU) to focus on ethical and privacy issues when using social media for crisis management in order to provide advice and recommendations to crisis managers for an ethically correct use of social media<sup>127</sup>. The results of the study conducted within the project underlined some key areas involved in the process: “surveillance; (unrestricted) collection and processing of personal and sensitive personal information; unauthorized disclosure of personal information; misinformation and lack of measures to correct inaccuracies; lack of informed

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Watson, H., & Rodrigues, R. (2017). Bringing privacy into the fold: Considerations for the use of social media in crisis management. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 26(1), 89–98.



consent; inadequate security of, and for personal information; and vulnerabilities of children”<sup>128</sup>. The failure in considering privacy issues in social media crisis communication not only impairs the fundamental rights of online users, but it also may damage the organization in terms of reputation and public image. Moreover, apart from organizations, privacy issues have prevented the governmental authorities to implement social media as an official tool to communicate with citizens in times of crisis<sup>129</sup>. Although the majority of online users seem to ignore the risks of social media, in recent years legal disputes have discussed privacy issues during crisis management<sup>130</sup>. In particular, two practices will be further analysed to understand the extent of the privacy challenge. One of the problematic practices performed by government agencies and by commercial entities is social media surveillance, since online users do not know how the material gathered from their social media will be used and to what extent these entities will monitor them<sup>131</sup>. During crises, crisis managers might need to collect personal information of online users to counter the emerging issues. However, the problem arises when there is no control or restrictions to the collection of such information, which could lead to privacy issues about the scope of actions with such unrestricted collection of data<sup>132</sup>. Scholars suggest that there is the need to find a balance between the public good and the respect of fundamental rights during crisis situations<sup>133</sup>. In the last years, there has been progress in the data protection legislation, taking into consideration the new media framework<sup>134</sup>. Nonetheless, crisis managers should still pay attention to privacy challenges when using social media in order to protect the personal space of individuals.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Akhgar, B., Fortune, D., Hayes, R., & Guerra, B. & Manso, M. (2013). Social media in crisis events: Open networks and collaboration supporting disaster response and recovery. 2013 IEEE International Conference on Technologies for Homeland Security, HST 2013. 760-765.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Watson, H., & Rodrigues, R. (2017). Bringing privacy into the fold: Considerations for the use of social media in crisis management. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 26(1), 89–98.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Akhgar, B., Fortune, D., Hayes, R., & Guerra, B. & Manso, M. (2013). Social media in crisis events: Open networks and collaboration supporting disaster response and recovery. 2013 IEEE International Conference on Technologies for Homeland Security, HST 2013. 760-765.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2 Social media use in crisis management

After having discussed the role of social media in crisis communication, it is worth briefly analysing how social media could be actually applied to crisis management procedures. This section will briefly cover the three phases of crisis management adding social media to the equation. As previously examined, in order to incorporate social media into crisis management procedures there is the need to rethink the whole decision-making mechanism to include the data obtained by the analysis of social media. Apart from this aspect, organizations may use social media tools with the purpose of crowdsourcing to gather new perspectives and solutions on how to effectively manage a crisis, introducing findings and ideas coming from online users<sup>135</sup>. Indeed, there have been various examples of international organizations and government agencies that enhanced their crisis management process with the introduction and adaptation of social media tools: the Dutch government uses a specific website for disseminating information among citizens during a crisis (e.g., [www.crisis.nl](http://www.crisis.nl)); SensePlace2 is one of the many map-based application, through which crisis responders can filter information coming from people, while analysing the evolution of the crisis through space and time<sup>136</sup>.

Thus, crisis managers should implement mechanisms to integrate social media in their crisis management plans, in order to benefit from these technologies during all three stages of crisis management. Starting from the pre-crisis stage, social media tools are employed to share informational content and messages to prepare the public to face a potential crisis. This preliminary step is fundamental in the process of prevention and in minimizing the damage once the crisis erupts, but the spread of information is highly dependent on the reach of social media<sup>137</sup>. Moreover, in the pre-crisis phase, social media could be used for detecting early warning signals of a crisis and

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<sup>135</sup> Chan, J. C. (2013). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Preparedness, Response and Recovery. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/risk/The%20role%20of%20Social%20media%20in%20crisis%20preparedness,%20response%20and%20recovery.pdf>

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

identifying the emerging issues. In fact, through the daily and repetitive inspection of the social media platforms, with the help of analytical tools, organizations and government agencies can track online concerns and easily identify upcoming crises<sup>138</sup>. During the detection phase, the emerging issues should be evaluated by crisis managers to assess which one should be prioritized and how to prevent it from erupting. Also in this case, social media tools can be helpful in identifying the most urgent issues through an analysis of comments and online sentiments<sup>139</sup>. Nevertheless, the crisis management team should be prepared in the case that it is not possible to prevent the crisis from happening in the first place. During crisis planning and the training of personnel, social media platforms could be used to simulate a crisis and evaluate both the performance of the team and the response of the public and stakeholders<sup>140</sup>. The preparation phase is fundamental to be reactive when the crisis will emerge and will likely escalate quickly. For this reason, the plan designed in the pre-crisis will provide for the procedures to be followed and for every type of contingency.

In the crisis response phase, crisis managers are starting to use social media to facilitate the procedures of problem solving and decision-making, by gathering essential information from online platforms and aggregating them to generate a comprehensive picture of the crisis situation<sup>141</sup>. Moreover, social media tools are used to monitor the evolution of the crisis online and the feelings of the public, of the people involved and of the stakeholders. Thus, it is important that crisis management teams include social media managers and public relations officers that are required to coordinate in choosing the most suitable communication strategy, which has to be the same for both social and traditional media. However, according to the type of message that organizations desire to convey, there needs to be an evaluation of the platform to choose. For example, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook are more

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<sup>138</sup> Cole, S. (2019, January 30). The four stages of social media issue and Crisis Management. Econsultancy. Retrieved January 2023, from <https://econsultancy.com/social-media-issue-crisis-management-four-stages/>

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Chan, J. C. (2013). The Role of Social Media in Crisis Preparedness, Response and Recovery. <https://www.oecd.org/governance/risk/The%20role%20of%20Social%20media%20in%20crisis%20preparedness,%20response%20and%20recovery.pdf>

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

effective for rapid and direct messages directed at a wide audience, although Twitter allows only short messages. Instead, organizations prefer to use their websites or traditional media outlets when they decide to provide formal and official statements<sup>142</sup>. Finally, based on the response and the efforts to quickly terminate a crisis, organizations will have to deal with a shorter or longer period of recovery. In the post-crisis phase, it is important to evaluate the work of the organization in managing reputation online during crisis, by analysing people's reactions to the organizational response and especially by gathering the opinion of stakeholders regarding how the crisis was managed. Moreover, the crisis management team should examine the degree of effectiveness of social media in mitigating the effects of the crisis, in order to start the learning procedure. Indeed, as for normal procedures in the crisis management plan, the involvement of social media tools could offer a lesson to be integrated in the plan for future crises. In the recovery phase, social media appear to be an essential tool to further communicate with the public and to reassure them of the return to normalcy of the organizational operations. Social media have proved to be fundamental tools in the field of crisis management. However, they should not be considered as panacea<sup>143</sup>. Indeed, there are still problems and challenges connected to the use of social media for crisis communication. More research is needed in the future due to the constant evolution of social media technology and their growth in terms of reach and quality of interactions<sup>144</sup>.

#### 4. Social media and COVID-19: review of case studies

The analysis of the previous chapter underlined the relevance of social media for crisis communication strategies and how to effectively utilize such tools during crisis management. The present chapter represents the last part of this research and will cover a significant case study in terms

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<sup>142</sup> Cole, S. (2019, January 30). The four stages of social media issue and Crisis Management. Econsultancy. Retrieved January 2023, from <https://econsultancy.com/social-media-issue-crisis-management-four-stages/>

<sup>143</sup> Akhgar, B., Fortune, D., Hayes, R., & Guerra, B. & Manso, M. (2013). Social media in crisis events: Open networks and collaboration supporting disaster response and recovery. 2013 IEEE International Conference on Technologies for Homeland Security, HST 2013. 760-765.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

of social media crisis communication, the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, many scholars deem the recent pandemic as unique compared to previous health crises due to the extensive and unprecedented use of social media by citizens, organizations, and public authorities. Given the peculiar nature of the crisis and its proximity in time, it is worth analysing the social media practices adopted by institutions to reduce the effects of the pandemic, and at the same time the people's behaviour on online platforms with regards of COVID-19. The present research proposes a comprehensive review of the recent and relevant literature covering different aspects of the crisis, to analyse the perspective of the actors involved and to summarize the main findings, which may be helpful to national authorities and organizations in dealing with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and its long-term consequences. The first section of the chapter will briefly analyse the use of social media during past health crises to then compare them with the management of the COVID-19 crisis, in order to further expand the study framework. The second part of the chapter will be entirely devoted to the examination of the case study by reviewing relevant research and deriving some best practices from the outcome of the crisis.

#### 4.1 Public health crisis and social media

Despite the relevance of the COVID-19 case for the present study, the literature provides an extensive list of public health crises in which social media were employed for effective crisis communication. Indeed, the current pandemic, although with larger reach and stronger effects, is similar in nature to previous pandemic crises that occurred around the world and had a global impact. For this reason, scholars have paid huge attention to the analysis of previous health crises in the framework of crisis management and social media. Moreover, it is important to analyse crisis communication during a public health crisis, that differs from other types of crises for its increased impact and its unpredictability. In particular, crisis communication pursues the aims of preventing the spread of the disease even further and of protecting citizens from the infection. To achieve such objectives, national authorities should share messages about the disease with the public in order to provide individuals

with the necessary tools for assessing risk and adopting precautions<sup>145</sup>. Indeed, during public health crises, the lack of reliable and detailed information could cause uncertainty in people that are not aware of the severity of the crisis<sup>146</sup>. Furthermore, the strategies chosen to communicate with the public during a health crisis may also affect the compliance of people with the instructions provided by public health experts. Information coming from the governmental authorities is perceived as reliable and accurate, increasing the public's trust in institutions.

With the advent of social media, crisis management teams slowly implemented this new tool into their communication strategies. Indeed, scholars have highlighted that the increased use of social media during public health crisis led some institutions to establish a two-way communication stream with the public via social media. On one side, crisis managers use online platforms to share information and contain the damages of the crisis. On the other, citizens use new media to enhance their situational awareness (“all knowledge that is accessible and can be integrated into a coherent picture, when required, to assess and cope with a situation”<sup>147</sup>) and to connect with people that are experiencing the same condition. Social media allow the people concerned and the general public to understand the crisis and respond to it in the most effective manner. In this sense, support is provided in two ways: a concrete and functional help deriving from official and reliable information on how to deal with the health crisis, plus an emotional support coming from the connection with people and from the share of common feelings<sup>148</sup>. Moreover, online platforms allowed the formation of communities to discuss health issues during and especially after pandemics<sup>149</sup>. Indeed, it is becoming more frequent the phenomenon of medical social media, which are composed of content related to medicine and health problems that may be produced by patients (their relatives and friends) or by

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<sup>145</sup> Seeger, M. W., & Griffin Padgett, D. R. (2010). From image restoration to renewal: Approaches to understanding postcrisis communication. *The Review of Communication*, 10(2), 127-141.

<sup>146</sup> Gui, X., Kou, Y., Pine, K. H., & Chen, Y. (2017). Managing uncertainty: Using Social Media for Risk Assessment during a Public Health Crisis. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

<sup>147</sup> Sarter, N. B. & Woods, D. (1991). Situation Awareness: A Critical But Ill-Defined Phenomenon. *The International Journal of Aviation Psychology* 1, 1: 45–57.

<sup>148</sup> Gui, X., Kou, Y., Pine, K. H., & Chen, Y. (2017). Managing uncertainty: Using Social Media for Risk Assessment during a Public Health Crisis. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

healthcare professionals, who want to educate the audience on a certain topic<sup>150</sup>. Although this social media function helps people to empathise with others and receive news regarding diseases, there is the possibility of erroneous and misleading information that may be then shared to a wider audience through the social media spread mechanism. Nevertheless, these are just some of the social media functions that could be employed in crisis communication. In particular, it is worth considering strategies used by institutions during past health crises, that will be applied to the COVID-19 framework.

Research focusing on health crises have stressed the importance of public health surveillance through social media mining<sup>151</sup>. Through surveillance practices, institutions are able to early detect warning signs of an incoming disease that could allow them to enact measures to prevent the disease from spreading. Social media and new technologies can assist crisis managers in their work functioning as sources for public health alerts<sup>152</sup>. Indeed, through the use of alerting systems and analysis tools, institutions can scan social media searching for keywords and content related to the disease and process such data to obtain relevant information for crisis management. This mechanism overcomes national boundaries by analysing content in different languages and is especially helpful when dealing with a global health crisis<sup>153</sup>. Moreover, the social media surveillance is a smaller part of the monitoring procedure that organizations and institutions carry out on a daily basis. In fact, social media content is constantly monitored to detect warning signals of a crisis, to gather relevant information both for functional crisis operations and for understanding the emotions of the people concerned. In the monitoring framework, experts include the so-called “epidemic intelligence”<sup>154</sup>, whose aim is to gather information through social media and to complement traditional surveillance

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<sup>150</sup> Denecke, K., & Atique, S. (2016). Social Media and Health Crisis Communication during epidemics. *Participatory Health Through Social Media*, 42–66.

<sup>151</sup> Gui, X., Kou, Y., Pine, K. H., & Chen, Y. (2017). Managing uncertainty: Using Social Media for Risk Assessment during a Public Health Crisis. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

<sup>152</sup> Denecke, K., & Atique, S. (2016). Social Media and Health Crisis Communication during epidemics. *Participatory Health Through Social Media*, 42–66.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Paquet, C., Coulombier, D., Kaiser, R., & Ciotti, M. (2006). Epidemic intelligence: A new framework for strengthening disease surveillance in Europe. *Eurosurveillance*, 11(12), 5–6.

systems with online mechanisms that control digital platforms for emerging issues<sup>155</sup>. Furthermore, national authorities can assess the health of the population also outside the crisis framework, thanks to the picture provided by digital sources. This process is called digital epidemiology and is based on human activity on social media, that become platforms for sharing medical content during epidemics and reporting the evolution of the disease from the perspective of the concerned population<sup>156</sup>.

Moreover, evidence shows that the crisis outbreak was first reported on social media by unofficial sources and then verified by health experts that would provide detailed information regarding the disease activity<sup>157</sup>. Indeed, research has underlined the key role of social media for public health agencies, in order to share disease-related information in a timely and accurate manner, as shown by the US Centre of Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) performance during the H1N1 flu epidemic<sup>158</sup>. The CDC is a perfect example of public health authority that made an effective use of social media, by informing the public on the safety measure to adopt and by creating the CDC Emergency feed, which provides up-to-date information, precautions to be adopted and health alerts for the public during a health crisis or a natural disaster emergency<sup>159</sup>. In fact, the dissemination of information is essential during public health crises, to raise situational awareness and to allow people to make informed decisions. Due to its decentralised nature, social media enable the quick circulation of information, both coming from official sources and from online users<sup>160</sup>. Public health experts examine the social media content to search for relevant information regarding the current crisis situation and to produce accurate reports for crisis managers, including both scientific and functional details and actual experience of the public concerned. At the same time, people seek information from official sources, through national authorities, health experts or traditional media profiles, but they

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Denecke, K., & Atique, S. (2016). Social Media and Health Crisis Communication during epidemics. *Participatory Health Through Social Media*, 42–66.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Gui, X., Kou, Y., Pine, K. H., & Chen, Y. (2017). Managing uncertainty: Using Social Media for Risk Assessment during a Public Health Crisis. *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

<sup>159</sup> Denecke, K., & Atique, S. (2016). Social Media and Health Crisis Communication during epidemics. *Participatory Health Through Social Media*, 42–66.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.



base their online research also on physical and emotional proximity, in order to share news and recommendations at the local level<sup>161</sup>. Indeed, during public health emergencies, citizens express their willingness to help managing the crisis by means of volunteering. Social media, such as Facebook, allows people to indicate their availability to mobilize during emergencies on the status section of their profile, so that crisis responders can check the individuals who are willing to participate and quickly contact them<sup>162</sup>.

Figure 2. Types of social media and their use for health crisis communication<sup>163</sup>.

Type of Social Media	Example	Use for Risk and Crisis Communication and for Digital Epidemiology
Social network	PatientsLikeMe, Facebook	Coordination among emergency services and volunteers, share information inside a community, swift update on emergency situation
Content sharing	YouTube	Situational awareness in real time through exchange of pictures and videos, launch vaccination or disease prevention campaigns
	Flickr	
Collaborating knowledge sharing social media	Wikis	Situational awareness, dialog between victims and emergency services
	Forums	
	Message boards	
Blogging/microblogging	Blogger	Convey recommendations, warnings, share facts and rumors, source for mapping emergency information
	Twitter	
	WordPress	

Social media perform different functions and are used for different purposes during health crises.

Figure 2 is an overview of the main types of social media and their use in crisis communication.

Although crisis managers developed their strategies around different social media platforms, Twitter is one of the most used and analysed by studies due to its peculiar characteristics: short messages (maximum 280 characters), use of hashtags for specific topics, and wide reach. Indeed, Twitter is a powerful tool for the analysis of data that may provide relevant insights for the management of a

<sup>161</sup> Gui, X., Kou, Y., Pine, K. H., & Chen, Y. (2017). Managing uncertainty: Using Social Media for Risk Assessment during a Public Health Crisis. Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

<sup>162</sup> Denecke, K., & Atique, S. (2016). Social Media and Health Crisis Communication during epidemics. Participatory Health Through Social Media, 42–66.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

health crisis. The monitoring procedure on Twitter is facilitated by the presence of hashtags that recall the disease, by location-based searches and by the examination of keywords in the messages<sup>164</sup>. Moreover, tweets differ in their content performing three main functions: providing information, expression of opinions and report of personal issues<sup>165</sup>. Informative messages are certainly the most useful type during a health crisis because they give situational awareness to both the public and the authorities. Online users usually express their opinions through social media, which can be problematic for the monitoring systems when detecting keywords which are used in an inappropriate manner or when those messages contain inaccurate information and get spread. Finally, tweets expressing personal problems are extremely relevant for crisis managers that, through a proactive activity, may try to connect and communicate with those people and gain trust and credibility, both necessary during crises. Nevertheless, scholars found some disadvantages in using Twitter as the main source for online crisis communication. Indeed, the tweets are usually composed of short sentences, abbreviations or keywords, which may generate misunderstanding<sup>166</sup>. Adding this problem to the huge amount of data, it is evident the difficulty in interpreting and examining the content of messages in the context of the health crisis<sup>167</sup>. Although the usefulness of Twitter cannot be denied, crisis managers have to weigh its benefits with the shortcomings deriving from its proper characteristics.

The same reasoning can be applied to every type of social media by analysing the consequences generated by their usage. Surely, the quality and reliability of online data must be considered in the context of public health crises, due to the impact that the national authorities' decisions have on the spread of the disease. If crisis managers fail to identify false information and use them as part of their decision-making strategies, the consequences could be enormous both for the material and reputational damage. Moreover, national authorities and public health experts should pay attention to

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

the phenomenon of misinformation, which could generate the spread of incorrect news about the disease, preventing people from receiving the necessary knowledge to avoid the infection. For this reason, the presence of authorities and medical experts online is essential in order to provide accurate information to the people asking for clarifications and for comfort during crises. Indeed, in the Zika health crisis, the lack of credible and reliable sources led people to search for answers through online forums, due to the extreme uncertainty caused by the management of the crisis<sup>168</sup>. Another issue is the large amount of social media content that is produced during a crisis that needs to be supported by a robust technology, allowing health officials to detect relevant and valuable information<sup>169</sup>. Additionally, social media content might be difficult to interpret due to language ambiguity or if medical terms are used in different contexts, thus complicating the work of the analytical systems in obtaining the correct information for the purpose of crisis management<sup>170</sup>. This could generate false alarms that hinder the work of the crisis team, which, in its surveillance function, should be aware of the privacy issues related to the retaining of personal data. In fact, when creating an online application for the detection of diseases, it must be established the scope of research, the users involved and the area of application<sup>171</sup>. Finally, there is the need of global guidelines to effectively contrast public health crises through the use of social media, and these procedures should take into account the differences in reach of social media between developed and developing countries, especially when dealing with global pandemics. The analysis carried out in this first section will be considered to examine the COVID-19 case study, which, despite being an unprecedented pandemic, maintains almost the same mechanisms as previous ones. Indeed, it is important to reason on the implications that the COVID-19 pandemic brought in order to better deal with future public health crisis that may present similar aspects.

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<sup>168</sup> Gui, X., Kou, Y., Pine, K. H., & Chen, Y. (2017). Managing uncertainty: Using Social Media for Risk Assessment during a Public Health Crisis. Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

<sup>169</sup> Denecke, K., & Atique, S. (2016). Social Media and Health Crisis Communication during epidemics. *Participatory Health Through Social Media*, 42–66.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

## 4.2 COVID-19 crisis: review of best practices

The spread of COVID-19 around the world resulted into a challenging pandemic which was mainly managed at the national level. In contrast with previous health crisis, the role of social media highly contributed to the management of the crisis, due to the increased number of users that were connected online during lockdowns in order to promptly receive information and to contact families and friends. To properly analyse the crisis, it is essential to first provide a general overview of the pandemic, in order to frame the context for the following review of the case that will be carried out by examining some of the most prominent studies about the role of social media for effectively managing a public health crisis. In particular, this research will focus principally on academic papers and some correlated works that can present a clear picture of the COVID-19 crisis, from the perspective of national authorities, organizations, and the public, under different aspects, such as misinformation, surveillance and techniques for crisis communication. The literature analysed in this chapter was chosen on the basis of their relevance in the field of social media crisis communication and for their findings related to the pandemic crisis. Starting from the examination of these results, the present chapter will present new considerations regarding the crisis management, which will be further discussed in the conclusive part of the thesis, with the summary of social media best practices.

### *4.2.1 Overview of the COVID-19 emergency*

The COVID-19 is a new strain of the SARS infection that was identified in Wuhan (China) in December 2019. The spread of the virus led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a global pandemic on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020<sup>172</sup>. Indeed, COVID-19 affected several countries and caused the most dangerous and fatal public health crisis in recent times. As of September 2021, the WHO reported more than 220 million people infected and around 4.5 million deaths worldwide<sup>173</sup>. This

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<sup>172</sup> Zhou, Y., Draghici, A., Abbas, J., Mubeen, R., Boatca, M. E., Salam, M. A. (2022). Social media efficacy in crisis management: Effectiveness of non-pharmaceutical interventions to manage COVID-19 challenges. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

ongoing pandemic represents the largest crisis since World War II in terms of health emergency, economic and financial difficulties, and social problems for both countries and companies. Indeed, the spread of the virus led governments to adopt restrictive measures that disrupted social interactions, economic activities and international relations<sup>174</sup>. The pandemic has greatly impacted the functioning of businesses and the behaviours of society that needs to collaborate to effectively respond to the crisis, in order to mitigate the long-term effects of COVID-19 on economy<sup>175</sup>. The difficulties encountered in promptly managing the crisis derived also from the lack of cooperation between countries during the initial stages of the virus. As for past pandemics, the crisis response strategies adopted by governments and organizations were crucial for determining the evolution of the crisis itself, meaning that effective measures could have stopped the virus from progressing even further. In fact, the pandemic crisis is still ongoing, especially in third-world countries where resources for handling the crisis are lacking and vaccines are still not as widely distributed as in developed countries. Moreover, the virus itself is constantly evolving into new strains, thus requiring constant research and analysis by health experts. For these reasons, there is the need of further studies to deeply understand the nature of the crisis and to ultimately terminate it, re-establishing the normalcy in our society.

Scholars have agreed in defining COVID-19 as an unprecedented crisis event and have recognized its disruptive effects on several aspects of our lives<sup>176</sup>. In particular, it has been categorized as a sticky crisis, a “complex and challenging crisis issue” that will be more difficult to handle for crisis managers<sup>177</sup>. Indeed, the adoption of restrictive measures for a prolonged time, such as lockdowns and social distancing, posed an additional challenge for organizations in managing their daily

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Kwok, L., Lee, J., & Han, S. H. (2021). Crisis communication on social media: What types of covid-19 messages get the attention? *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 63(4), 528–543.

<sup>176</sup> Park, Y.-E. (2021). Developing a COVID-19 crisis management strategy using news media and social media in Big Data Analytics. *Social Science Computer Review*, 40(6), 1358–1375.

<sup>177</sup> Coombs, W. T., Holladay, S. J., & White, K. L. (2020). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and application in dealing with complex, challenging, and recurring crises. In Y. Jin, B. H. Reber, & G. J. Nowak (Eds.), *Advancing crisis communication effectiveness: integrating public relations scholarship with practice*. Routledge

operations<sup>178</sup>. Moreover, the uniqueness of COVID-19 crisis is the peculiar use of social media by both crisis managers and the public. Apart from mitigating the effects of the virus, national governments and businesses had to face an “infodemic”, the spread of falsified information, which damages the communication strategies of crisis managers and causes disproportionate consequences at a global level<sup>179</sup>. For this reason, it is important to analyse the efforts of national governments and organizations in managing the challenges of social media crisis communication during COVID-19 and gain best practices that could be used in future crises.

#### *4.2.2 Lessons from COVID-19*

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, several studies have been conducted examining the role of social media in managing the crisis. Nevertheless, most of them focused on limited data from single countries without considering the general picture. The purpose of the present research is to analyse the literature to find the best practices that were adopted in social media crisis communication during the COVID-19 crisis, to establish some guidelines to better handle future health crises but also to correctly terminate the present one while minimising the damages. In this section, an analysis will be carried out examining some prominent research that best summarize the importance of social media during crises. In particular, there will be an evaluation of the public (national authorities, health experts, and the public itself) and the private sector (businesses) performance in handling the pandemic crisis. Indeed, although it was governments and international organizations that primarily dealt with the COVID-19 crisis, even companies have suffered greatly the effects of the crisis and had adopted social media in their marketing strategy. For this reason, the present analysis will first examine the strategies adopted by public authorities to effectively use social media considering

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<sup>178</sup> Tian, Y., & Yang, J. (2022). Deny or bolster? A comparative study of crisis communication strategies between Trump and Cuomo in covid-19. *Public Relations Review*, 48(2), 102182.

<sup>179</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

several aspects, such as the fight against misinformation, the use of surveillance systems and the actions to mitigate the effects of the crisis.

During COVID-19 crisis, people were extremely uncertain of the evolution of the pandemic and decided to increasingly rely on social media to communicate with people and search for relevant information. Thus, apart from dealing with the crisis on an operational level, national authorities had to reassure the public of the handling of the situation through timely and concrete communications. The COVID-19 crisis represented a turning point in the governments' use of social media for crisis communication. Some scholars deem that social media have become a crisis communication actor itself, by quickly disseminating news about the disease and precautions to adopt during the pandemic<sup>180</sup>. Indeed, national authorities and health organizations, such as the WHO and the US CDC, heavily relied on social media for managing the crisis, by providing reliable information and guidelines for the preventing the increase of infections and for responding to growing concerns<sup>181</sup>. For example, during the early stages of the virus, the importance of wearing a mask was disregarded by the public due to the inefficiency of clearly communicated safeguards by authorities, which later engaged in a consistent messaging strategy to underline the relevance of masks for decreasing the probability of transmission<sup>182</sup>. The effectiveness of social media in addressing people's search for information depends on the ability of public authorities to correctly deliver frequent and consistent messages formulated using the right tone, which changes according to the content and the aim of the message<sup>183</sup>. In this regard, several studies analysed the behaviour and strategies of national authorities for using social media during crisis management, creating a list of best practices to be followed for the continuation of the COVID-19 crisis or for dealing with future health crises. Despite the difference

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Mourad, A., Srour, A., Harmanani, H., Jenainati, C., & Arafeh, M. (2020). Critical impact of social networks Infodemic on defeating coronavirus covid-19 pandemic: Twitter-based study and Research Directions. *IEEE Transactions on Network and Service Management*, 17(4), 2145–2155.

<sup>182</sup> London, J., & Matthews, K. (2021). Crisis communication on social media - lessons from covid-19. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 31(1-2), 150–170.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

in methods (some analysed social media content of governmental officials, while others carried out sample surveys across the population), the results present a coherent pattern.

Considering the rapid evolution of the COVID-19 crisis, social media enabled governments to modify statements and to keep up with the evolution of the virus<sup>184</sup>. Public authorities constantly shared information on the official profiles to provide the most recent news to preoccupied citizens. Indeed, some studies highlighted the importance for the government to have official accounts on social media that increase their visibility in times of crisis, especially across young adults, who form a big share of online users. In particular, the optimization of search engines and the appropriate layout of websites and social media profiles have contributed to increase the accessibility of governments accounts for online users<sup>185</sup>. Regarding the form of messages, the tone used in governments' ones was chosen either to communicate empathy and reassurance or to underline the seriousness of the situation and the need to adopt all the necessary precautions in order to minimise the spread of the virus. Indeed, a study conducted in the US underlined that a more positive tone in pandemic messages is generally more accepted by the public, that prefers frequent and constructive content on social media<sup>186</sup>. Furthermore, the study found that there is a relationship between the strategy and form of crisis communication and the changes in citizens behaviours, even if the governments' messages may not be the only contributing factor<sup>187</sup>. Nevertheless, in some cases, the attention of national authorities to timely communicate information diminished, and one reason might be that there is no more the need to educate citizens to the virus. However, it is essential that public authorities continue their efforts to provide relevant information to the public by reallocating resources in order to fill the gaps that might form online and cause the spread of fake news<sup>188</sup>. People relying on social media highly value

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Al Shaher, M. A., & Radwan, A. F. (2022). The Role of Social Media in Government Communication during Covid-19 Pandemic: The Case of KSA. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10, 368-383.

<sup>186</sup> London, J., & Matthews, K. (2021). Crisis communication on social media - lessons from covid-19. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 31(1-2), 150-170.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.



the interaction of government officials through informational messages, that should be maintained even after the effects of the crisis diminish. Although there is a positive correlation between the increase of dedicated social media posts and increased approval of governmental policies, this effect has diminished as the COVID-19 crisis prolonged<sup>189</sup>. Indeed, citizens initially accepted restrictive policies that were meant to be temporary, but gradually decreased their support in the governments' prolonged measures that in part damaged social interactions and economic activities (e.g., lockdowns, closure of non-essential activities, social distancing).

In some countries, statistics about the number of cases and deaths were updated on a daily basis and communicated through both traditional and social media. In this way, citizens were given a vast situational awareness and increased their trust in the government, that in most cases functioned as a valid source of information. In particular, a sample survey conducted in Saudi Arabia demonstrated that 43.4% of respondents considered the government official accounts on social media as the most authentic source of information during the COVID-19 crisis<sup>190</sup>. Moreover, in terms of most accessed and reliable sources for the spread of relevant pandemic content, more than half of the survey participants (51.7%) claimed that the health ministry social media account provided the most useful information for the prevention of the infection<sup>191</sup>. The results of this case study are coherent, in general terms, with the findings of past public health crisis. Nevertheless, when considering studies that expand the sample survey to include more countries and focus on specific parts of the population, the results may present a different scenario. For example, a recent survey was conducted among twenty-four countries considering the group age 18-40 years old, which is deemed to use social media the most<sup>192</sup>. In particular, the results reveal that during the pandemic people accessed social media to search for information mainly looking at traditional media (34%) and WHO accounts (31%), while

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

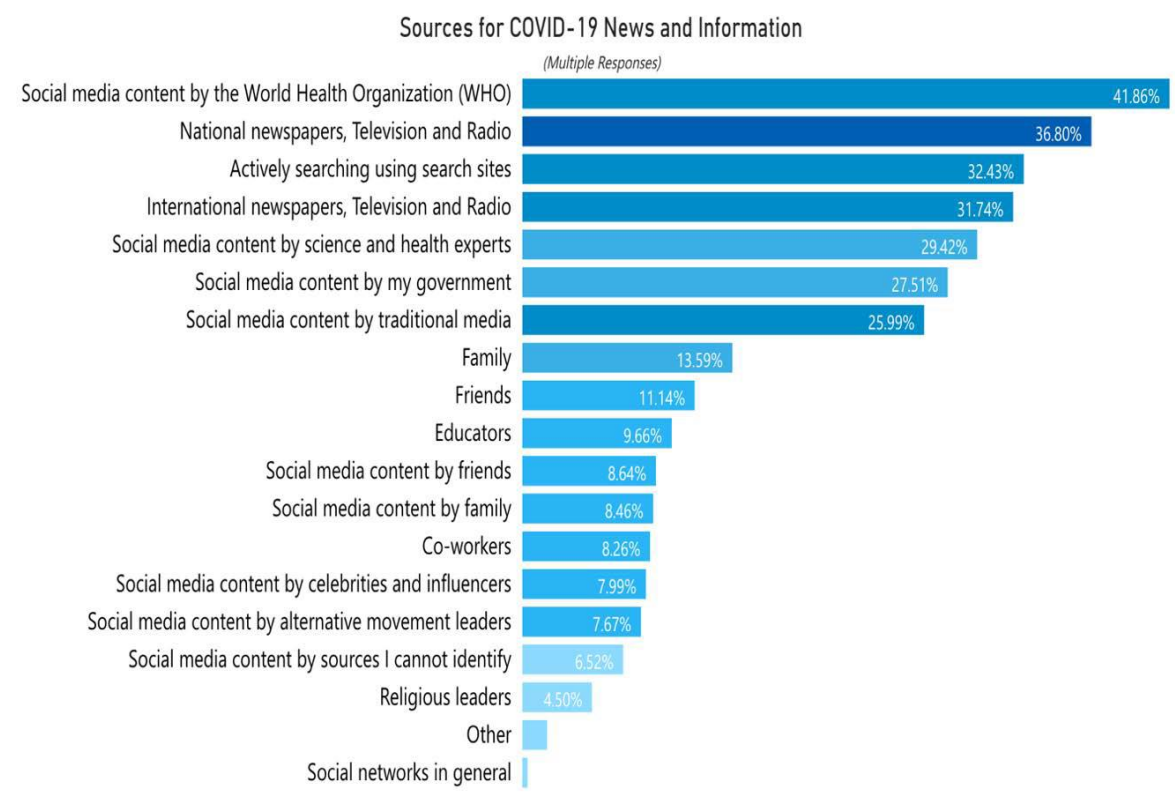
<sup>190</sup> Al Shaher, M. A., & Radwan, A. F. (2022). The Role of Social Media in Government Communication during Covid-19 Pandemic: The Case of KSA. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10, 368-383.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

content posted by public health experts and the government was slightly less accessed (28%)<sup>193</sup>. Moreover, as shown by figure 3, when answering to the question “When a vaccine becomes available, which of the following sources would you look to first for information?”, social media content by government was ranked sixth by 27.5% of respondents, who deemed more relevant other sources of information such as WHO accounts or national traditional media<sup>194</sup>. These results highlight the inefficiency of government officials to benefit from social media tools as other organization did. Indeed, public authorities should improve their social media profiles and websites to gain more visibility and increase the accessibility for online users, which usually prefer less structured content. Thus, there is the need to train and assemble a social media management team that will assist crisis managers in their use of social media and, during peaceful times, will monitor online platforms and upgrade governments’ social media accounts and websites.

Figure 3. Sources for vaccines information<sup>195</sup>.



<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

Nevertheless, the efforts of national governments in social media crisis communication have increased during COVID-19 and the establishment of a direct channel for communication with citizens raised their awareness and trust in the institutions<sup>196</sup>. Indeed, the latter is an essential asset for the government in order to ensure the compliance of people with guidelines and health recommendations<sup>197</sup>. Moreover, to obtain higher compliance rates from citizens, social media messages should follow a precise crisis communication strategy and should be delivered from important government officials. On this matter, a study analysed the strategies adopted by two politicians in the US, the former President Donald Trump and the former New York governor, Andrew Cuomo. The analysis of their tweets during the first phase of the pandemic highlighted some important differences in their communication techniques which impacted the degree of trust of citizens. While Trump minimized the severity of the virus and distanced himself from experts, leading stakeholders to negatively evaluate his crisis response, Cuomo stressed the importance of following health guidelines and of gathering factual information, which allowed him to receive greater support and trust<sup>198</sup>. Despite the differences in the approach, both crisis communication strategies obtained some results, which were measured by the number of retweets. Nevertheless, Trump's communication on social media was highly criticised for prioritizing his political agenda rather than effectively addressing the pandemic<sup>199</sup>. Instead, a key element of effective crisis communication is to address the concerns of the public, delivering both informative and comforting messages. In this way, politicians increase public trust in the government and could eventually foster their political aims while building a direct relationship with citizens on social media<sup>200</sup>. The strategies that government officials adopt in social media crisis communication may significantly impact the public opinion and the institutional reputation, that might be damaged during a severe health crisis.

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<sup>196</sup> Al Shaher, M. A., & Radwan, A. F. (2022). The Role of Social Media in Government Communication during Covid-19 Pandemic: The Case of KSA. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10, 368-383.

<sup>197</sup> Tian, Y., & Yang, J. (2022). Deny or bolster? A comparative study of crisis communication strategies between Trump and Cuomo in covid-19. *Public Relations Review*, 48(2), 102182.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

In some countries, apart from sharing information about vaccines, regulations and restrictions, governments also used online platforms to promote health and safety campaigns with the support of health experts and social media influencers<sup>201</sup>. Indeed, as posited by the SMCC model, influential social media creators (here called influencers) play an important role in crisis management, affecting the extent to which crisis communication has an impact through social media<sup>202</sup>. During the early phases of the pandemic, influencers shared public health information and recommendations, using as sources both governmental decrees and health ministry directives<sup>203</sup>. Due to their wide social media audience, influencers managed to spread verified and accurate news that helped citizens to take the necessary precautions, but the messages were also aimed at comforting people and relieving the psychological burden derived by lockdowns and social distancing. In fact, apart from disseminating relevant information to prevent further virus infections, influencers entertained their followers who were connected online for longer periods during the pandemic and contributed to create online communities sharing similar interests. Some governments have acknowledged the importance of these actors in delivering informative content to a wider audience and decided to collaborate with them during the pandemic for spreading awareness and encouraging compliance with the directives<sup>204</sup>. Thus, influencers have been integrated into crisis communication strategies as important crisis communicators, especially for promoting the necessity of precautions and vaccination. This method was adopted by Australia, Finland, UK, and Indonesia, and the latter has established a social media campaign in collaboration with some influencers to spread information about vaccines and encourage people to vaccinate<sup>205</sup>. Although scholars have underlined the prominence of influencers as crisis communicators during the COVID-19 crisis, it was shown that some influential creators

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<sup>201</sup> Al Shaher, M. A., & Radwan, A. F. (2022). The Role of Social Media in Government Communication during Covid-19 Pandemic: The Case of KSA. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10, 368-383.

<sup>202</sup> Liu, B. F., Jin, Y., Briones, R., & Kuch, B. Managing turbulence online: Evaluating the blog-mediated crisis communication model with the American Red Cross. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, in press.

<sup>203</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

spread misinformation and posted messages against vaccines, while being supported by parts of the population. For example, in Italy the so-called “no-vax” movement organised several manifestations against the COVID-19 vaccines and the participation was higher than expected. Nonetheless, both health experts and influencers tried to block the spread of fake news (e.g., 5G damages the immune systems and causes COVID-19) in order to convince people of the benefits of the vaccination process in the fight against the virus. In particular, clinicians represented a trusted source on social media, as they spread medical information and address individuals’ concerns in a direct manner<sup>206</sup>. Indeed, social media were packed with questions that regarded the virus and how to recognize the symptoms, especially in the first phase of the pandemic when COVID-19 tests were not easily accessible. Thus, the role of health experts in delivering fundamental information to the general public highly contributed to the crisis management process of public authorities. At the same time, it is important for the government to engage with influential public figures on social media that can provide the necessary support during crises and can help the training process with their skills to improve the performance of government’s social media managers.

During the pandemic, experts noticed an increase in the number of fake news present on social media, which led the UN and the WHO to warn citizens about the possibility of finding falsified and incorrect information when searching on social media and websites<sup>207</sup>. Indeed, the major concern for public authorities and organizations was ensuring that people were given reliable and valuable information about the virus in order to adopt a correct behaviour and to control the spread of the disease. While traditional mass media was able to quickly detect false information and to correct the previous statements, the same cannot be applied to social media, which requires stricter controls and misinformation cannot be acknowledged as soon as it emerges. During global pandemics, the effects

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<sup>206</sup> Malecki, K. M., Keating, J. A., & Safdar, N. (2020). Crisis communication and public perception of covid-19 risk in the era of social media. *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 72(4), 697–702.

<sup>207</sup> Mourad, A., Srouf, A., Harmanani, H., Jenainati, C., & Arafeh, M. (2020). Critical impact of social networks Infodemic on defeating coronavirus covid-19 pandemic: Twitter-based study and Research Directions. *IEEE Transactions on Network and Service Management*, 17(4), 2145–2155.

of the spread of fake news are much stronger on both the population and the managers, which have to face serious consequences<sup>208</sup>. Thus, crisis managers had to revise their strategy to increment the monitoring of social media in order to quickly detect fake news and remedy to them. This explains the increased presence of public authorities on online platforms, sharing relevant information to dissipate any doubts and correct mistakes about the virus. Moreover, health experts and medical personnel contributed to the elimination or at least mitigation of fake news by sharing academic studies, data about the virus and also personal experience in hospitals, showing actual pictures and videos of the severe situation they were facing. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that public health experts are not the only credible source that could be found on social media, since the information they shared was also available to government officials, international organizations and business activities<sup>209</sup>. In their analysis, crisis managers have also to consider the ability of online users to detect fake news. If individuals are able to distinguish between real and false content, the spread of misinformation would be minimised. Indeed, it is not the single social media post that causes problems, but if it is shared to a wider audience and gains visibility, it may influence people to believe to such erroneous information. For this reason, both governments and social media companies should organize targeted campaigns to educate online users to a correct use of social media platforms and to select the relevant content to share with others<sup>210</sup>. Furthermore, public health authorities could actively engage in a direct communication with the individuals responsible of spreading falsified information to understand the reasons and the mechanisms of the infodemic<sup>211</sup>.

During the pandemic, social media outlets have proactively addressed misinformation, through algorithms, “forwarding limits” and restrictive policies regarding COVID-19 content<sup>212</sup>. Despite

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<sup>208</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

<sup>209</sup> Mourad, A., Srouf, A., Harmanani, H., Jenainati, C., & Arafeh, M. (2020). Critical impact of social networks Infodemic on defeating coronavirus covid-19 pandemic: Twitter-based study and Research Directions. *IEEE Transactions on Network and Service Management*, 17(4), 2145–2155.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

these approaches against fake news, social media were not able to adequately prevent the spread of falsified information about the virus. For example, a study revealed that Facebook contributed to the spread of health and vaccination misinformation in several states (e.g., US, France, Germany, Italy)<sup>213</sup>. The reasons for social media failure to address the misinformation problem were the inadequate preparation to respond to the COVID-19 infodemic and the focus on advertisement and offering specific services to online users<sup>214</sup>. Thus, social media outlets should engage in an immediate banning process on accounts that are considered sources of misinformation, in order to minimise the impact of their post on the social media community. Moreover, some platforms, previously contrary to the introduction of content regulating systems, decided to provide for fact checking and censoring mechanisms to support crisis communication on social media<sup>215</sup>. Public authorities could decide to collaborate with social media outlets in order to adequately filter fake news, as demonstrated by the rapid response unit established in the UK<sup>216</sup>. Despite the addition of preventive measures to block the spread of misinformation, sometimes it can be difficult to recognize fake news that are produced by trolls and interactive bots<sup>217</sup>. For this reason, there is the need to develop a comprehensive digital policy approach that can be applied during global crisis, in order to have a coherent framework at the international level<sup>218</sup>. Indeed, some attempts have been made in the past years to create a set of policies for dealing with misinformation on social media during health crisis, but these initiatives have developed only at national or regional level. For instance, the European Commission set forward several projects, such as the Code of Practice on Disinformation and the European Digital Media

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Mourad, A., Srour, A., Harmanani, H., Jenainati, C., & Arafeh, M. (2020). Critical impact of social networks Infodemic on defeating coronavirus covid-19 pandemic: Twitter-based study and Research Directions. *IEEE Transactions on Network and Service Management*, 17(4), 2145–2155.

<sup>215</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

<sup>216</sup> Mourad, A., Srour, A., Harmanani, H., Jenainati, C., & Arafeh, M. (2020). Critical impact of social networks Infodemic on defeating coronavirus covid-19 pandemic: Twitter-based study and Research Directions. *IEEE Transactions on Network and Service Management*, 17(4), 2145–2155.

<sup>217</sup> Volkmer, I. (2021). Social Media and covid-19: A global study of digital crisis interaction among gen Z and millennials. <https://doi.org/10.46580/124367>

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

Observatory<sup>219</sup>. Another example is the list of policies developed by the OECD that public authorities should adopt when dealing with digital misinformation during health crisis, which includes “supporting a multiplicity of independent fact-checking organizations; ensuring human moderators are in place to complement technological solutions; voluntarily issuing transparency reports about COVID-19 disinformation; and improving users’ media, digital and health literacy skills”<sup>220</sup>. These efforts might be useful for international organizations such as the WHO to elaborate regulations and standards for the use of social media during crises to contrast the phenomenon of misinformation. In this way, national authorities would possess the necessary means to manage a global health emergency and to adopt strategies that consider both national interests and the international situation.

As explained in previous chapter, the monitoring procedure is an essential tool for institutions when dealing with social media. During health crises, social media surveillance could reveal patterns of the virus infections and enable public authorities to effectively tackle the problem and address citizens’ concerns. Moreover, governmental social media managers can simply monitor people’s acceptance of restrictive measure by controlling the comments under the post to understand their sentiments<sup>221</sup>. In this way, the government can adjust its crisis communication strategies in order to increase the degree of compliance with restriction, and at the same time the following messages can include a clearer sense of empathy towards affected citizens. Indeed, during the COVID-19 crisis, the large number of informative messages usually generated a negative attitude of citizens towards the governmental measures, which created a sense of discomfort and social exclusion<sup>222</sup>. The social media monitoring could be an effective tool for increasing the trust of citizens in governmental actions, even if there should always be a limit to the extent of the gathering of data in order not to violate the individual privacy of online users. Nevertheless, due to the extensive number of social

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> MacKay, M., Colangeli, T., Gillis, D., McWhirter, J., & Papadopoulos, A. (2021). Examining social media crisis communication during early COVID-19 from public health and news media for quality, content, and corresponding public sentiment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(15), 7986.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.



media posts that were created during the pandemic, some governments were not always able to properly analyse online trends and adopt the necessary measures. Fortunately, technologies can overcome this problem by providing analytical tools capable of extracting relevant information from messages. In particular, experts underlined the role of data mining during crisis management procedures, which enables the crisis team to prepare for emergencies<sup>223</sup>. Indeed, social media posts are categorised as “unstructured text big data” and they can be sorted and examined through “semantic network analysis”, which consists of grasping the main concepts from social media posts and defining a trend during time<sup>224</sup>. This analytical tool allows crisis managers to understand the evolution of the pandemic on social media and to adjust their management plan accordingly. Moreover, both government and organizations can utilise big data mining for identifying the most pressing problems for the society and design their crisis communication strategy based on these insights that are derived from the aggregation of social media trends<sup>225</sup>. In the past, to understand the opinion of citizens, public authorities conducted nation-wide surveys that were expensive and required time in order to be properly carried out. The introduction of social media data mining as a tool for the government would be cost and time efficient, providing a detailed picture of the public sentiment during and after crisis and an analysis of the main social issues that the government should try to include in its agenda. In particular, this analytical tool could be currently implemented in countries which are still struggling with the COVID-19 crisis, in order to define the best strategies to effectively terminate the emergency situation.

Indeed, as explained above, the pandemic is still ongoing especially in the less developed countries that did not have the necessary resources to counter the crisis. Some countries are still struggling with the vaccination procedures due to the lack of vaccines and of medical professionals. The situation in these countries is further worsened by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on financial and economic

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<sup>223</sup> Park, Y.-E. (2021). Developing a COVID-19 crisis management strategy using news media and social media in Big Data Analytics. *Social Science Computer Review*, 40(6), 1358–1375.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

activities, which have experienced serious disruptions in all nations. Thus, it is worth briefly analysing how the private sector dealt with the COVID-19 crisis through the use of social media tools. Due to lockdowns and closure of non-necessary business activities, national economies were disrupted, and companies are still struggling to recover from the crisis, whose consequences expanded over several sectors. Social media are an essential tool for businesses' marketing strategy, since companies engage in a two-way communication with their consumers, exchanging information and opinions. With the COVID-19 crisis, the presence of economic activities on social media diminished due to their focus on re-establishing normal operations. Indeed, businesses were trying to maintain their credibility and reputation high in front of their stakeholders, disregarding the importance of social media in consumers' assessment of the organizational crisis performance. The social media communication of a company may impact the online users' attention, which highly depends on the type of content posted and on the strategy utilised in the message<sup>226</sup>. In particular, during a pandemic, businesses should constantly provide information through social media to their stakeholders and consumers of the operational status. In fact, while public authorities can utilise also traditional media to deliver informative messages, social media tools are rapid and efficient in spreading companies' information to the widest audience possible. Studies conducted on the use of online platforms by business activities during the COVID-19 crisis reveal that consumers responded positively to social media messages that provided a clear overview of the company's situation, frequent updates, and emotional support<sup>227</sup>. It was also shown that visual content and short messages were the most effective strategy for certain types of businesses to quickly deliver their message to stakeholders<sup>228</sup>. Another important issue to consider regarding the private business sector during COVID-19 crisis is social media marketing, whose aim is creating a direct relationship with consumers on online platforms<sup>229</sup>. Indeed,

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<sup>226</sup> Kwok, L., Lee, J., & Han, S. H. (2021). Crisis communication on social media: What types of covid-19 messages get the attention? *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 63(4), 528–543.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Dubbelink, S. I., Herrando, C., & Constantinides, E. (2021). Social media marketing as a branding strategy in extraordinary times: Lessons from the covid-19 pandemic. *Sustainability*, 13(18), 10310.

due to the increased amount of time users spent on social media during the pandemic, some companies have paid closer attention to consumers' opinions and actually participated to online conversations in order to gather relevant information to improve their communication strategies and economic performance. Furthermore, the presence of businesses on social media during the pandemic has increased the public perception and the company's reputation, while being relevant in order to minimize the damage caused by the economic stagnation of the crisis. The positive impact generated on social media was also functional to strengthen the relationship with stakeholders that perceived the company as credible and trustworthy<sup>230</sup>. Apart from the effective use of social media, some companies have implemented new technologies in order to initiate or continue the process of digitalization. Those businesses capable of effectively transitioning to digital channels were able to survive to the pandemic and satisfy the demands of consumers, who were increasingly present online<sup>231</sup>. Thus, the private sector presented two opposing narratives when dealing with COVID-19 on social media. On one side, there were some companies that were not able to benefit from social media tools, due to the extreme pressure posed by the economic crisis, which drastically impaired their operational capacities. On the other side, companies that were already heavily present on online platforms managed to effectively communicate with their consumers and to adapt their core functions to embrace the digitalization process.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

After having analysed social media crisis communication during the COVID-19 crisis, it is worth comparing the findings with the five best practices reported in the second chapter of the thesis. Indeed, although it is undeniable the prominent role of social media for the crisis management procedures, it is relevant for the present research to determine which techniques were most effective in handling the pandemic, and how the real case differed from the theoretical framework delineated in the literature.

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

Starting from the first guideline, which calls for the proper communication method, the analysis of the pandemic crisis highlighted the importance for public authorities to build a direct dialogue with citizens through social media in order to gather information about pressing social issues and to understand the emotional status of online users during lockdowns. At the same time, through the creation of ad-hoc medical communities, health experts were able to disseminate reliable news about the virus and raise citizens' awareness about the precautions to adopt. Moreover, both government officials and public health authorities correctly delivered informative messages, but evidence shows that sometimes this social media content lacked the positive tone necessary to comfort and reassure citizens. In fact, due to the severity of the COVID-19 crisis, authorities preferred to share relevant information to prevent an excessive spread of the disease instead of delivering emotional messages to the worried citizens. Despite the lack of positive tone in their social media content, governmental authorities managed to ensure compliance with the restrictive measures and effectively communicated the news regarding the evolution of the crisis, gaining trust and credibility. Nevertheless, the frequency of governments' updates about the virus diminished as the crisis prolonged. Thus, while in the first phase of the pandemic the government's social media communication was timely and consistent, producing the desired effects, the second phase was characterised by a decrease in social media content due to the attenuation of the crisis. The overall performance of public authorities for the COVID-19 crisis communication can be considered positive because, despite the slower rhythm of social media posts in the second phase of the crisis, they managed to deliver the correct messages both to inform and comfort citizens in emotional distress.

The second best practice is understanding the social media logic, which consists of integrating this new form of communication into the crisis management strategies and training the personnel to correctly use and monitor online platforms. Indeed, the role of social media managers has become fundamental for both institutions and businesses in order to adopt the best social media strategy, especially during a crisis. The administration of government's official accounts was successful for

providing easily accessible information and for analysing the social media trends to implement new policies that respond to social concerns. Social media managers were able to effectively design social media profiles that became more visible and active during the pandemic. Moreover, several governments understood the importance of cooperating with actors and companies influential in the online arena. Indeed, influencers collaborated with public officials and health experts to share COVID-19 information to a wide audience in order to raise citizens awareness about the virus and to promote the vaccination campaigns. Nevertheless, the main problem encountered during the social media management of the pandemic was the spread of misinformation which greatly impacted the effectiveness of government measures. Despite its severity during the COVID-19 crisis, this phenomenon was not new to crisis managers, and several scholars underlined the responsibility of social media companies in mismanaging the problem. For this reason, they should implement precise mechanisms to detect and delete fake news from social media in order to allow the proper functioning of crisis management procedures. Furthermore, for future health crises, governments should try to collaborate with social media outlets in order to spread scientific facts regarding viruses and promote good behaviours to adopt during an emergency. Indeed, during the COVID-19 crisis, Instagram created a function that allows users to quickly find accurate information about the virus, redirecting them to Ministry of Health or WHO official websites that provide updated news.

Connected to this topic, the third guideline is about the importance of monitoring social media during crises. Indeed, social media are an essential tool for crisis managers in order to control social trends, through hashtags and keywords, and to detect fake news in a rapid way. Institutions and organizations usually avail themselves of technological tools to supplement the social media monitoring, such as Google Alerts. During the pandemic, the monitoring of online platforms helped the government to understand the reach and the spread of the virus by analysing individual social media posts through the search of keywords like “coronavirus”, “COVID-19” and “pandemic”. Moreover, the monitoring procedure allowed the creation of ad-hoc online applications that, thanks to the data of the Ministry

of Health, provided a national picture of the people infected, in order for both national authorities and citizens to grasp the pandemic situation of their country and regions (e.g., Immuni app in Italy). Most importantly governments and businesses monitored social media to prevent the spread of misinformation which could harm the organizational reputation and produce a chain of unreliable and falsified information that could mislead citizens during the pandemic. In this context, the creation of a global set of rules for the use of digital tools would produce a decrease in misinformation, due to the ban of inaccurate content and the education of citizens when using social media.

The fourth guideline provides for the prioritization of traditional media, but the findings does not support this best practice. While in the past social media were still an emerging source of information and were deemed unreliable compared to traditional media, the recent crises have shown an equilibrium between the two forms of media. In particular, traditional media outlets have themselves created social media profiles in which they share the most prominent news on a daily basis. During the COVID-19 crisis, traditional media outlets were mainly used by governmental authorities for speeches and recommendations regarding the virus, presenting the current situation of the country. Nevertheless, due to the closure of non-essential activities, some people passed from reading newspaper to reading news on websites or through traditional media's posts on social media. Thus, the pandemic demonstrated that the two types of media are almost on the same level, even if social media are expected to become the main source of information in the future. For this reason, the last guideline provides that social media crisis communication should be about increasing the use of social media. Indeed, it is important that institutions position themselves on social media, creating an official account and interacting with online users. Indeed, while in past crises governmental authorities were reluctant to make an extensive use of social media, COVID-19 crisis required them to be present online in order to create a direct channel of information sharing through a two-way communication with the citizens. The prominence of social media for crisis communication strategies has become evident during the pandemic and should be investigated further to fully exploit their potential.

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## Summary

The present research proposes to analyse the role of social media in crisis management and to understand how to effectively use them as a proactive form of communication to handle a crisis. In particular, this study wants to answer to the question “what are the best practices for the use of social media in crisis management?”. The first chapter covers the process of crisis management, starting from general definitions of crisis, crisis management and crisis communication. Then, the chapter analyses crisis management models used in the literature, with a particular focus on the three-stage model, deemed as the most comprehensive one. During the pre-crisis stage, three actions are performed by the crisis management team: signal detection, prevention, and preparation. All these steps entail a proactive role of managers that have to plan ahead to deal with a possible incoming crisis. The crisis stage is characterised by the recognition of the occurring crisis and by the procedures taken to respond to it. Finally, the post-crisis stage refers to a situation when operations have returned to normal. Moreover, the crisis management team has to reassure the stakeholders and the public of the proper functioning of the organization, and it also has to perform a review of the crisis in order to learn from it. This theoretical framework will be employed in the second chapter, which will examine the role of social media in crisis communication and crisis management. The second chapter is indeed devoted to a detailed evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media by both the public and institutions affected by the crisis. The characteristics of social media easily adapt to the practices of crisis communication, due to the medium’s interactivity, the wide public, and the direct response to stakeholders. The chapter examines five best practices for an effective social media crisis communication that are deemed the most comprehensive for the present analysis. Additionally, the second chapter underlines two important challenges of social media during crises identified by the literature: communication barriers and the privacy issue. After having discussed the implication of social media for crisis communication, the analysis considers the general framework of crisis management, explaining the role of social media in the three stages of a crisis. Finally, the third and final chapter of this research is devoted to the analysis of a case study, the COVID-19 crisis. The first

part of the chapter briefly examined the past public health crises in which social media played a role in effectively managing the emergency. However, the main focus of the chapter is the analysis of the relevant literature in order to find the best practices which were adopted during the pandemic for social media crisis communication. Moreover, the chapter will also include some brief considerations on the private sector marketing strategy, which is important to understand the true potential of social media for crisis management. The presentation of a case study will further support my thesis that social media have become a key factor to include in crisis management considering that the benefits from their use may reduce the emotional and material damages of the crisis.