

Using Social Media In Crisis Communication: A Case Of Daystar University's 2017/2018 Crisis

Mavis Eleanor Manyasa, Daniel Onyango Omondi, Dr. Ruth Owino, &
Dr. Daniel Robert Aswani
Daystar University

Abstract:

Organizations go through crises and during such times, it is imperative that the different publics are communicated to. Increasingly, social media is offering an enticing channel to communicate with the different publics. This paper locates the place of social media as a channel of communication during crises. The study focused on Daystar University's 2017/2018 crisis. The study findings revealed a consumption of messages on social media among the students with a not so high consumption and usage of social media by the then university management. Further, the findings show similarity with the constructs of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to which the then university management communication on the crisis did not align to expectations. Crisis communication and more so through social media needs to be handled carefully as this would impair the reputation of the organization.

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I. Introduction

Daystar University has an overly well-maintained relationship with its publics and anchored on its quest to train servant leaders (Daystar University, 2016). With these qualities in place, it was difficult positioning the university within the crises it underwent between 2017/2018. In 2017, the university had to deal with many complaints against the then administration ranging from high tuition fee, misuse of funds, complacency of senior management, a culture of intimidation, broken hostels and facilities, students expected to use clinic (Ngina, 2017). Determined to discuss the issues that troubled them, students went to social media, especially Twitter, with a view of propelling the crises beyond the university. Social media was abuzz with news on Daystar, for instance, the following hashtags rallied audiences to the troubles that bedeviled the university: #DaystarLivesMatter, #DaystarUniversityStrike and #DaystarUniversityRot. With the crisis becoming a trendy topic, students escalated the matter by boycotting classes to compel the administration to pay attention to their grievances. The final phase saw students strike, the University campuses closed, and learning suspended.

The rallying of support among students and the drawing of attention of many other stakeholders through social media speaks to the popularity of social media among the ages of 7 and 25 years (Consumer Insight, 2013). Similarly, Dabner (2012) concludes that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter are the latest relationship interconnectors among learners. There seems to be a connection between crises and the buzz on social media. The period before 2014, Daystar Facebook and Twitter social media platforms were dormant. The 2017 crises brought these social media accounts to life. Additionally, the students used YouTube to advance their claims.

Studies have described and theorized how well organizations need to manage crises and ensure the reputation of the organization (Page & Fearn, 2005; Hill & Knowlton, 2006; Ford, 2013). The arguments presented by these authors suggest a model where information was disseminated through broadcast and print media. The reality of social media speaks to the disruptions that dissemination of information can do today. Faster communication has made crises communication a touch of a button. Social media has adversely altered crisis communication conditions, the platforms have enabled crises to spread and develop differently (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). For Daystar University, the crisis was amplified, analyzed, and shared widely thanks to social media. To this end, social media can be used to disapprove and confront establishments and their response strategies to crises (Wendling, Radisch, & Jacobzone, 2013).

Despite being an avenue for crises brewing and escalation, social media platforms can be exploited to aid an organization successfully communicate a crisis. (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Social media has allowed everybody to be a source of information, users can share views, perceptions, and familiarities with others (Marken, 2007). These platforms consequently pose new challenges for crisis communication and

management. For instance, the platforms allow free flow of information, this is very crucial as the chances of reputational risks have been heightened (Kaul et al., 2015). This puts the managers in a position where they must act instantly when the comments start flowing. Effective communication on social media during a crisis expects the managers to respond to the claims and complains that come up on social media. The instantaneous nature of social media messages creates a challenging need to respond to each issue raised in the messages. Ensuring that the messages are consistent across all channels is also a challenge during a crisis. The use of social media in crisis communication thus becomes vital for the corporate communicator. With its potency as a tool in crisis communication, very few studies have focused on how social media can be used to harness information and end disruptive crises for institutions. This paper examines how social media was used in managing the 2017/2018 Daystar University crisis.

The study was guided by two theories the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was conceptualized by Coombs (2007b) and the social mediated crisis model (SMCM). The SCCT theory was developed by Coombs to safeguard an organizations reputation at the time of a crisis, it encompasses a research guide to select crisis response strategies and communicative resources. SCCT posited that a crisis dictates the selection of crisis response strategy based on crisis responsibility level and reputational threat (Coombs, 2007b). SCCT is based on three fundamentals: crisis, crisis response strategies (CRS) and a technique for harmonizing the CRS and the crisis. The second theory - social mediated crisis model (SMCM) is an expansion of SCCT to incorporate the facet of social media (Jin & Liu, 2010). The theory posits that during, before and after a crisis there exist three kinds of publics that generate and consume information on social media. These kinds of publics include content creators who are made up of people who generate content that is accessed by other users, followers who follow the content from creators and have access to this information that has been put out and the in-actives that have no direct access to information from social media, they however come into contact with the information indirectly or seek it from other sources (Jin & Liu, 2010). The SMCM describes the communication between the publics and the organization during a crisis, the managers must recognize that the source of information and its form have an impact on individuals' levels of acceptance to different crisis response as shown in the model captured below:

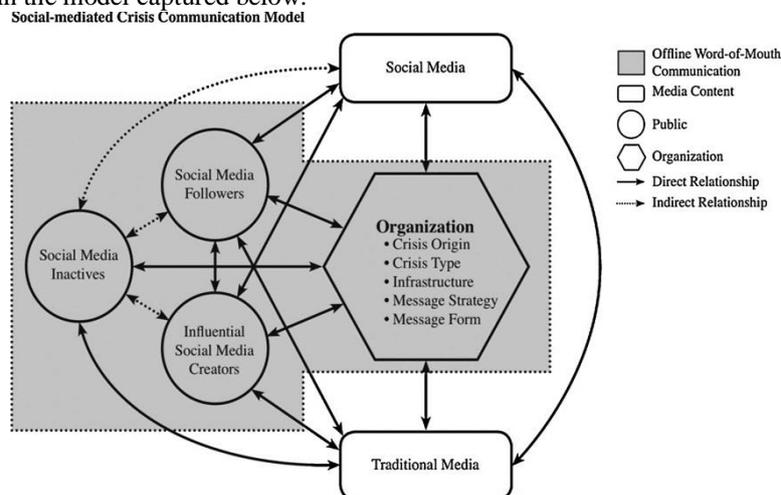


Figure 1.1: Social Mediated Crisis Model (adapted from Jin and Liu, 2010)

II. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey as its research design. A descriptive research design gives an account of the situation as it is (Kothari, 2004). Descriptive research aids in identifying the features of a group in each situation, it assists in giving logical thinking about characteristic of a given situation. The total population for the study was 4606 students – undergraduate and postgraduate students (Daystar, 2019). There are 280 teaching and non-teaching staff. The target population was 3935 undergraduate students from Daystar University and the 12 staff from the Corporate Affairs department. Arising from the population, the researchers drew 120 students and 4 staff from the Corporate Affairs Department. The sample was drawn using the stratified random sampling based on the schools within the university as schools provided homogeneous units within the university (Kothari, 2004).

The study generated primary data and secondary data. Some of the information was collected first-hand from the sources while other data was generated from previous studies. Specifically, the researchers used questionnaires and interviews to collect primary data. For the distribution of questionnaires to the undergraduate students the researchers trained three research assistants on the method the research would use to identify and administer the questionnaire to the target audience the research was aimed at collecting data from. Of the three

researchers, two were assigned to collect data from Athi River Campus and one was assigned to Nairobi Campus. Athi River campus was assigned two research assistants since it is geographically bigger and the classrooms are scattered thus adding a challenge in the distribution of questionnaires. Further, the researchers and the research assistants worked hand in hand with school administrators from the five schools (the strata) in Athi River Campus who assisted in identifying the class schedules for fourth year students. The researchers purposively selected fourth year students because they were second year students during the crisis at the institution. Research assistants were assigned the duty to collect data. Questionnaire was selected for this study because of its ability to collect significantly large quantities of data from respondents within a limited time and resources. In-depth interviews were ideal as the researcher's desired sample consisted of a specific target population. The interviews were used to acquire information on the social media strategy used by the university during the crisis and how crisis communication was managed at the institution. The technique is advantageous as the researcher gets a good response rate and in-depth feedback (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). The shortcoming of this method was that it was time consuming, could have been biased (Cooper & Schindler, 2003).

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of text and image according to (Creswell, 2009). For quantitative data, the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 software was used for analysis. Qualitative data generated through the interviews was analyzed thematically. The researchers settled on thematic analysis since it was adaptable and can be used in any theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers were keen to look out for keywords and patterns equivalent to the quantitative data.

Ferrell, Fraedrich, and Ferrell (2008), argued that research ethics accentuates on saying what is right and wrong in the research period. Researchers ensured that the study adhered to the correct process in the gathering and evaluation of data and recommendation of the research outcomes. We secured approval from the Daystar University Ethics Research Board (DU-ERB) and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) before going to the field to collect data. An introductory letter for data collection was obtained to enable the researchers to collect the data from Daystar University staff and employees. We avoided bias during data analysis and interpretation. In adhering to the ethical standards such as objectivity and the avoidance of self-deception, the researchers were able to secure the confidence of students to participate in what was going to be a difficult task of getting feedback from students. We also allowed respondents to drop off at any point during the data collection process over and above the fact that we had to seek voluntary participation of the respondents. The researchers ensured that the identities of the respondents were protected by not including a name section in the data collection tools and not quoting the respondents during the presentation of data and findings.

III. Findings

Of the 120 questionnaires that were distributed to undergraduates in the six different schools at Daystar University, 118 were appropriately filled and returned giving a response rate of 91.5%. The respondents were almost an equal representation with males contributing 45% while female respondents were 54%. Most of the respondents were aged between 18-25 years (89.8%) with a paltry percentage of those above 26 years (10.2%). Respondents indicated that they had subscribed to multiple social media networking sites including Flickr (5.1%); Looper man and WhatsApp (22%); LinkedIn (36.4%); Pinterest (44.9%); Twitter (67.8%); Facebook (70.3%); YouTube (82.2%) and Instagram (89%). The data is presented in figure 1.1 below.

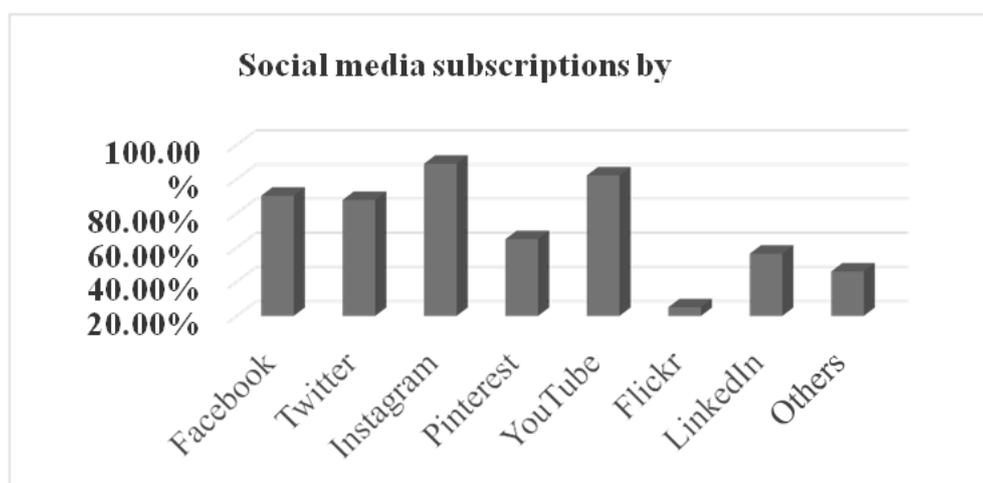


Figure 1.2: Social Media Subscriptions by Students

Daystar University had similarly subscribed to many social media networks. From the in-depth interviews, the study established from respondent Corp/1/2/2019 as follows:

The institution is subscribed to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and the school Website. These social networking sites are managed by five selected members from the Corporate Affairs Department. We have policies in place that govern how social media is handled and all the five members have undergone rigorous training on social media management.

Being a subscriber to some of the social media networking sites made it easy for the students and other publics to communicate and network with the institution. About one third of the respondents (30.4%) did not subscribe to any Daystar University social media networking accounts. Of those who subscribe, 25% subscribed to all the university accounts. Other subscribers included Pinterest (0.8%); LinkedIn (7.6%); Instagram (23.7%); Twitter (37.3%); Facebook (42.4%); all Daystar University social media accounts (25%).

Using Social Media in Crisis Communication

Daystar's corporate affairs department was charged with coordinating the communication during the 2018/2019 crisis. The department worked very closely with the crisis management team. When asked to evaluate the department's use of social media in its communication during the crisis, respondents gave remarkably interesting views. Over a quarter (34.7%) of the respondents remained neutral on whether the use of social media by the corporate affairs department gained any favorable reputation for the institution. About half (41.5%) of the respondents disagreed while 20.4% of the respondents agreed that the use of social media gained some favorable reputation for the institution. A paltry 3.4% refrained from answering this question. The less than one quarter endorsement of the respondents who participated in this study speaks of perception that social media was not used as an active channel to communicate on the crisis. Figure 1.3 presents the data finding.

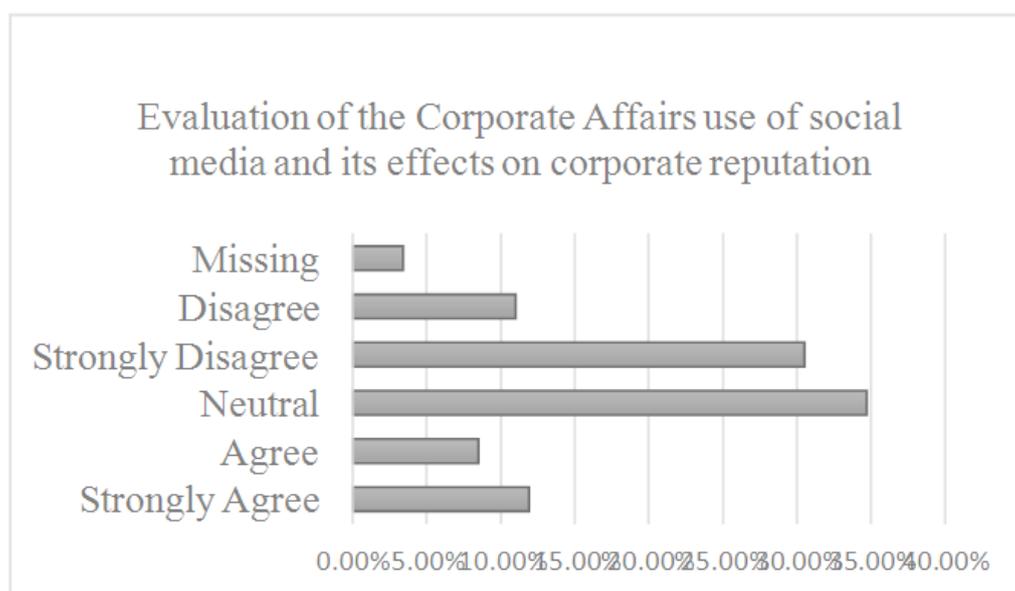


Figure 1.3: Corporate Affairs use of Social Media and Effects on the Reputation

Evaluation Daystar University's Standards in how it Treats Stakeholders

When asked whether the university had maintained open communication and allowed stakeholders to get in touch with the University including through social media, slightly above a quarter either remained neutral (27.1%); agree (38.2%); or disagreed (31.3%). Less than 10% opted not to answer the question. The data is presented in figure 1.4 below. The finding shows the need for the University to actively engage the stakeholders, a majority of whom were adherents of social media. With the growing interest on social media, organizations ignoring this option will have difficulty in handling crises.

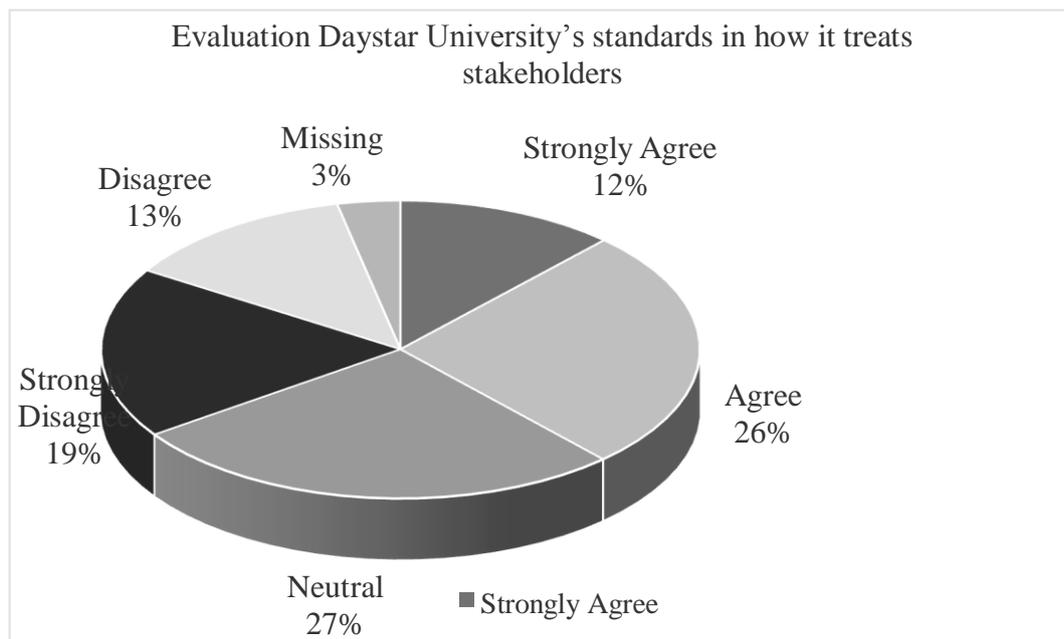


Figure 1.4: Daystar University's Standards in how it Treats Stakeholders

Evaluation of Daystar's conduct on social media and its influence on perception

Respondents in the study were asked if the way Daystar University conducted itself on social media influenced their attitude and opinion towards the University particularly in the way they read and observed the crisis. More than half (58.4%) of the respondents agreed that they were influenced; a further 30.5% of the respondents remained neutral while 9.3% disagreed. Less than 2% of the respondents opted not to answer the question. The data is presented in figure 1.5 below:

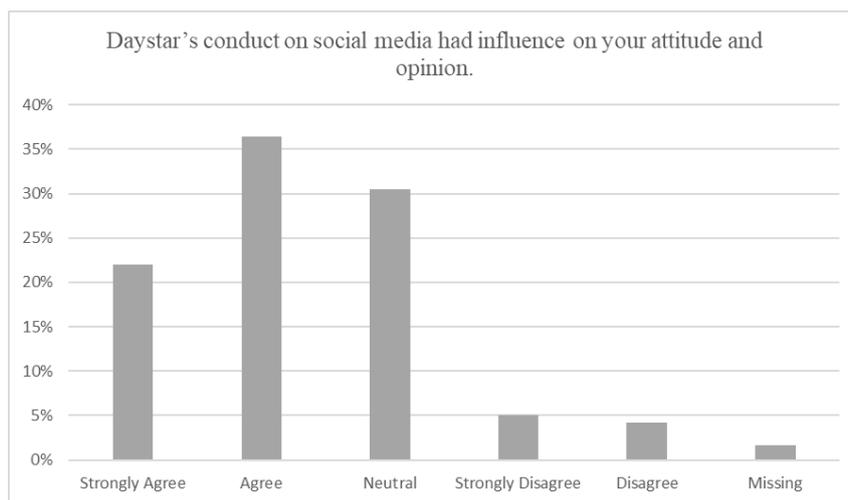


Figure 1.5: Daystar University's Conduct on Social Media Influenced my attitude

These findings mean that the attitudes and opinions of majority of the respondents were affected by the way the institution conducted their communication on social media. Findings from the interviews with Corporate Affairs members reveal that social media usage at the time of the crisis was a challenge. Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 stated as below:

We used the platform to monitor what was being said about us by the students and other stakeholders. We also used the platform to identify the issues the students were raising, and these issues guided us in finding ways to handle them, for instance the decision to not respond to the claims was guided by the negative online feedback, the need for conversation with the student leaders also emanated from our social media monitoring.

However, social media usage was also a challenge as indicated by Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 who stated as below:

Through the posts made on social media by the students, their solidarity to the course was solidified and it was very difficult to reason with them on the mitigation measures to the crisis agreed upon by the university. The students also gained full support from other student bodies in other universities and also from their parents. The support in some way made the crisis escalate even further.

The above findings imply that monitoring social media platforms during a crisis is essential as it may help the institution prevent further escalation of the crisis and help prevent reputational damage. The findings further imply that the usage of social media usage was a challenge for the institution, data from the interviews reveal that the information that was posted by the students on social media resulted in the institution facing tremendous challenges in managing the situation.

Crisis Communication during the Daystar 2017/2018 Crisis

Interviews were conducted to ascertain how the university managed crisis communication during the 2017/2018 crisis. Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 gave insights on how the university managed its communication during the crisis. Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 revealed that the institution developed a crisis communication plan that was designed to be used during the crisis. Despite having a crisis communication plan, a social media strategy was distinctively missing. The institution however used the social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, and the institutions website as feedback channels. Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 stated as follows:

We used these and continue to use them to monitor what stakeholders are saying for anticipation, prevention, and response.

This finding indicates that the University took the appropriate steps in dealing with a crisis by having a crisis communication plan in place to deal with the event.

The respondent additionally reveals that the CMT struggled to handle the crisis that the institution was facing because of the lack of trust by the students in the administration. Respondent Corp/3/3/2019 stated as follows:

The VC and the Council Chair who were both caught up in the middle of the crisis allegations however made it strenuous for the institution to select an authority to respond to issues that were under investigation". Addressing staff, students, parents, and media satisfactorily did not effectively take off until the appointment of Ag. VC on 18th December 2017.

This finding reveals the challenges that arise when the leadership of an institution is accused of being responsible for a crisis. Studies have shown that organizations should not keep an individual onboard if potential damage outweighs value. This means that Daystar University could have taken the steps to remove the accused from the frontline of crisis management as they conducted investigations and managed the crisis. This also highlights the importance of trustworthy leadership during crisis management. The institution further put-up notification and monitoring platforms which included the platforms included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, among others.

Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 stated as follows:

We used these channels to monitor what stakeholders were saying for anticipation, prevention, and response. We also used some limited recorded messages. However, we did not prepare any holding statements ahead of the crisis.

This finding implies that social media sites are important during a crisis as they help to inform an organization on how to manage the issues. Messaging was also a challenge for the institution, as Respondent Corp/1/2/2019 indicated as follows:

Although we knew the type of information most of our stakeholders needed, it was difficult to distil key messages in the absence of appropriate responses to the questions asked.

The institution also announced it had launched investigations into the crisis and were expecting a forensic report by February 2018. The communication was done through memos that were sent to the students via email. The institution further sent press statements and briefings announcing the closure of the university. An email to all students and university community on the same announcement was similarly sent out by the institution. This was the second time the institution was being closed indefinitely. Therefore, this finding implies that a crisis is bound to reoccur if it was not resolved and if there exist any misunderstandings between those involved in the earlier crisis. Findings from Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 reveal that it was after the VC

was placed on sabbatical leave that proper crisis management kicked off. Respondent Corp/3/2/2019 stated as follows:

A forensic investigation was commissioned immediately to look into the claims that had been brought forward by the students; this information was disseminated through school emails to the students.

The respondent further reveals that consistent communication from the university started in 2018 after the second closure of the school and the institution used *Infospot* (The University newsletter) social media, public announcements on local dailies, press releases and press briefings to reach all their stakeholders. The findings imply that the university was under pressure because they had been forced to close the institution twice.

Respondent/3/3/2019 further stated as follows:

The Company Board met and announced the appointment of a special taskforce to review the Forensic report, to reopen schools and investigate crisis and make recommendations to Trustees.

IV. Discussion

This study was guided by the SCCT which posits that a crisis dictates the selection of crisis response strategy based on crisis responsibility level and reputational threat (Coombs, 2007a). SCCT is based on three fundamentals: the crisis, the crisis response strategies (CRS) and a technique for harmonizing the CRS and the crisis. The study focused on how the institution managed crisis communication at the time of the crisis. Crisis communication according to Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007), aims at plummeting uncertainty about the concerns that come up during a crisis. Findings indicated that the institution adhered to some of the steps that organizations should follow in the event of a crisis as stipulated by Coombs (2006). First is the anticipation stage, where organizations should anticipate a crisis and develop a crisis management plan. In the anticipation stage, the institution submitted a vulnerability audit with a list of all student grievances received between September and October 2017. At this stage, the institution should have gone forth to ensure that they prevented and prepared for the crisis. In their preparation the institution already had a crisis management plan as stipulated in the institutions communication policy.

Having a crisis management plan is essential in crisis communication and management and these sentiments are echoed by a study by Modeus et al. (2012) who concluded that to manage a crisis organization needs to have a crisis plan in place. It is, however, vital to note that a crisis management plan does not equate to crisis communication plan. Daystar University, with their possession of a crisis communication plan, had the capacity to manage the crisis effectively.

The institution further formed a CMT to ensure that the issues pertaining to the crisis were addressed. Findings revealed that the team suffered major setback in trying to manage crisis communication due to lack of proper leadership, hence the prolonging of the crisis. Leadership is vital in offering focus, overview, uniting employees and spearheading an organization throughout the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2011). The finding was like that of a study done by Heath (2010), who notes that the containment stage of the United Way of America crisis was prolonged because the board failed to ask the CEO to resign, the CEO had been accused of overzealous spending. This further resulted in other United Agencies losing out on donations to enable them to operate.

Information about crisis is often sent out to the stakeholders through different communication channels (Zaremba, 2010); this is similar to the findings of this study which revealed that Daystar University utilized different communication channels to disseminate information. Despite the inconsistency of sending updates, the institution used memos via email to the students, press releases for the parents and external stakeholders, text messages to the parents, social media to the students and press conferences to reach other external stakeholders. From the findings social media seemed as a more effective platform for the stakeholders.

Findings further revealed that the institution refrained from touching on the reasons for the boycott and the students' grievances. For instance, a press release announcing the closure of the institution cited the boycott by the students and failed to touch on the crisis at the institution. The institution did not adhere to SCCT recommendations by Ashcroft (1997), that when a crisis occurs there is an urgency from stakeholders to be updated on the actions an organization is taking to deal with the crisis. The lack of inadequacy of communication from the institution during this period reflects on the competency of the organization (Wooten & James, 2005).

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, some of the findings on examining crisis communication management during the crisis at Daystar University agree with what is stipulated in SCCT though the institution in some instances chose a different approach and this may have made their management ineffective. Further findings indicated that the denial strategy is not ideal for organizations that are responsible for a crisis; accommodative strategies have been proven to work in cases where an organization is responsible for a crisis. Nevertheless, organizations

should still use Coombs SCCT as it has been proven to work. An appropriate strategy should be selected by an organization based on the stakeholder's attribution to a crisis.

Proper management of a crisis helps in improving and safeguarding the reputation of an organization. Crisis communication is an essential aspect of crisis management and effective communication can prevent the prolonging of a crisis in an organization. The communication should be quick especially in the early stages of a crisis as this may help the organization in containing the looming crisis. Constant updates are key when handling crises as the stakeholders feel less abandoned and cared for, aspects which were significantly lacking in Daystar's crisis communication.

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