Social media engagement as an evaluation barometer: Insights from communication executives

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to examine how communication executives and managers evaluate social media engagement and how they cultivate as well as measure social media engagement during crises. In-depth interviews were conducted with 43 in-house senior communication managers from 15 top-tier corporations and 28 non-profits based in the United States. The findings revealed that senior communication managers recognize the importance of making meaningful interpretations of informatics and work to analyze signs of engagement evident in stakeholders' interactive and dialogic actions on various social media platforms. These communication managers also recognize the importance of social media in prior-crisis environmental scanning, creating a credible on-line voice by providing timely accurate information to affected communities, and adopting social media in *crisis engagement*, especially managing conversations and resonating to online stakeholders' emotions. Based on these findings, the researchers further discussed an enhanced four-dimensional model for evaluating social media engagement in regular circumstances and a model for evaluating social media engagement during crisis communication.

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1. Introduction

As internal and external audiences get more involved in social media, a need exists to measure what is called *engagement* (Paine, 2008, 2011). By turning to engagement, practitioners can explain how target stakeholders' engaged actions online (e.g., clicking, viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, making criticisms and recommendations) may impact bottom-line related behaviors (e.g., purchasing or donating) (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). The basic assumption underlying the engagement perspective is that social media content is more likely to be effective when a target audience is highly engaged. An engaged audience becomes aware, maintains a high level of presence, and participates in ongoing real-time conversations with organizations and other stakeholders. Apart from *a general framework of engagement*, scholars also have stressed the need of applying the engagement perspective to examining the role of social media *in specific communication programs* (e.g., media relations, crisis communication, etc.). Crisis communication is on top of the list as social media have often surpassed traditional media in meeting affected parties' informational, emotional, and structural demands (Freberg, 2012).

Few studies have discussed the theoretical rationale underlying social media engagement as a measurement perspective to assess how publics are engaged in social media and their responses to such mediated experiences in *general* and in *specific*

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Involvement (Awareness and Presence):

1. Site traffic;
2. # Page clicks;
3. Time spent;
4. # Link clicks;
5. # Track backs, etc.

Interaction (more robust behaviors than analytics):

1. Purchasing behaviors;
2. Requesting catalogs;
3. Signing up for emails;
4. Posting comments;
5. Uploading audios/videos/images/photos, etc.

Intimacy (Sentiment, Affinity, and Tonality):

The emotional component that members of a public exhibit in conversations and actions, for instance, the meanings behind posts, comments, reviews, forum threads, etc.

Influence (Impact and Community Building):

The likelihood that members of a public will exhibit outreach-expanding actions, such as passing a corporate blog or a YouTube video on to their social networks.

Social Media Engagement

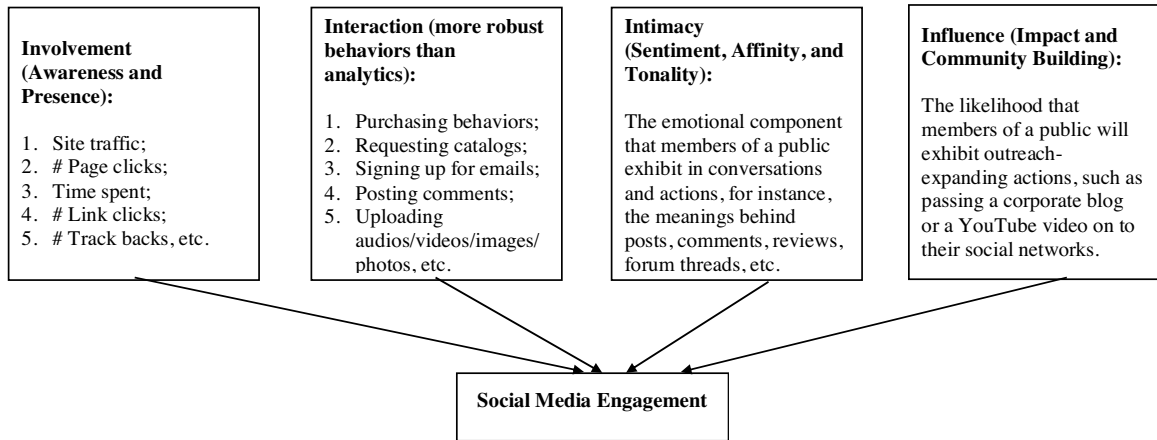**Fig. 1.** A tentative measurement model of social media engagement for future development (adapted based on previous literature).

Crisis Involvement:

1. Provide timely and accurate information (e.g., accuracy checks and honest responses).
2. Cultivate a high level of on-line involvement and awareness among affected communities (e.g., site traffic, page views, time spent, link clicks, track backs, etc. on social media platforms).

Crisis Interaction:

Monitor and facilitate engaging interactions so that all affected and interested parties can easily
1. Request for real-time information;
2. Share messages with credible sources;
3. Create and curate unfiltered yet truthful eyewitness and reaction media content (e.g., videos, photos, texts, etc.).

Crisis Intimacy:
1. Rumor, empathy and sympathy management.
2. Affected communities' emotional needs should be well attended to so that they can exhibit constructive actions conducive to problem solving and decision making.
3. It is measured via the meanings behind posts, comments, reviews, and social media threads.

Crisis Influence:
Construct a crisis on-line community characterized by
1. Constant multimedia-enhanced conversations;
2. Content forwarding;
3. A multi-directional communication network (i.e., one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many).
4. The assessment focuses on the outreach-expanding actions that affected parties exhibit, such as passing a corporate tweet or a YouTube video on to their social networks (families, friends, acquaintances, and social media followers, among others).

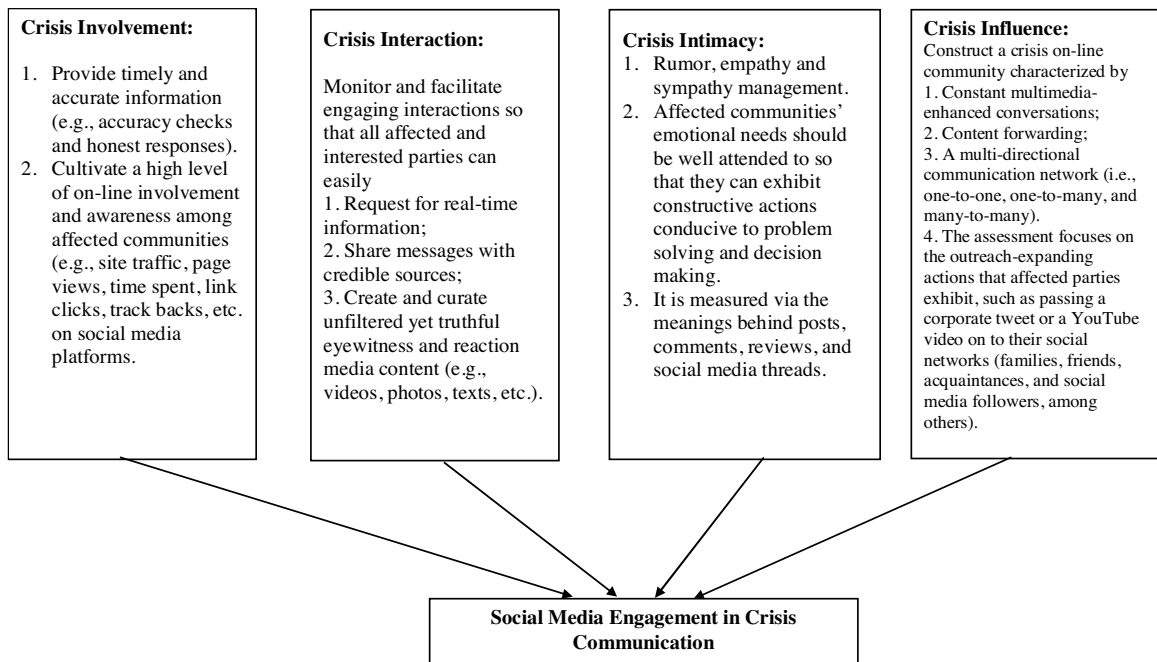**Social Media Engagement in Crisis Communication**

Fig. 2. A tentative measurement model of social media engagement for social media (adapted based on previous literature).

communication contexts. To bridge the research gap, we conducted in-depth interviews with 43 senior communication managers working in various organizations and investigated how these communication executives perceived social media engagement as a measurement perspective and its role in crisis communication. Findings of our study and the preliminary conceptual framework (see Figs. 1 and 2) shed light on future theoretical and practical discussions on public engagement via social media.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media use and evaluation

An increasing number of scholarship has investigated how for-profit corporations, non-profits, individual activists, and professionals are using social media to manage strategic communication programs (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013), such as media relations (Bajkiewicz, Kraus, & Hong, 2011), relationship management (Men & Tsai, 2012), volunteer recruitment (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011), fundraising (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009), and crisis management (Freberg, 2012). Emerging from this extensive body of literature is a pressing need for more research on measuring social media effectiveness. For example,