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SIMULATIONS FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION: THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Simulations have been widely used in crisis and emergency communication for practitioners but have not reached classrooms in higher education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects that simulations using social media have on the learning of crisis communication among college students. To explore the effects, a real-time crisis simulation activity using social media is created for 132 undergraduate students enrolled at a business school. Both quantitative and qualitative data collected from pre- and post-simulation surveys are used to investigate the benefits of simulations on learning and identify the challenges the participants experienced.

KEYWORDS

Simulations, Role-Playing, Social Media, Crisis Communication, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Simulations are considered a powerful and effective tool for learning with great potentials for educational use and have been widely used in the higher education setting. It is defined as a representation of some phenomenon or activity that users learn about through interaction with the simulation (Alessi & Trollip, 2011). Using an interactive abstraction of simplification of environments or events of real life, simulations force learners to act upon in the given situation.

Two critical components of simulations are non-linear and dynamic structure and causal relationship between choice and outcomes. Simulations usually have multiple variables present in scenarios that are inter-related and each variable leads to a different outcome, which means that the situation that learners are placed at a given point is created by the choice that the learners have made previously. This dynamic and interactive nature of simulations rendered by the non-linear structure makes learners aware of freedom and control they have as well as responsibilities they should bear in their decision making. This further gives students an opportunity to reflect on the consequences and meaning of their decisions (Gary & Wood, 2011), and learn the need for broader perspectives and multifaceted approaches to problem-solving. Hence, simulations are an effective tool to teach skills and knowledge related to processes, decision-making, and problem-solving.

Positive effects of simulation-based learning have been accumulated in education literature. Prensky (2001); Aldrich (2005) argue that simulations stimulate enjoyment and motivation among learners which in returns enhances enjoyment in learning concepts. Simulations are found to foster collaboration among learners and voluntarily explore various options (Chakravorty & Franza, 2005). Others reported that critical thinking can be enhanced through simulations (Sportsman, et al, 2011). The challenges, unexpected or hidden factors, or unpredictable outcomes in real-life like situations in simulations will provide opportunities to learners to develop critical thinking skills through problem-solving experience. Simulations also teach decision skills (Alinier, Hunt, Gordon. & Harwood, 2006; Bolt (2005): Aldrich (2005), and encourage the application of concepts learned from classroom to the given situation (Anderson & Lawton, 2004). Simulations also have positive effects among learners. Participants through observation and collaborative group process learn from knowledge, attitudes, and actions from one another (Keys, 1990).

Public relations and corporate communication fields have used crisis simulations in consulting and training of top management and employees with a series of crisis scenarios with differing levels of severity (Sellnow, Venette, & Veil, 2006). Through a simulation, the levels of knowledge of crisis and preparedness of the organization and its members are assessed, and the outcomes of the simulation create the awareness of potential risks and crises of the organization the sense of urgency for planning for crisis and emergency situations for all participants.

2. SIMULATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are dramatically changing lives of everyone. From photos of food on Instagram (so-called food porn), to a YouTube video of a police shooting an unarmed man (South Carolina cop shooting, 2015), to tweets of an airplane crash (a plane crash in the Hudson River, 2009), to a Facebook page of humanitarian aid to Nepal (International Medical Corps, 2015), social media penetrated to every facet of individual life. No other media was so rapidly changing the way people communicate with others. Learners these days use social media on a daily basis for activities ranging from meeting and making friends, broadening personal networks, sharing ideas and opinions, creating contents, learning and teaching others, etc. However, higher learning education, and simulations in specific, has not fully incorporated social media into teaching and learning in a classroom.

Social media provides a free and easy way to disseminate large amounts of information to large groups of people very quickly and efficiently. Given the widespread of social media in crisis communication and the utility for information dissemination and communication with many stakeholders, simulations using social media are a perfect tool to teach crisis management and communication.

2.1 Research Questions

This study aims to examine the effects of simulations using social media on students' learning processes and outcomes of crisis management and communication such as satisfaction, engagement, understanding concepts, problem-solving skills, and instructor effectiveness. Besides benefits, this study will explore the challenges and difficulties that learners face during simulations. The past studies in simulations seem skewed towards exploring the benefits of SBL, largely ignoring negative effects on learning process and outcomes or challenges to learners. Understanding what learners went through during simulation helps educators design and prepare for more effective simulation programs. The non-linear structure of simulations may create confusion and frustration for learners, especially for those with low motivation, lack of understanding of situations, or prefer linear/sequential learning style. The research questions of this current study are as follows:

RQ1: What effects do simulations have on learners' satisfaction, engagement, and understanding the course concepts?

RQ2: What challenges do simulations pose to learners during the simulation?

3. METHOD

The week before the simulations, students will learn about crisis communication including the types of crisis communication (Benoit, 1995), crisis communication strategies (Coombs, 2007), and crisis communication planning (Coombs, 2014). The study will employ a real-time simulation where all students are assigned to specific roles. For this study, we developed a scenario about a food retail brand in a crisis due to a claim that the brand has been using slavery in production for many years. During the simulation activity, students are asked to 1) monitor the development of the crisis, 2) maintain communication with internal and external stakeholders, and 3) take any necessary actions at any time during the simulation. After the 60-minute simulation, students will give a press conference to the press (the instructor and the teaching assistants) at the broadcasting studio at the University, issuing the official statement of the company and engaging in Q&A session (30 minutes) with the press.

3.1 Measurements

Two surveys will be used to collect the data from the participants. The pre-simulation survey measures the levels of social media proficiency, learning style, communication style, understanding of the crisis-related concepts, and attitudes toward simulations, which will be used as control variables. The post-simulation survey measures the levels of the perceived usefulness of simulations, engagement, and satisfaction. The survey also measures challenges that students experienced during the simulations by using qualitative feedback. All measures are adapted from existing studies or created to fit the study context. Using the data obtained from the pre- and post-simulation surveys, this study will examine the relationships among these variables using structural equation modeling (SEM).

3.2 Participants

Participants are 132 undergraduate students who are currently enrolled at a corporate communication course at a business school in Singapore. The participants will be divided into six sessions, about 22 students per session. The simulation will run one session at a time in a given week. About four students will be assigned to different teams such as CEO's office (one student will be assigned to the CEO), Corporate Communications, Investor Relations, Internal Communications, Government & Stakeholder Relations. Each team is in charge of managing the different stakeholder groups such as employees, media, investors and shareholders, government and legal authorities, consumers, retail stores, and suppliers, and is responsible for gathering any information from their stakeholders regarding the current crisis and maintaining constant communication with them. All teams are instructed to use various communication tools such as emails, the company's Intranet, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings, and only Corporate Communication team is allowed to use additional social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to keep these two social media as the official communication channel for the company. All social media comments, emails, news articles, and incoming calls will be made and fed to the students by a team of assistants.

3.3 The Simulation and Press Conference

The simulation starts with the CEO receives a message from his friend who tries to confirm the news article that claims the company has been using slavery and inhumane working conditions for workers at its food manufacturing facilities in Asia for many years. Then the CEO calls his/her team for verification of the story. In rapid succession, multiple articles reporting the claim begin to appear on major news sites, followed by posts and tweets on social media. A few minutes later, there are many calls from journalists for the company's official comments on this issue. One reporter says that he/she would like to interview the CEO about this issue. From this point onward, participants will receive various inputs such as emails, telephone calls, social media feeds, etc. Participants are asked to return requested outputs and deliverables using the communication tools. Table 1 shows a complete list of inputs during the simulation.

Table 1. Timeline for Crisis Communication Simulation

Time (minutes)	Event
0:00	CEO receives a message from his friend regarding the news article
1:00	CEO calls CEO office team for verification of the story
2:00	Multiple articles appear on major news sites
5:00	Social noise begins
9:00	Calls from journalists for comments, Requests for interviewing the CEO
10:00	Corporate Communication team convenes a meeting
13:00	New online article appears
17:00	New comments to that article start to appear
21:00	Amnesty calls for comments
25:00	Local branch office issues unapproved response on Twitter
27:00	CEO calls his team as he has just received a call from a journalist about the tweet.
27:00	Head of Operation emails technical information regarding the crisis.
29:00	New online article appears
31:00	Amnesty issues press release
35:00	Journalists start calling
35:00	Criticism escalates on social media
39:00	The new online article appears which contains customer boycott, Amnesty comment, and criticism toward the company.
42:00	Regulators call for information and comments
45:00	Facebook group appears: Anti-brand group
49:00	Employee in Brazil posts personal response on behalf of company
51:00	Labour rights group emails CEO about the employee's response
53:00	Share price tanks, trading suspension
57:00	Angry investor calls
60:00	Simulation ends. 10 minutes break before the press conference
70:00	Press-conference starts
100:00	Press-conference ends

4. EXPECTED RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Clearly indicate advantages, limitations, and possible applications. In this paper, we will investigate, through the analysis of survey data, whether simulations using social media are effective learning tools for crisis communication in higher education. The results of this study will shed lights on our understanding of the benefits and challenges that simulations using social media produce to learners and can enlighten educators with practical knowledge about how to incorporate simulations using social media into classrooms.

It is expected that the simulations using social media will be viewed as educational, engaging, and satisfactory in learning crisis communication by participants. Immersed in the realistic setting of the simulations such as the scenario, the involved stakeholder groups, various inputs, and the evolution of the crisis, students will experience and appreciate the importance of action in preparing for crisis communication. Performing under time pressure will create unexpected effects to the whole experience. Some students may forget the basic communication rules or skills; others may experience frustration for having the difficulty of collaborating with various groups or being unable to keep up with information influx.

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