The Saudi Government Response to COVID-19:
Social Media Analysis of 2020

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Abstract. this study examined the Saudi government's response to COVID-19 on Twitter during the 2020 Hajj season. Its goals were to provide insights into how the authorities addressed concerns, clarified protocols, and upheld public trust. Additionally, the research offered a model for how governments can use social media to effectively communicate during crises, possibly saving lives by sharing timely and accurate information. Three hundred and seventy-one tweets from three official Saudi government Twitter accounts—the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Hajj, and the General Presidency of the Holy Mosques— were subjected to a qualitative content analysis from before, during, and after the 2020 Hajj pilgrimage. Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the study indicated that the government's crisis communication strategies primarily focused on justification and ingratiation. The investigation revealed five major themes; namely, "Surveillance," "Precaution," "Awareness," "Services," and "Statistics." The analysis demonstrated that the Saudi government effectively used Twitter as a primary tool for transparent communication, addressing public concerns and ensuring safety throughout the crisis. Furthermore, Twitter messages showed a strong focus on early, proactive measures to protect pilgrims. The government highlighted surveillance, including monitoring equipment, general health services, and the sterilization campaign to ensure preparedness at mass gatherings during Hajj. The results also showed a significant focus on precautions, strictly adhering to international guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, the government prioritized public health awareness by launching digital platforms and online educational programs on safety protocols and preventive measures. Ultimately, the study demonstrated that Saudi Arabia's crisis communication strategy during Hajj 2020 was highly effective, successfully ensuring the safety of pilgrims and the smooth execution of the rituals despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Hajj 2020, SCCT Theory, Crisis Communication, Social Media.

Introduction

The Worldwide Health Organization (WHO) announced the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, which profoundly impacted the world in late 2019. The number of confirmed infection cases worldwide reached 5.5 million, affecting all aspects of daily life. Following the outbreak of the pandemic in late December 2019 in Wuhan, China, governments globally implemented mandatory measures to mitigate the virus' spread, initially with house quarantine, travel restrictions and border closures. This resulted in enormous disruptions affecting the lives of millions of people worldwide. With the lack of an effective vaccine and drugs, global initiatives placed a strong emphasis on social distancing and locking down cities and countries as the primary solutions to control the virus (Hassounah, Raheel, & Alhefzi, 2020). Thus, the varied approaches and timelines led people to debate whether the authorities succeeded or failed in addressing the issue seriously during the first phases when they might have potentially mitigated the virus's transmission.

The Saudi government implemented robust and sustainable measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 and was highly engaged on social media. Prior to the confirmation of the first COVID-19 case in Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Health had already been actively engaging with the public on social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp to share information, raise awareness, and provide hygiene guidelines. (Hassounah, Raheel, & Alhefzi, 2020). The government managed several official social media outlets, including Twitter, to communicate restrictions to the public. The public's awareness and preventive measures were raised in part by these communications.

This study has significance because of Saudi Arabia prominent global position, especially among Islamic countries (Ochsenwald, 1981). The safety of pilgrims is at the heart of the Saudi government concerns; thus, it is essential to explore how the Kingdom's authorities dealt with COVID-19 by spreading awareness and making pilgrims and other visitors comfortable upon arrival. Even though Saudi Arabia is considered a developing country, it devised and implemented an effective multisectoral plan with multiple measures to contain COVID-19, which could help other nations addressing comparable circumstances in the future.

Several studies investigated COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia, including the work by Hassounah et al. (2020) on the role of digital technology in responding to the pandemic, and the study by Algaissi, Alharbi, Hassanaine, and Hashem (2020), which draws on lessons learned from the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) from a health perspective. However, this investigation focuses on a different perspective specifically on the government's use of social media for crisis communication purposes, an aspect not thoroughly explored in previous research. By analyzing official Twitter accounts and applying the tenets of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)—a theory rarely explored in Middle Eastern studies—this research contributes a new perspective on how the Saudi government communicated with the public during COVID-19, particularly in the context of the Hajj. This approach presents a novel perspective on SCCT in contrast to its Western applications. The study also provides a model for effective social media use in crisis communication, emphasizing transparency, public trust, and timely updates. Its contribution lies in extending SCCT to the Middle Eastern context and offering a practical framework for governments to manage crises via social media, particularly in culturally specific settings.

Literature Review

COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia:

COVID-19 is an infectious disease that impacts the respiratory system, leading to conditions ranging from mild cold symptoms to severe pneumonia. (Cui, Li & Shi. 2019). The World Health Organization designated it a global pandemic due to its swift dissemination and the numerous fatalities it incurred. On March 2, 2020, the Saudi Ministry of Health reported the country's first COVID-19 case, involving a Saudi citizen who returned from Iran via Bahrain (Algaissi et al., 2020). Saudi Arabia subsequently undertook multiple measures to curtail the transmission of the virus. It imposed restrictions on Gulf Arab nationals traveling to Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities for Muslims, as well as foreign visitors coming for tourism and the Muslim Umrah pilgrimage. Saudi officials immediately recognized the threat that the outbreak posed.

Several studies have examined COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia. Hassounah et al. (2020) explored the use of digital technology in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that the Saudi government and the private sector launched around nineteen apps aimed at supporting public health and delivering healthcare services in addition to an electronic learning platform to sustain the educational process. Moreover, telecommunications corporations partnered to assist

with governmental endeavors, and risk communication initiatives utilized social media, websites, and SMS messaging to convey guidelines on optimal practices. Another study assessed Saudi Arabia's improved response to COVID-19, drawing on lessons learned from the 2012 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) outbreak (Algaissi et al., 2020). The study found that Saudi Arabia demonstrated a strong sense of preparedness and vigilance, taking swift actions to address the spread of COVID-19, building on its experience with the MERS epidemic. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia exercised significant caution prior to reaching one hundred confirmed cases of infection by suspending social and religious events. In fact, the Kingdom has demonstrated significant advancement in clinical and academic studies pertaining to epidemics.

Safety during Hajj

The importance of Saudi Arabia, especially from the Islamic perspective, made its position during COVID-19 critical. Saudi Arabia holds a significant economic and political position on the world stage due to its crude oil production and revenues. It is also a religious hub for millions of Muslims worldwide hosting large religious gatherings during the holy month of Ramadan and Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. Every year, Saudi Arabia hosts more than ten million pilgrims as the country exerts every effort to upkeep the holy sites and provide all means of comfort and reassurance to the pilgrims (Al-Omari, 2025). Taking care of pilgrims' health and safety is prioritized by the Saudi government (Malsin & Abdulaziz, 2020). However, when the first wave of COVID-19 hit Saudi Arabia on March 4, the country had to shut down the Holy Mosque, suspended Umrah for its citizens, limited the number of pilgrims during Hajj, and banned international pilgrims (Press, 2020).

Researchers and practitioners suggested improving safety awareness and procedures during Hajj. According to the Ministry of Hajj, registering for a Hajj visa was mandatory. This process enabled Hajj authorities to oversee the flow of international pilgrims, prioritize first-time visitors, and limit the number of repeat pilgrims (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2013). Furthermore, the Saudi government reconstructed and expanded the al-Jamarat Bridge to increase its capacity and alleviate congestion (Schneider et al., 2011; BBC News, 2006). Moreover, Binsalleeh, et al (2009) proposed that to identify pilgrims, service supplier companies offered white, non-technical bracelets. They suggested that the use of radio frequency identification (RFID) technology could optimize the efficiency of scanning, storing, and managing health information in electronic databases.

Khozium, Abuarafah, & AbdRabou, (2012) recommended implementing a decision support system that utilizes thermal cameras as sensors on the roads between Arafat and Muzdalifah—two key religious sites—to assist authorities in monitoring and managing the pilgrimage. The analysis system linked to these sensors could evaluate accurately the flow and density of the crowd in real-time. The significance of this system was to alert authorities of substantial gatherings to enhance decision-making processes and crowd management.

The precautions that COVID-19 forced such as social distancing and isolation contrasted with the rhythm of the Hajj. However obligatory vaccinations and high sanitation of pilgrims' housing had a substantial effect on curbing the spread of infectious diseases such as typhoid and cholera during Hajj (Balkhy, Memish, Bafaqeer, & Almuneef. 2006), however, coronavirus had no known remedy. As a result, Saudi officials suspended the Umrah, an optional Hajj, for its residents on March 4 (Moosa, 2020). Travel by foreign nationals to perform Umrah had already been prohibited. The Hajj's pace contrasts with the social separation and isolation brought on by COVID-19 caution (Abdulrahim & Abdulaziz, 2020). This proclamation contributed to the reduction of religious gatherings during the pandemic by underscoring the significance of safety within Islamic beliefs for believers globally.

To ensure safety, the Saudi government announced the resumption of Hajj for a restricted number of individuals within the country. Ten thousand Muslims were selected at random via the hajj internet application, as opposed to about 2.5 million the year before. They underwent a COVID-19 test and then quarantined in city hotels before starting the Hajj ritual (France 24, 2020). Additionally, the Kingdom undertook an effort to interact with pilgrims by offering informative material in several languages.

Crisis communication and social media

Social media plays a major role during crises in terms of communication. The activity on social media increases intensely during disasters and communication is considered an essential aspect of the way that disasters appear and are managed (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015). The effectiveness of social media has been proven to reveal the severity of disasters and assist in making crises difficult to ignore. Finlayson (2011) argues that transparency and visibility of governments' dealing with disasters have increased due to the speed and ubiquity of communication technologies.

Saudis are the largest active users on social media, standing at 25 million, an incredible 72.38% of the population (Blogger, 2020). This is attributed to most of the population being youth, internet availability, and high ownership of smartphones. Saudi Arabia had 20.03 million Twitter users, making up 58% of the country's social media reach (Blogger, 2020), highlighting the importance of social media as a key tool in crisis communication.

Twitter is a social site for information content that connects users to a variety of knowledge based on their personal interests (Twitter, 2011). The site allows users to share their thoughts in 140 characters called tweets and upload photos and other media with their followers. Twitter has 330 million monthly active users and 145 million daily active users (Lin. 2020).

Studies have revealed an increase in the use of social media for preventing and addressing crises (Fearn-Banks 2011). In the case of COVID-19, for example, the government of Saudi Arabia announced the country's closure on Twitter before confirmed cases hit the one hundred marks. Twitter and other social sites were used during crises to share information, launch campaigns, and express reactions (Lachlan, Spence, Lin, Najarian & Greco, 2016). Additionally, social media were utilized for crisis preparedness, raising environmental awareness, promoting health, and connecting with the public during emergencies. Finch, et al. (2016) engaged volunteers and built relationships with individuals and the media.

Social media can significantly improve crisis response for several reasons. It allows for instant communication with the public, with platforms like Twitter acting as a primary news source (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Crises often lead to a rise in social media use, particularly through smartphones (Stokes & Senkbeil, 2016). While people increasingly rely on social media for real-time updates, many emergency managers lack the necessary experience to use these platforms effectively (Lachlan et al., 2016). Key crises where social media played a crucial role include the 2009 Red River Valley flood (Palen et al., 2010), Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 (Wang & Zhuang, 2017).

The study of Rufai and Bunce (2020) examined G7 leaders' usage of Twitter in response to COVID-19. The research revealed that 88.9% of the leaders had an active and verified Twitter account, with a following of 85.7 million individuals. Based on the content analysis of G7 leaders' viral tweets, three themes emerged. The 'Informative' was identified with a hundred and sixty-six (82.8%), forty-eight (28.6%) of which had links to government sources, while nineteen (9.4%) tweets were classified as 'Morale boosting' and fourteen (6.9%) were designated as 'Political'. This study will utilize the

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to analyze the Saudi government Twitter accounts during COVID-19 after categorizing them into key topics.

Theoretical framework

A crisis is an event that can harm an organization's performance and jeopardize its reputation. The way an organization communicates during a crisis can help mitigate or even prevent reputational damage. Effective crisis management is essential for preparing for and overcoming the challenges posed by crises. (Avery, et al., 2016, Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019). Coombs (2010, 20) defines crisis management as "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted… seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage."

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Over the past twenty years, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has become the leading theoretical framework in crisis communication and management research, providing valuable guidance to practitioners (Kim, 2019). SCCT was especially used to detect whether different types of crises have different effects on an organization's post-crisis reputation and more relevant crisis-based response strategies. In addition, organizations must recognize several perspectives in a crisis: The organization must first acknowledge that a crisis has arisen. Secondly, it must assess the degree of its accountability for the problem. Thirdly, the organization must determine how much responsibility different audiences assign to it for the situation. The organization then selects a response strategy.

According to SCCT, an organization must manage its crisis responses by considering public perceptions since they impact the crisis's escalation. A crisis management team must recognize that the crisis's impact is not merely caused by the accident itself, but by how the accident is handled—both in terms of management and public response (Harrison, 2005, Coombs, 2007a; Zyglidopoulos, 1999).

SCCT enhances our understanding of crisis perception and, depending on the crisis type, directs the appropriate organizational reaction to alleviate threats to the organization's reputation. The principal recommendation for SCCT is that audiences assign varying degrees of accountability to the organization in crisis, contingent upon the nature of crisis, hence jeopardizing the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007a). SCCT categorizes crises into three types--victim, accidental, and preventable—based on the level of culpability the public attributes to organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). According to the SCCT theory, events such as natural disasters, rumors, or product tampering are instances of victim crises. The public perceives organizations as victims and assigns them less blame. On the other hand, technical errors are regarded as accidental crises, when the public views the crisis as unintended and places little blame on the organizations. Organizational failures or human error, however, are examples of avoidable crises, and the public holds them to a high standard of responsibility. In such scenarios, the public believes organizations have taken certain operations that could harm the public at large (Coombs, 2007a).

Coombs (2007b) asserts that such attributes are contingent upon the framing of the crisis. He identifies two distinct types of frames: the mass media frame and the public frame. The mass media frame manifests in news coverage, whereas the public frame embodies the public's pre-existing interpretation or perception shaped by their immediate environment. Research indicates that media framing can influence or shape the public frame, as repeated messages can reach and impact the public. The study by An & Gower, (2009) found that media coverage focusing on human concerns made respondents more sympathetic towards victims and less likely to blame the company. Additionally, SCCT suggests that a company's success in managing a crisis relies on the stages

outlined by the crisis manager to identify crisis types or clusters (based on the level of responsibility). These stages form the basis for determining the appropriate strategy to guide "what companies say and do after a crisis (Coombs, 2010, 20)." If crisis attribution is at a low stage (group of victims), a defensive strategy such as denial, attacking the accused, or scapegoating may be used by the crisis manager. According to Kriyantono & McKenna (2019) when the organization has minimum stage attribution (accidental cluster), excuses and justification (known as a moderate defense strategy) can be used. Meanwhile, adaptive strategies such as apology or compensation should be used when crisis attribution is at a high level (intended group). The organization must use a reinforcement strategy in every crisis to develop relationships and cooperation with the public. This current research will examine the response of the Saudi government during COVID-19 based on the categories outlined (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019).

Researchers have established several lists of crisis response strategies. Coombs (1999) categorizes these lists into "eight crisis response strategies:

(a) An attack on the accuser, in which the crisis manager confronts the group or the person that claims a crisis exists.
(b) Denial, in which the crisis manager claims that there is no crisis.
(c) Excuse, in which the crisis manager attempts to minimize organizational responsibility for the crisis.
(d) Victimization, in which the crisis manager reminds stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well.
(e) Justification, in which the crisis manager attempts to minimize the perceived damage inflicted by the crisis.
(f) Ingratiation, in which the crisis manager praises stakeholders. and reminds them of the past good works done by the organization.
(g) Corrective action, in which the crisis manager tries to prevent a repeat of the crisis and/or repair the damage done by the crisis.
(h) Full apology, in which the crisis manager publicly accepts responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from the stakeholders" (Coombs, Holladay, 2002. 6, 8).

The Saudi Arabian government's crisis response strategies were examined using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Using SCCT, the study looked at how the Saudi government handled COVID-19 and how social media fit into the framework for crisis communication. This theoretical framework emphasizes the functional significance of communication in an organization and is essential for comprehending communication in a group context. Additionally, SCCT offers insightful information about how different institutions of society use communication in emergency situations.

Research Questions

RQ1: What was the response of the Saudi government to COVID-19 during Hajj 2020 on Twitter in alignment with the fundamentals of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)?

Methodology

To characterize and analyze textual data using a systematic coding technique, this study uses qualitative content analysis. The text is methodically examined by researchers to find recurrent themes, patterns, or concepts, which are further categorized and examined. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an investigative method that starts with a theoretical or interpretive viewpoint and aims to comprehend study problems by examining the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to social or human concerns. Finding hidden and underlying themes that are not

immediately apparent is the goal of qualitative research. Research questions are addressed by these underlying topics.

The main objective of content analysis is to analyze the content of messages by methodically coding them and identifying recurring themes and patterns. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state that "content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the context of text data." Data in content analysis is not simple and quantitative, and the researcher must find the pertinent information by developing themes within the dataset. Content analysis can be applied to both quantitative and qualitative data. It involves examining various forms of communication, such as books, newspapers, videos, text messages, tweets, and Facebook posts (Parveen & Showkat, 2017).

The researcher relies on content analysis as it is the primary method most researchers employ to analyze social media content. According to Snelson (2016), content analysis is one of the key approaches for studying social media. Social media content, including messages and tweets, is an excellent fit for content analysis since it is easy for the researcher to identify themes within the messages. If done correctly, this approach should be impartial, trustworthy and free of bias.

Several researchers have investigated crisis communication through social media. Rufai & Bunce (2020) explored how G7 leaders utilized Twitter in response to COVID-19. In a similar vein, Vera-Burgos & Griffin-Padgett (2020) looked at Twitter's role in crisis communications during natural disasters, highlighting its capacity to provide victims with information, instructions, encouragement, and hope, while also updating national and international audiences to ensure appropriate assistance. Rufai & Bunce (2020) included the G7 world leaders' viral tweets which got a minimum of five hundred likes. From November 17, 2019, to March 17, 2020, content analysis was used to generate themes and codes by searching for 'COVID-19' or 'Coronavirus' keywords. The study of Vera-Burgos & Griffin-Padgett (2020) examined the Houston Mayor, Sylvester Turner's official Twitter account prior to, during, and after Hurricane Harvey. The study offered a relevant framework for guiding research during research in data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

This study used content analysis to examine three official Twitter accounts of the Saudi government: The Health Ministry @SaudiMOH, The Hajj Ministry, @HajMinistry and General Presidency of the Holy Mosques @ReasahAlharmain, having a total of 4.623 million followers. These official Twitter accounts were selected because they are reliable, direct sources of information from important Saudi government organizations. They served as public communication platforms and provided insightful information on the government's priorities, messaging, and public engagement. Analyzing these accounts provided a unique opportunity to examine how the ministries in question used social media to disseminate information and interact with the public particularly on topics related to health, the Hajj ritual, and the holy mosques.

All tweets were analyzed beginning from July 22, 2020, the first day of the month of Hajj, one week before the commencement of the ritual, to August 4, 2020, the final day of Hajj. July 22, 2020, was designated as the initial date for analyzing tweets regarding the Saudi government's response to COVID-19, as Saudi Arabia typically initiates preparatory plans prior to the ritual days. The tweets were collected utilizing Twitter's advanced search functionality, which yields prominent tweets instead of all tweets from each account. An Excel spreadsheet detailing all government's tweets was downloaded for further investigation.

Data Analysis

The initial researcher collected and examined the data, downloading all posts into a spreadsheet organized by date to facilitate content retrieval. There were three hundred and seventy-one tweets

from all accounts combined. The researcher subsequently refined the data to eliminate any tweets unrelated to Hajj and COVID-19, yielding a total of eighty-six tweets. After coding each tweet and classifying it into themes, a conclusion was reached based on the SCCT phases and the effectiveness of the content was assessed. Two coders examined the tweets analysis, and to guarantee inter-coder reliability, the researcher and the coders had discussions. As part of the coding procedure, the researcher arranged tweets in an Excel sheet, and the coders independently coded approximately fifteen tweets each. To guarantee unanimity the coders discussed and resolved differences after the initial coding. After that, they came up with several potential themes, which were then further discussed with the researcher. A mass-communication specialist was consulted to resolve any discrepancies after the codes were combined into themes. Upon reevaluation, similar themes were consolidated, yielding in five final themes. The validity and dependability of the study findings were improved by this exhaustive and cooperative procedure.

Results

The content analysis revealed one hundred and seventeen codes that were subsequently categorized into the following five themes:

(a) Surveillance: pertains to real-time monitoring of the Hajj ritual.
(b) Precaution: encompasses steps implemented to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, thereby guaranteeing the safety of pilgrims.
(c) Awareness: includes efforts to disseminate knowledge and information about COVID-19 in many different languages.
(d) Services: includes the means put in place to cater to pilgrims' needs.
(e) Statistics: covers reports on the number of pilgrims who have health problems.

The thematic categorization of the tweets was largely based on their content. Among the eighty-six tweets, one hundred and seventeen codes were identified and categorized into five themes. Twenty-eight 'Surveillance' codes were identified along with twenty-six 'Precaution,' twenty-six 'Awareness,' twenty-five 'Services', and five 'Statistics'. However, seven codes were discarded due to their incompatibility with any themes. The codes pertained to the Hajj plan's success and appreciation for the Saudi government. Every tweet was formally published in the government accounts cited earlier.

To respond to the RQ1 we must identify first the type of crisis the government was facing. Despite being a "victim" of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Saudi government's robust response to it calls into question the tenets of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). According to SCCT, the strength of a crisis response is typically expected to align with the perceived level of responsibility. However, in this case, the Saudi government responded more forcefully than would be expected given their perceived level of responsibility. SCCT suggests that crises perceived as victim or accidental should lead to minimal attributions of responsibility, resulting in passive responses. But Saudi Arabia's proactive strategy doesn't fit this pattern, indicating that the theory may be too rigid. Scholars like Macnamara (2021) argue for a broader understanding of crisis responsibility, while Boin et al. (2016) suggest expanding crisis categories to better capture the complexities of modern crises. This highlights the need for more flexible crisis communication frameworks that can account for situations where the crisis does not clearly fit into traditional categories.

After identifying the crisis type, the researcher analyzed the Saudi government's response strategies on its official Twitter accounts. Most tweets were categorized under justification, where authorities sought to reduce the perceived damage caused by the COVID-19 crisis. This strategy emphasized the government's efforts to protect pilgrims by highlighting the rigorous precautionary measures

implemented, such as sterilization and social distancing. For example, one tweet stated, "To ensure the safety of the pilgrims during the holy pilgrimage, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah carries out systematic sterilization operations, using internationally approved protocols," which served to justify the government's actions and highlight the extent of the safety measures. Another tweet states that "the Presidency prepares the Holy Mosques with virtual paths to serve the pilgrims," showing proactive steps taken to limit physical contact and ensure safety.

Ingratiation was another noteworthy strategy observed, in which authorities commended stakeholders, such as pilgrims and health professionals, and reminded the public of the government's past achievements in managing the Hajj. For instance, a tweet read, "Praise be to God, the health status of pilgrims is reassuring, and no new cases of Coronavirus infection have been recorded so far," which not only reassured the public but also praised the effectiveness of the precautionary measures. Additionally, tweets like, " As part of the efforts by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah leaders, in coordination with security officials, measures are being implemented to ensure that pilgrims can perform their rituals smoothly and comfortably," reinforced the government's role in successfully managing the pilgrimage. This approach aimed to preserve goodwill and positive relations by highlighting Saudi Arabia's historical competence and leadership, so bolstering the government's credibility and competence in handling the crisis. Such strategies reflect Coombs and Holladay's (2002) crisis communication framework, with justification intended to lessen blame while ingratiation tries to maintain public support amid the crisis. Each one of the five identified themes, namely, Surveillance, Precaution, Awareness, Services, and Statistics is explained in detail in the next paragraphs, illustrating how they were communicated via official tweets to control the crisis and preserve public trust.

Surveillance Theme

The results indicate that the Saudi government significantly highlighted surveillance. This theme includes monitoring equipment, general and health services, and sterilization process to prepare to receive pilgrims. For example, some of the tweets included a live transmission of the pilgrims' performance at the holy sites. In addition, other tweets expressed leaders' confirmation of the execution of the Hajj plan. One tweet said, "The Presidency has announced the successful implementation of the plan to receive and dispatch pilgrims to the Grand Mosque on the first day, supported by an integrated system of advanced services."

Table (1) Surveillance Theme Summary

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
Surveillance	live monitoring of the Hajj ritual.	Transferring pilgrims	#يحدث_الآن⌛| نَفرة حُجَّاج بيتِ الله الحَرام من مَشعر عَرفات إلى مَشعر مُزدلِفة بكلّ يسرٍ وطمأنينَة.
			#عرفه https://t.co/GAXCaDmRnp صور من طواف الوداع، اللهم تقبّل من حجّاج بيتك الكريم. https://t.co/a7Bzbohrom
		Performing Tawaf	
			#يحدث_الآن⌛| حجاجُ بيتِ الله الحَرام يرمُونَ جَمرة العقَبةِ بكلّ يسر وطمأنينَة. #بسلام_آمنين🕋 https://t.co/Wl9Ks6ImOD
		Stoning of the Devil	

Precautions Theme

The analysis also demonstrated a strong emphasis on precautions. The Saudi government posted several tweets concerning the sterilization of the Grand Mosque and other holy sites, along with the necessity for maintaining social distancing. Tweets also showed the country's strict adherence to international standards to curtail the spread of COVID-19. One tweet stated that "to ensure the safety of the pilgrims during the holy pilgrimage, The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah carries out systematic sterilization operations, using internationally approved protocols." Another tweet highlighted that "as part of its precautionary measures for this year's Hajj, the Presidency prepares the Holy Mosques with virtual paths to serve the pilgrims."

Table (2) Precaution Summary

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
Precaution	Measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19.	Protective Measures Protocol	جانب من الإجراءات الاحترازية المطبقة لضمان سلامة الحجيج : ◼ الإسورة الذكية (تطمّن) لضبط العزل المنزلي والمؤسسي . ◼ التباعد المكاني . ◼ قياس درجات الحرارة . ◼ استخدام الكاميرا الحرارية التقنية . https://t.co/JTx9FBQK70
		Safe and Healthy Hajj	#انفوجرافيك كيف استعدّت المملَكة 🇸🇦 لمَوسِم حج "صحّي وآمن" #حج٢٠٢٠؟ https://t.co/DlZS6Rbqsr

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
		Social Distancing	لسلامتك أثناء الحج التزم بترك مسافة آمنة بينك وبين من حولك#بسلام_آمنين https://t.co/9JmqrinsiQ
		Smart bracelet	#انفوجرافيك📊 السوار الذكي "تطمن" .. وسيلة لضمان سلامة الحجيج في فترة العزل المنزلي بعد الحج.#بسلام_آمنين🕋 https://t.co/Gm18fSKNdE
		Antibacterial Ihram	لأول مرة في الحج .. استخدام "إحرام" يمنع تكاثر البكتيريا لضمان سلامة ضيوف الرحمن#بسلام_آمنين🕋 https://t.co/M46K5Ct0Dr #شاهد🎥| لضمان سلامة ضيوف الرحمن في رحلة الحج المُقدسة..
		Sterilization Operations	

Awareness Theme

Awareness had an essential role in Saudi Arabia's handling of the crisis during the Hajj season. The government's tweets included information about seminars, lectures, and digital platforms that had been launched to raise public health awareness on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during Hajj. One example was a tweet advertising the virtual course on Jurisprudence of Rituals and their purpose in the light of the Corona pandemic.

Several tweets indicated the government's emphasis on public and health services offered to pilgrims. According to one tweet, the Health Ministry assigned a health leader to every fifty pilgrims to strictly enforce all health requirements. Government tweets reported the number of infected cases among Hajj pilgrims. What is more, at the end of the Hajj, it was confirmed that no pilgrim had been infected with COVID-19 due to strict precautionary measures. One tweet stated, "Praise be to God, the health status of the pilgrims is reassuring; no cases of new Coronavirus infection have been recorded among them so far."

Table (3) Awareness Summary

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
Awareness	Efforts to share knowledge and information about COVID-19.	Avoiding catching stomach flu	لتجنب إصابتك بالنزلة المعوية خلال الحج ننصحك باتباع التعليمات التالية#بسلام_آمنين⬇ https://t.co/lUGYm5L1iI
		Educating the Elderly	بتوعيتهم نرعى كبار السن، وبتوجيههم نحافظ على صحة المجتمع، حمّل الملصقات المتوفرة بعدة لغات عن أهم الإجراءات الاحترازية عند رعاية كبار السن.
		Awareness Website	الآن الموقع التوعوي عن فيروس كورونا الجديد (Covid-19) بـ (8) لغات: http://covid19awareness.sa https://t.co/sBPtZ2BUA4 أهم الإحتياطات الصحية عند الحلاقة.

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
		Head Shaving Protocol	https://t.co/IkNzeLuN6y #بسلام_آمنين

Service Theme

This theme encompasses various procedures established to accommodate the requirements of pilgrims during the Hajj, particularly in light of COVID-19 safeguards. Health services, including medical care and quarantine facilities, were provided, while safety measures, including social distancing labels, water bottles, and copies of the Holy Quran were supplied to pilgrims to enhance both their safety and spiritual experience. Additionally, one health leader was assigned to every fifty pilgrims to oversee their health and well-being. The government also distributed instructional e-books to educate pilgrims on health protocols and preventive measures. As a gesture of hospitality, gifts were given to pilgrims, and the Arafat sermon was translated into various languages to make it accessible to everyone. A key component of these services was the Smart Hajj app, which provided real-time updates on health protocols, transportation, crowd control, and emergency alerts, helping pilgrims navigate the ritual safely. These services collectively ensured a well-organized, safe, and enriching experience for pilgrims, overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Table (4) Services Summary

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
Services	Systems in place to meet the needs of pilgrims.	Haj Smart App Free Zamzam Water Bottles Instructional E-books	#تطبيق_الحج_الذكي📲 | هويّة رقمية أطلقتها #وزارة_الحج_والعمرة لحجاج بيت الله، تقدم خدمات تقنية نوعية لتسهيل أداء المناسك وإثراء التجربة. #بسلام_آمنين https://t.co/EWk3eP4JeR رئاسة شؤون الحرمين تُجهز عبوة (ماء زمزم المبارك) لكل حاج .. ضمن "خدمة الحاج والزائر وسام شرف لنا ٨." https://t.co/2XoSBU9Tmc رئاسة شؤون الحرمين تُطلق عدداً من الكتب الإلكترونية والإرشادات الخاصة بالمسجد الحرم .. ضمن "خدمة الحاج والزائر وسام شرف لنا ٨." https://t.co/P4xVi554bJ

Statistics Theme

This theme includes data related to the health status of pilgrims during the Hajj, with the Ministry of Health's daily briefings reporting no cases of COVID-19 or other public health issues among pilgrims. The medical care provided predominantly focused on minor illnesses, ensuring that all affected pilgrims received prompt attention and resumed their rituals. No deaths were recorded, reflecting the effectiveness of the preventive health measures in place. Health services included field hospitals, mobile field hospitals, and clinics, along with dedicated field teams who accompanied pilgrims throughout key rituals like the stoning of Jamarat Al-Aqaba, Tawaf, and the overnight stay in Mina. Additionally, each bus had a dedicated driver to ensure safe transportation, underscoring the positive impact and effectiveness of the health services in maintaining the well-being of pilgrims.

Table (5) Statistics Summary

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
Statistics	Daily reports on pilgrims' numbers and status.	Pilgrims' Numbers	#وزارة_الحج_والعمرة: إجمالي أعداد حجاج هذا العام 60 ألف حاج، للمقيمين من كافة الجنسيات والمواطنين داخل المملكة. #حج_1442هـ

Theme	Definition	Codes	Tweet Examples
		Health Status	بحمد الله الوضع الصحي للحجاج مطمئن، ولم يتم تسجيل أي حالات إصابة بفيروس كورونا الجديد بينهم حتى الآن. السبت 11 ذو الحجة 1441هـ
		Daily Summary	الإيجاز اليومي لموسم الحج. الجمعة 10 ذو الحجة 1441هـ #بسلام_آمنينhttps://t.co/w0YSP4kUvZ
		Hajj Success	عاجل | فيديو ... وزير الصحة السعودي يعلن نجاح موسم #الحج صحياً وخلوه من #كورونا

Discussion

This study focused on the Saudi government's response to COVID-19 during the 2020 Hajj season, although other studies have looked at the pandemic's effects on digital and technology (Hassounah et al., 2020) and the response to COVID-19 from a health perspective, building on the MERS experience (Algaissi et al., 2020). According to this analysis, the Saudi government's use of Twitter during the COVID-19 outbreak during the Hajj is an excellent illustration of how to effectively use crisis communication during a natural disaster.

In contrast to the Chinese government, which downplayed the crisis and rejected all accusations (Hariharan, 2023), the Saudi government adopted a calculated strategy, concentrating on fusing ingratiation and justification. These strategies were used to involve pilgrims in early security precautions, surveillance, and services to guarantee their own safety. Strategic communication was crucial during the first, middle, and end phases of the response. Clear instructions were given to reduce risk and improve public safety to safeguard the pilgrims. It should be noted that a leader's response is vital for crisis management, especially when it threatens lives. In line with Vera-Burgos & Padgett (2020), the government's social media response was not only aimed at informing pilgrims about precautionary measures and surveillance but also at promoting unity. The tweets from the government highlighted key messages, including 'peacefully safe, everyone's cautious, and united in care'.

Much like the uncertainties during Hurricane Harvey (Vera-Burgos & Griffin-Padgett, 2020), officials were unsure where COVID-19 might first strike, and they wanted to avoid the tragic fatalities experienced in Germany. The Saudi government remained visible throughout the crisis, reassuring pilgrims of their safety, which boosted confidence and gave them a sense of hope. Additionally, they urged citizens to stay home so that the pilgrimage could be better managed by appealing to their sense of responsibility. This communication approach fostered a sense of unity through a variety of manifestations of support for preventive measures, such as voluntarily initiatives and motivating posts on Twitter.

Furthermore, Algaissi et al. (2020) revealed that Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to take unprecedented early preventive measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The early safety measures put in place to guarantee pilgrims' well-being were further confirmed by this study. While Rufai & Bunce (2020) analysis of G7 World leaders' viral tweets in response to COVID-19 identified three major themes: informative, morale-boosting, and political, the analysis of Saudi Arabia's Twitter accounts revealed five main themes: surveillance, precaution, awareness, services, and statistics.

Recommendations

The following are important findings from the current study:

1. Expand Crisis Communication Frameworks: Given that Saudi Arabia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic did not fully fit into established crisis communication models like SCCT, it is advised that crisis communication theories be further developed and improved for situations in which crises do not fall into the categories specified by the theory. This might include comprehensive frameworks that address proactive crisis responses, particularly within culturally distinct contexts.
2. Improve the use of technology for crisis management: The results validate the effectiveness of the "Smart Hajj App", hence, governments and organizations ought to invest in better digital technology for real-time updates, health monitoring, and logistical support especially in large-scale public events.
3. Enhance stakeholder coordination: Future crises would benefit from enhanced interagency collaboration and clearly defined channels of communication to ensure efficient operations and a faster, more unified response as illustrated in crisis management of major public events.
4. Further Cross-Cultural Studies: This study fills a research gap in crisis communication in the Middle East. To find best practices that can be applied globally, future research should examine regional variations in crisis communication strategies among nations, particularly in culturally distinct situations.
5. Boost Crisis Communication Training: Crisis communication training should be integrated into the preparation for significant public events such as the Hajj. Government officials and event coordinators should receive training regularly to handle different crisis types using both traditional and digital media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the vital role of effective crisis communication in managing global emergencies, particularly during a pandemic. By examining the Saudi government's use of Twitter during the 2020 Hajj season, the research reveals how the government utilized social media to address public concerns, clarify safety protocols, and maintain trust. The findings demonstrate a well-organized crisis communication approach, centered on transparency, early action, and adherence to international health standards. Through five key themes—surveillance, precaution, awareness, services, and statistics—the Saudi government efficiently communicated measures to safeguard pilgrims and kept the public informed in real-time, contributing to the successful management of the Hajj amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study also highlights the importance of social media platforms, like Twitter, as a tool for providing timely, accurate, and transparent information during crises, offering a framework for other governments to follow. By adopting strategies such as justification and ingratiation, the Saudi government showed its dedication to public health while fostering positive relations with stakeholders. Ultimately, the research underscores the significance of social media in modern crisis communication, demonstrating its potential in maintaining public safety, managing uncertainty, and ensuring the success of large-scale events like the Hajj, even in the face of unforeseen challenges.

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استجابة حكومة المملكة العربية السعودية لكوفيد 19:
تحليل وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لموسم حج 2020

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مستخلص. تناولت هذه الدراسة استجابة حكومة المملكة العربية السعودية لجائحة كورونا (كوفيد–19) عبر تويتر خلال موسم الحج 2020 وذلك بهدف تقديم رؤى حول كيفية تعامل الحكومة مع المخاوف، وتوضيح البروتوكولات، والحفاظ على ثقة الجمهور. كما قدم البحث نموذجًا عن كيفية استخدام الحكومات لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي للتواصل بشكل فعال أثناء الأزمات، مما قد يسهم في إنقاذ الأرواح من خلال مشاركة المعلومات الدقيقة في الوقت المناسب. تم إجراء تحليل نوعي للمحتوى على 371 تغريدة من ثلاث حسابات رسمية للحكومة السعودية على تويتر: وزارة الصحة، ووزارة الحج، والرئاسة العامة للمسجد الحرام، وذلك خلال الفترة التي سبقت وأثناء وبعد مناسك الحج 2020. باستخدام نظرية الاتصال في الأزمات الظرفية (SCCT)، وجدت الدراسة أن استراتيجيات الاتصال في الأزمات التي اعتمدتها الحكومة السعودية تركز في المقام الأول على التبرير والإستمالة. وقد كشفت البيانات عن خمسة محاور رئيسية هي: "المراقبة"، "الاحتياطات"، "التوعية"، "الخدمات"، و"الإحصائيات". وأشار التحليل إلى أن الحكومة السعودية استخدمت تويتر بفعالية كأداة أساسية للتواصل بشفافية، مع معالجة المخاوف العامة وضمان السلامة طوال الأزمة. كما تم التركيز بشكل كبير على التدابير الوقائية المبكرة لحماية الحجاج عبر رسائل تويتر، مع إبراز جهود المراقبة بما في ذلك معدات المراقبة والخدمات الصحية العامة، وعملية التعقيم استعدادًا لاستقبال الحجاج. كما أظهرت النتائج تركيزًا كبيرًا على الاحتياطات، مع الالتزام الصارم بالإرشادات الدولية لمنع انتشار فيروس (كوفيد–19). بالإضافة إلى ذلك، قدمت الحكومة الأولوية للتوعية من خلال إطلاق منصات رقمية ودروس عبر الإنترنت لتثقيف الحجاج حول بروتوكولات السلامة والتدابير الوقائية. في النهاية، أبرزت الدراسة أن استراتيجية التواصل في الأزمات التي اتبعتها المملكة العربية السعودية خلال حج 2020 كانت فعالة للغاية، حيث نجحت في ضمان سلامة الحجاج وتنفيذ الشعائر بسلاسة رغم التحديات التي فرضها الوباء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فايروس كورونا (كوفيد–19)، نظرية الاتصال في الأزمات الظرفية، حج 2020، التواصل في الازمات، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.