



Social media and culture clash: Examining cultural influence on Facebook crisis communication in Botswana

Abstract

Multicultural crisis communication in Botswana has become complex due to the country's various ethnicities and cultures. Facebook remains a dominant communication platform, but traditional media is also used to cover organisational exigencies. However, there is a lack of research guiding public relations (PR) practitioners in multicultural crisis communication in Botswana, and this study addresses this gap. Semi-structured interviews with 20 Botswana PR practitioners revealed that they use Facebook to manage crises, but do not engage in online dialogue with the public. Instead, they post status updates and switch to offline cultural communication platforms for face-to-face dialogue. This article proposes and introduces a Botswana-focused model, the Cross Cloverleaf Relationship Model (CCRM), that probably resonates with similar contexts in Sub-Saharan African countries. The model facilitates authentic crisis communication between Facebook and the *kgotla* system, Botswana's traditional and cultural communication platform. I suggest that multinational companies may find the *kgotla* system helpful during emergencies in Botswana.

Keywords

Crisis communication, ethnic, intercultural, *kgotla* system, multicultural, third culture building

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INTRODUCTION

Botswana is considered one of the most peaceful and stable countries in Africa (Rudhumbu, Dziva & Plessis, 2021). It is a landlocked country located in Southern Africa, and its population has rapidly increased from 574,000 in 1966 when it gained independence from the British to about 2.6 million people in 2023 (World Population Review, 2023). The country is home to a diverse, multi-ethnic and multilingual population, with approximately 30 languages spoken (Chebanne & Monaka, 2020:58). On the economic front, Botswana's economy grew by 6.5% in 2022, driven by a favourable external demand for diamonds (World Bank, 2023). However, the World Bank has projected growth to decelerate to an average of 4% from 2023 to 2025.

Botswana, like other African nations, has organisational crises, making it hard for organisations and PR professionals to manage them. Western companies such as the United Nations (UN), Embassies, Standard Chartered Bank, and De Beers, to mention a few, operate in Botswana, but cultural differences may impede authentic communication, as George and Kwansah-Aidoo (2017) noted. Lehmberg and Hicks (2018:358) mentioned that Western PR practitioners are overwhelmed and ill-prepared for handling crises, as crisis communication is now "international and multicultural". As such, Western crisis managers in Botswana and other Sub-Saharan African countries need research to inform their intercultural communication practices, including those on Facebook. This platform amplifies local crises into global emergencies, as people can share content with anyone, regardless of location (Vesselinov, Villamizar-Santamaria, Gomez Fernández, 2021:117). Thus, Facebook's cross-border reach intensifies crises in Botswana, as it reaches multicultural audiences beyond borders. Therefore, companies must be ready

and capable of handling crises in unknown cultures to safeguard their reputations.

A 2020 Afrobarometer survey showed that social media usage in Botswana has doubled in five years, with 34% using platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for news (Lekorwe, 2020). This study focuses on Facebook due to its popularity in Botswana (Cornelius, Kennedy & Wesslen, 2019; Mosweu & Ngoepe, 2019). Despite Twitter being preferred by the elite and journalists, Facebook can reach a broader audience (Ross et al., 2018). Over 75% of Botswana's population subscribes to Facebook (Statcounter, 2022), making it a crucial crisis communication tool, which poses challenges for PR practitioners as publics use it to access and share information (Mosweu & Ngoepe, 2019).

Facebook is beneficial for businesses and political movements in Botswana, and traditional media have created pages to reach their audiences. It appears that Facebook helps to free audiences from state media blackouts (Jotia, 2018:265). The use of Facebook gained popularity in Botswana during the 2014 general election, following its success in the 2008 United States presidential elections and revolutions in the Arab region and Africa (Masilo & Seabo, 2015:118). Before the 2014 general elections, some organisations, including the government, used Facebook to communicate with stakeholders, but with limited success (Mosweu & Ngoepe, 2019). As a result, Botswana's citizens, primarily taxpayers, can anticipate organisations to communicate with them on this platform and share details about crises, as Facebook has provided them with a platform to discuss the country's socio-economic and political climate (Jotia, 2018; Mosweu & Ngoepe, 2019).

Organisational crises like fraud or product recalls can threaten corporate reputations (Konig, Graf-Vlachy, Bundy & Little, 2020), leading to financial and reputational losses (Carrington, Combe & Mumford, 2019). Unprepared organisations risk further harm if they fail to control the narrative (Roshan, Warren & Carr, 2016). If not handled actively, social-media-driven crises can rapidly reach a vast audience. Rees (2020) notes that David Carroll's YouTube video, viewed and commented on by 18 million people globally after United Airlines damaged his guitar, harmed the airline's reputation. In such cases, untrained PR professionals may avoid genuine communication due to the public's amplified role in crisis-driven social media discussions with organisations (Roshan et al., 2016). As such, the lack of scholarship on how to manage a crisis in a multicultural setting like Botswana provided a great motivation for this study. This article aimed to investigate how PR practitioners in Botswana use Facebook to navigate and manage organisational crises in this culturally diverse setting, by posing the following research questions:

RQ1: How do PR practitioners use Facebook to disseminate crisis messages in Botswana?

RQ2: To what extent does culture influence crisis communications on Facebook in Botswana?

RQ3: How does the kgotla system facilitate Facebook to become a trustworthy source of crisis information in Botswana?

Social media and crises

Before reviewing literature, it is important to define social media, a key theme in crisis communication research. Social media refers to internet-based applications enabling content creation and exchange (Roshan et al., 2016), including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, microblogs, forums, and social networking (Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012). It allows users to follow others and view their content (Zheng, Liu & Davison, 2018). Thus, the content can amplify reputational risks for organisations when it triggers a crisis (Rees, 2020).

Crisis communication research has advanced the development of theoretical frameworks (Benoit, 2013; Coombs, 2004), and scholarship on social media usage during crises (Agarwal, Aziz & Zhuang, 2022; Austin et al., 2012; du Plessis, 2018; Lin, Spence, Sellnow & Lachlan, 2016; Roshan et al., 2016). Social media has become a dominant feature of modern crisis communications (Zheng et al., 2018). Undoubtedly, crisis communication scholarship continues to grow. Through social media, crisis information is shared faster than ever, and can cause more harm to organisations that remain passive (Fannes & Claeys, 2023) as that reflects on their credibility and the ability to control and influence (Lin et al., 2016). As such, Rees (2020) concluded that reputation management must include proactive social media posts and organisations must address the speed and emotion of social media. However, organisations should be mindful of when

to clarify rumours on social media to reduce harm (Agarwal et al., 2022).

Facebook in crisis communication

Facebook remains a dominant, popular and powerful social media platform for crisis communication (Atkinson S. et al., 2021). It is a major source of crisis communication, as seen in a study by Pawsey, Nayeem and Huang (2018) and during the coronavirus pandemic (Atkinson A.M. et al., 2021; Sengul, 2021). As such, crisis managers must take advantage of Facebook's information-sharing capabilities (Akgül & Uymaz, 2022). Research indicates that face-to-face communication is the most common form of crisis communication, followed by TV, text, phone, and Facebook (Austin et al., 2012:203). While the advantage of utilising Facebook in crisis communication is undeniable, not all individuals are equipped to fully partake in and benefit from its deployment, due to a lack of self-confidence in using the platform. In other words, prior studies have considered the constraints imposed upon self-disclosure on Facebook by low self-esteem (Forest & Wood, 2012) and the impeding of comprehensive information acquisition when users lack the confidence to actively engage on the platform and share their personal circumstances during crises.

Lappas, Triantafyllidou and Kani (2021) found that Facebook encourages dialogue and citizen engagement. Another study considered the effects of crisis communication on Facebook and found it enabled parasocial relationships between athletes and fans of different cultures (Utz, Otto & Pawlowski, 2021). Yet, Atkinson S. et al. (2021), suggested that using Facebook can build genuine connections with the public and increase community resilience. Through their online connections, individuals who network can enhance their communication with and influence entities like governments, corporations, and the media by holding those in power accountable, ultimately leading to policy or practice changes (Sormanen & Dutton, 2015). Additionally, Facebook allows younger and older generations to interact in a multicultural space, which can lead to the formation of new meanings and identities (Casmir, 2009). This highlights the importance of social media networks like Facebook for interactive crisis communication.

Furthermore, Facebook and traditional media enjoy what Sun, Wang and Xiao (2022) call a complementary role. In other words, the media and Facebook complement each other because news agencies use the platform to share their news, and as their 'important source of news' (Mosquera, Odunowo, McNamara, Guo & Petrie, 2020: 577). As this study focuses on Facebook as an important tool for organisational crisis communication in Botswana, scholars have found that reputation can, among other things, be affected by information on this platform (Ye & Cheong, 2017).

Culture and crisis communication

The Internet and technology have made trade global, and organisations span diverse cultures (George & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017). For instance, Botswana has investors and multinational corporations in financial services, UN agencies, embassies, mining, and tourism (Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2020). These organisations are not immune to crises. Crisis communication requires physical or media-based responses and an understanding of local cultures (Claeys & Schwarz, 2016). Ganga and Sriramesh (2018) note that ignoring culture comes at a high cost to reputation and profits. As such, communicators should consider cultural beliefs and practices when creating crisis communication plans, programs, and messages (Fern-Banks, 2011).

Ganga and Sriramesh (2018) found that culture incorporates political, economic, media, societal, and activist environments in crisis communication. Business culture is thus embedded in various environments. As such, crisis communication should take into account the organisation's and country's cultural backgrounds. Foreign organisations in a country may collaborate with local experts to create suitable messages and manage relationships (Fern-Banks, 2011; Ganga and Sriramesh, 2018). Without considering the audience's beliefs, communication may fail. These beliefs, taboos, and traditions vary across countries and are not identical (Fern-Banks, 2011). For example, Botswana's ancient cultural beliefs and proverbs have contributed to its values of peace, free speech, cooperation, interdependence, and humanness (Nhlekisana, 2016:150). Due to culture, some communities in Botswana have conservative,

fatalistic attitudes that limit action (Few, Spear, Singh, Tebboth, Davies & Thompson-Hall, 2020). As such, this article examines how culture influences crisis communication from a non-Western perspective, with the goal to contribute to global scholarship. As suggested by Rees (2020) non-Western research challenges Western PR norms by exploring different cultures.

Furthermore, culture is an essential part of crisis communication research because it influences how organisations communicate with different audiences in those settings. There is a school of thought that the organisation-centric approach to crisis communication, at the exclusion of cultural perspectives, is 'a major lacuna that reduces the global application of crisis communication literature' (Ganga & Sriramesh, 2018:205). An approach that considers culture has the potential to achieve tremendous and sustainable outcomes in a crisis communication plan (George & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017). This study builds on the need to consider crisis communication through the lens of culture to broaden its global application.

The lack of scholarship on how people in different cultures respond to crises implies Western-authored strategies such as denial, scapegoat, attack accuser, excuse, justification, ingratiation, concern compassion, regret and apology (Coombs, 2010), may not be effective in Botswana. Kwansah-Aidoo & Saleh (2017) argued that the South African government's denial of xenophobic attacks damaged its reputation, and that apologising was too late. Denial failed, but the apology succeeded due to African humanistic values like *Ubuntu* (Gade, 2011). Botswana culture values respect and compassion for others (Osei-Hwedie, 2010), so the denial strategy may not work in this culture. However, it may be relevant in contexts where confrontation is a crisis resolution norm, such as the United States of America (Guiniven, 2002). Botswana's political culture does not favour extremism (Osei-Hwedie, 2010). As such, a denial strategy might be met with resistance and criticism because it ignores humanistic values. Thus, Western crisis response strategies may not be suitable for other cultures, as public needs and message comprehension vary.

Third culture building and the *kgotla* system

South Africa, which is characterised by its search for identity, legitimacy, and professional recognition, draws influence from the American model of PR despite having had British and Dutch colonial administrations (Rensburg, 2009). South Africa is the most economically powerful country in Southern Africa and has the most advanced PR practice (Rensburg, 2009).

Activism gives the public power over organisations and is important to PR research (Coombs & Holladay, 2012:881). South African PR has adopted this approach to promote change through dialogue and third culture building (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015:818). Multicultural contexts such as found in South Africa require PR practitioners to build relationships with local and global publics, necessitating third culture building (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015) to create a relational and dialogic intercultural PR (Kent & Taylor, 2011:69). Kent & Taylor (2011) proposed the third culture model, which sees people as active, involved, and concerned about their survival. This explains why PR in South Africa is heavily reliant on public involvement. As such, PR practitioners in Botswana use the *kgotla* system, a village assembly, to facilitate dialogue and engagement (Otlogetswe, 2018). Benecke & Oksiutycz (2015) argue that this dialogue is essential for PR, and the *kgotla* system is ideal for dialogue and diffusion programmes because it remains credible, culturally valid, and effective in reaching many people (Noga, Kolawole, Thakadu & Masunga, 2018).

The *kgotla* system in Botswana is suitable for PR as it facilitates and values communication, dialogue, and stakeholder engagement. It is known for public activities that involve citizens, such as open meetings to discuss conflicts (Molokwane & Lukamba, 2018). Western public spheres of the 18th century, which were essential for national discourse, have declined due to mass media (Gesser-Edelsburg, Shir-Raz, Walter, Mordini, Dimitriou, James & Green, 2015), but the *kgotla* has remained relevant and robust. Communication in the *kgotla* is based on African humanism of *Botho* (Osei-Hwedie 2010) or *Ubuntu* as it is known in South Africa (Gade, 2011). The *kgotla* accommodates everyone, including the global public, living and working in Botswana. This multicultural public poses a challenge for PR practitioners and organisations to communicate during crises. Social values, such as proverbs and sayings, guide communication in

the *kgotla* system. For example, there are proverbs such as "Matlho a phage a lebagane" (conversations are better held face-to-face) and "mafoko a *kgotla* a mantle otlhe" (everyone's views are welcome in the *kgotla*) (Dube & Kgalemgang, 2017:366). These sayings promote free speech, but there is another modern saying that "there is no hurry in Botswana" (Xu, 2018), which seem to encourage organisations to take a relaxed approach to crisis communication.

The *kgotla* system, to borrow from the words of Benecke & Oksiutycz (2015:819), is a typical example of 'builders of culture' because PR practitioners use this platform to organise "engagements in which people have the opportunity to converse and take part in dialogue." Kent and Taylor (2011:51) suggest the third culture model to bridge cultures in intercultural PR. This model is applicable to the *kgotla* system and could help create a connection between cultures in national discourse conversations. As suggested by Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015), third culture building addresses intercultural communication in multicultural contexts involving many languages and ethnic groups. Botswana is a typical example of such contexts, and third culture building through the *kgotla* system, which can help PR practitioners facilitate intercultural communication and help organisations "navigate cultural terrains" (Kent & Taylor, 2011: 50) during crises.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws from semi-structured interviews with 20 senior PR practitioners in Botswana from September to October 2021. The interviews were part of the author's doctoral research, which adhered to Swansea University's College of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Committee guidelines. The participants were initially recruited through convenience sampling (Gibson & Hua, 2016; Treadwell, 2011) when contacted in 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic made it hard to reach and recruit participants, so snowball sampling (Krippendorff, 2004) was used for those who agreed to contact others in their network. Consent was obtained from all the participants (Berger, 2011; Punch, 2005). Interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded for transcription. Zoom is a free videoconferencing software programme used for remote work (Bailenson, 2021). In addition to Zoom transcription, note-taking was used to help produce accurate data (Punch, 2005:176). Zoom transcripts were checked for accuracy, as the software sometimes missed or misheard words, resulting in transcripts that did not match the audio. The author made decisions and judgments during editing to ensure the text was clear.

To avoid repetition, 18 interview questions were reduced to seven. For example, a question on the *kgotla* was removed to prevent duplication as the author anticipated they would discuss the *kgotla* system on a question about cultural communication. Reducing the questions also provided the interviewees enough time to express themselves. Gibson and Hua (2016:59) noted that "in-depth interviews require substantial time commitment lasting 60 to 90 minutes." The data was then thematically analysed and coded using NVivo, and a summary report was printed and interpreted. During the interviews, participants revealed organisations' names, supervisors' positions, and work details, which were redacted from transcripts to guarantee anonymity. Organisations were referred to as state-owned enterprises, parastatals, government ministries, private company or commercial banks (Ellersgaard, Ditlevsen & Larsen, 2021).

RESULTS

This section presents the findings under themes emerging from the interviews such as lack of engagement, cultural influence on crisis communication and the *kgotla*, and face-to-face engagement. These findings answer the research questions, stated earlier in the introduction.

Lack of engagement

The findings indicate that PR practitioners in Botswana only use Facebook for status update and do not engage with their publics in the comment section. Audience with queries or complaints are reached through texting via inbox or messenger. In other words, the exchange starts online and moves offline, a swim against technological tide. PR practitioners working for government and its agencies also make follow-up phone calls to answer their audiences' queries and engage in face-to-face conversations with

their publics when they visit villages and urban areas to address *kgotla* meetings. Additionally, the results also show that PR practitioners are hesitant to use Facebook during crises because of a lack of support from their principals. For example, one of the participants revealed that his chief executive officer (CEO) hates Facebook and has warned him not to use it during crises, because it has westernised young people and encourages them to disrespect the elders. It seems this made it difficult for them to engage audiences on Facebook because they are not well empowered. It also emerged that most of the decision-making on the form of the crisis messages to share with the public rests with their CEOs.

Cultural influence on crisis communication

The findings suggest that most Botswana organisations have a laid-back or traditional culture. It seems this culture leads to PR practitioners becoming passive during crises, as they only post status updates on Facebook and wait for the crisis to unfold before responding. For example, one of the interviewees said Botswana's conservative culture is a problem because leaders do not want to comment or share information, hoping the public would not discover the truth. For example, a state-owned agency employee also disclosed that their organisation follows a conservative culture, which requires their CEO to refrain from speaking until given approval by the Permanent Secretary or Minister who oversees the agency. As such, it seems this culture hinders information dissemination during crises. This suggests that some Botswana organisations think that sharing information during crises puts them in the spotlight, even though open communication is the best way to handle crises.

A former government practitioner also described their audiences as traditional, laid-back, unassuming, and too quick to forget problems that do not directly concern them. As such, it seems most practitioners take advantage of this cultural trait to evade crisis blame, because Botswana are perceived as less concerned about issues that do not directly affect them. Evidence from the interviews also suggests that the Botswana do not usually hold organisations to account because they have been made to believe that organisations are doing them a favour. As such, it seems that Botswana publics do not usually get involved in matters that do not directly concern them, and this might provide a window for passive practitioners to avoid crisis responsibility at the slightest opportunity.

The *kgotla* and face-to-face engagement

Practitioners were divided on whether the *kgotla* system lends itself to crisis communication. Some practitioners praised the *kgotla* system as effective because they use it to directly address communities and obtain instant feedback. One participant explained that traditional media does not provide them with an opportunity to directly engage with the public during crises. However, the findings showed that *kgotla* worked best in rural communities across Botswana where its integrity is still respected, compared to urban areas where practitioners prefer offline engagement on Facebook messenger and using telephone calls for follow-ups. Talking about its suitability in rural settings, an interviewee explained that Botswana is one of the few African countries that can handle crises in rural and remote areas because the *kgotla* allows everyone to speak their mind freely.

Furthermore, access to the platform was quicker for government PR practitioners than for private practitioners. For example, a participant who worked for a state-owned agency explained that she used the *kgotla* during the old-age pension payment crisis, which affected several communities. She approached the chiefs in various communities for permission to address the public and used public address (PA) systems mounted on vehicles to share crisis information, while also inviting the elderly to a *kgotla* meeting. While it ordinarily takes longer to summon people around the community for a meeting, practitioners unanimously agreed that making use of public address-mounted vehicles information was disseminated faster.

The participants also explained that the *kgotla* system is able to reach out to many people and answer their questions in one meeting during crises. In addition, it emerged that the *kgotla* system is still more believable and trusted than the traditional media channels and social media. Deliberating on the integrity of the *kgotla* system, one of the participants explained that *kgotla* holds greater authority and is widely

regarded as a platform from which many adhere to the decisions made. During the crises, PR practitioners who used the *kgotla* system talked about the platform complementing traditional and social media.

However, not all practitioners found the *kgotla* system helpful during crises. Some practitioners from parastatals and the private sector indicated that the system does not lend itself to communication during crises, but have acknowledged that it is suitable for pre- and post-crisis communication. One of the emergent issues that hinders private organisations and most parastatals from using the *kgotla* system is the cumbersome process of gaining access. It is evident that organisations cannot use this cultural communication platform without permission from village chiefs (custodians of the *kgotla*). Moreover, one of the problems with this ancient platform is that it has the power to decide which messages to share with communities, inhibiting the private sector from sharing their marketing and branding messages with the public.

DISCUSSION

The lack of Facebook conversations between organisations in Botswana and their audiences does not indicate that the organisations are hesitant or uninterested in establishing communication. In fact, this study has shown that they engage in offline dialogue, including utilising Botswana's cultural public sphere (*kgotla*) which is still active and robust in discussing issues of public importance (Molokwane & Lukamba, 2018). This contrasts with the West, which has abandoned its 18th century public sphere, which was a crucial part of national discourse (Gesser-Edelsburg et al., 2015). However, Facebook has made progress in this area by allowing publics to virtually engage in national discourse and promoting dialogue and citizen engagement (Lappas et al., 2021), which is why most organisations today complement Facebook with offline and cultural communication platforms.

PR practitioners favouring the *kgotla* system showed that it resonates with Botswana's pre- and post-colonial social values. As such, proverbs and sayings, such as "matlho a phage a lebagane" (conversations are better face to face) and "mafoko a *kgotla* a mantle otlhe" (everyone's views are welcome in the *kgotla*), foster dialogue and mutuality in the *kgotla* system (Dube & Kgalemang, 2017:366). However, the proverb "there is no hurry in Botswana" (Xu, 2018) might lead organisations to take a relaxed approach to crisis communication. These proverbs seem to shape radio, TV, Facebook, and organisational communication discourse in Botswana, despite social media's lack of regulation and disregard for social values. Thus, Facebook users are not held responsible for inappropriate discourse, unlike in the *kgotla* system, where leaders can reprimand those who misuse their freedom of speech. Additionally, sayings such as "there is no hurry in Botswana" (Xu, 2018) might suggest that time is not a priority for most organisations and PR practitioners in this setting.

This study suggests that reluctance to use Facebook is due to the perception that it leads to westernisation and moral decline, with users disrespecting elders. Thus, most Botswana organisations prefer offline dialogue to social-mediated dialogue. The government and its agencies trust traditional media and offline platforms more than Facebook. Private practitioners had meaningful Facebook conversations, suggesting government PR practitioners could benefit from training and empowerment to engage with the public on Facebook.

Cross Cloverleaf Relationship Model

This study introduces a Botswana focused model, the Cross Cloverleaf Relationship Model (CCRM), that will probably resonate with similar contexts in Sub-Saharan African countries. The model illustrates the interdependent relationship between social media and the *kgotla* system. Inspired by the cloverleaf traffic interchange (Wang & Zhou, 2018), the CCRM examines the flow of information between the *kgotla* system and social media platforms like Facebook. The introduction of this model to crisis communication studies significantly contributes to global scholarship on the flow of crisis information between organisations, offline cultural platforms, and social media publics in non-Western multicultural contexts like Botswana.

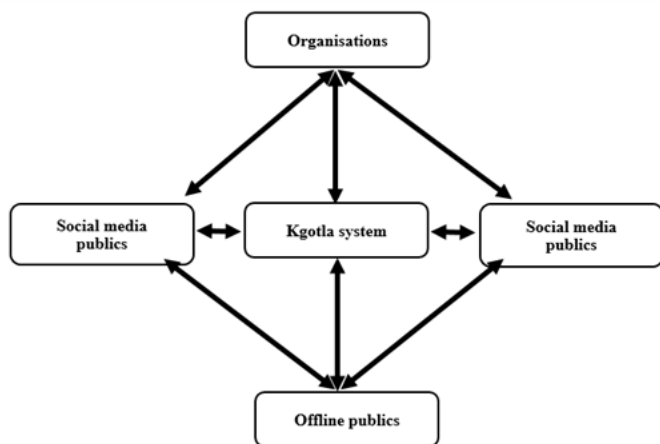


Figure 1: The Cross Cloverleaf Relationship Model (CCRM) between social media (e.g. Facebook) and the *kgotla* system in Botswana

The CCRM provides an opportunity for PR practitioners to utilise offline cultural platforms in the digital age. PR practitioners in the private sector indicated that the *kgotla* system was not ideal for crisis communication because of access and operational challenges. To address this problem, the CCRM, which has the *kgotla* system at the heart of crisis communication, proposes that this cultural platform should become virtual to enable PR practitioners to access and utilise it effectively during crises. The model also indicates that using both the physical and digital *kgotla* might help authentic and credible information flow into social media platforms such as Facebook, since this cultural platform is more trusted and still held in high regard.

The CCRM allows crisis information from the organisations to flow to the *kgotla*, social media publics and to the offline publics. This means organisations' Facebook posts can reach both online and offline audiences. The model encourages third culture building, allowing PR practitioners to create online and offline conversations (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015:819). The offline public in Botswana includes those without technology skills or internet access in rural and remote areas. As such, the model shows that the *kgotla* system disseminates crisis information to the offline public, which is then shared by the social media publics. This feedback is provided through Facebook comments and timelines. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that in Botswana, crisis communication on Facebook is ineffective without offline platforms like *kgotla*, which provides instant feedback and helps organisations and stakeholders.

Botswana and similar contexts in Sub-Saharan African may benefit from disseminating crisis information on Facebook via the *kgotla* system or similar platforms. However, PR practitioners, especially in the private sector, may have difficulty accessing this offline cultural platform. With the Government of Botswana working on improving the digital infrastructure, it seems that faster internet speed and connectivity might bridge this divide. As such, ignoring offline publics could harm an organisation's reputation. This study suggests the *kgotla* system quickly disseminates crisis information and provides instant feedback to stakeholders and the organisation. Thus, it appears the *kgotla* system can clear uncertainties and offer immediate feedback.

The *kgotla* system can be a reliable source of information for Facebook. The study shows that this platform provides trustworthy and believable information that users may share, helping to build trust between them and organisations. This supports the study of Lin et al. (2016), which found source credibility as a powerful tool for power control and source influence. Noga et al. (2018), also showed the *kgotla* remains a credible and culturally legitimate platform to reach the public. This evidence shows dialogue exists on offline platforms, in addition to Facebook, in multicultural non-Western contexts such as Botswana. In fact, Austin et al. (2012:203), found that face-to-face communication was the most common form of crisis communication, followed by TV, text, phone, and Facebook. As such, the *kgotla* system's inclusion in crisis and PR scholarship, and how it works with social media platforms, is a positive

step to help PR practitioners create dialogue and mutuality during crises.

The *kgotla* system's cumbersome chain of command restricts access, but removing these barriers could help organisations communicate with their offline publics during a crisis. Opinions differ on the *kgotla*'s suitability for crisis communication; private PR practitioners said it was too slow due to the chain of command. Therefore, streamlining administrative processes and training chiefs in crisis communication may help organisations use this offline platform in emergencies. This platform is a key crisis communication tool for government PR practitioners, as it enables stakeholders to form a positive image of the organisation (Coombs, 2010; Roshan et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it seems the private practitioners' contention that the *kgotla* system does not lend itself to crisis communication is valid, because it does not support prompt responses. Crisis research suggests that the speed of crisis response on any platform is critical, because it can significantly influence the outcomes of crisis management (Huang & DiStaso, 2020). It seems in the *kgotla*, speed seems problematic due to the chains of command and culture of consultations; hence, the saying that *there is no hurry in Botswana* (Xu, 2018). Government practitioners have indicated that they can access the *kgotla* system within a reasonable timeframe. To them, a reasonable time might mean 24 hours after the crisis has unfolded because of the hurdles and chains of command they must overcome before communicating.

The findings of this study are consistent with research indicating that knowing what people "want culturally is essential to successful communication" (George & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017:8). In other words, organisations might find it challenging to communicate in multicultural contexts if they do not understand the cultural needs of the public. However, although PR practitioners do not need to know or understand all cultures (Kent & Taylor, 2011), a Western PR practitioner working for an embassy in Botswana, for example, might not produce a culturally sensitive crisis message, unless he or she is guided and assisted by a local practitioner working for the embassy. As such, culturally insensitive crisis messages are to be avoided as they might potentially create reputational problems for organisations.

This article affirms the need for third culture building in PR, for multicultural settings to help PR professionals comprehend how publics co-construct meaning for organisations to traverse cultural terrains (Benecke & Oksiytycz, 2015; Kent & Taylor, 2011), especially in times of crisis. For instance, Facebook and the *kgotla* contribute to third culture building and give PR practitioners in Botswana a chance to comprehend how publics co-create meanings and navigate these cultural terrains. Facebook has connected the world, and global audiences have actively participated in conversations and dialogue about crises in other countries. Lehmberg & Hicks (2018) noted that Western PR practitioners are not ready for the international and multicultural scope of crisis communication. It seems Facebook has become a 21st century *kgotla*, where people can discuss and bring change. As such, intercultural crisis communication may bridge the gap between cultures, helping PR practitioners build relationships and manage crises. In the *kgotla*-Facebook hybrid space, different generations can engage in conversations, negotiating new meanings and identities (Casmir, 2009) and building a third culture.

Evidence in this study indicates that senior PR practitioners in Botswana are not in strategic management positions and do not have seats or voices in the boardroom. In other words, they serve as figureheads who occupy nominal positions where they cannot make strategic communication decisions. This contradicts the waves of excellence theory, which suggests that PR professionals should serve in managerial and technical positions because PR plays an important role in the "strategic management of the organization" (Grunig & Grunig, 2002:38). As such, it might be helpful for PR practitioners in Botswana to serve in strategic positions and become empowered to make final decisions regarding the types of crisis messages shared with the audience.

It also emerged that most organisations in Botswana believe that audiences might not find the truth if organisations withhold crisis information. It seems this belief system contributes to most organisations adopting a reactive stance to crisis communication. In this way, PR practitioners who proactively provide information on Facebook during a crisis are discouraged by their superiors and colleagues because they may draw unnecessary attention to the organisations during an emergency. Therefore, when the crisis has become global through Facebook, it might be difficult for these practitioners to cope with information

demands, thus putting their organisations' reputations at a greater risk.

Furthermore, it appears that leaders in some organisations in Botswana are somewhat culturally apprehensive about using Facebook during emergencies. Senior PR practitioners expressed strong opposition from their leaders to use Facebook during crises. This negative attitude seems to be perpetuated by cultural perceptions that Facebook, a Western communication platform, corrupts society's moral fibre and has given young people excessive power to challenge those in authority (Sormanen & Dutton, 2015). In other words, Facebook allows users to freely speak their minds on any subject, even those considered taboo in some societies in Botswana, something that might be viewed as disrespectful.

Facebook's liberal views and Botswana's cultural values may conflict, with Facebook comments seen as banter, criticism, and insults. PR practitioners view them as damaging to the society's moral values of respect for elders and those in authority. This perspective is linked to African culture. Western societies laud social media for its information-sharing and accountability capabilities (Atkinson A.M. et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2016; Sormanen & Dutton, 2015). Botswana likely view criticism of those in power and their organisations as disrespectful, so senior executives are unlikely to engage this audience on Facebook. This study built upon prior enquiries into the constraints imposed upon self-disclosure on Facebook by low self-esteem (Forest & Wood, 2012) and the impeding of comprehensive information acquisition when users lack the confidence to actively engage on the platform and share their personal circumstances during crises. Additionally, the study underscored the detrimental impact that organisational leaders' lack of confidence in proactively engaging and sharing information on Facebook can have on their ability to manage crises, as they may discourage their subordinates from utilising the platform during emergencies. As such, this article offers other researchers an opportunity to explore how low self-esteem, disguised as culture, influences leadership decisions when Facebook is used during crises.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Botswana PR practitioners understand Facebook's value in crisis communication, but do not take advantage of its full benefits due to administrative and cultural issues. It seems Botswana's cultural beliefs and sayings shape PR practitioners' attitudes towards crisis communication on Facebook, making them less active in this fast-paced environment. This study found that Botswana's crisis communication is still developing, and adjustments should be made to meet international standards. These changes could help bridge the gap between Western and non-Western crisis communication. Additionally, senior executives' views of Facebook, and other cultural factors, contribute to PR practitioners' passive stance during crises. The article suggests that global corporations in Botswana and similar settings in Sub-Saharan Africa may also benefit from the *kgotla* system for crisis communication in both rural and urban multicultural contexts.

This study has its own limitations. For example, it did not explore the views of the CEOs on Facebook's role in crises. CEOs in Botswana are essential in crisis communication and represent their organisations in emergencies. As such, PR practitioners are not empowered to communicate during crises, as the CEOs make decisions on crisis messages to share with the public. This study could have provided more insight into leadership and crisis communication on Facebook to help practitioners navigate and manage crises in Botswana and similar contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. CEOs' wisdom could have supplemented PR practitioners' experiences to gain a full understanding of crisis communication in Botswana.

Lastly, this study may help PR practitioners in Botswana and similar Sub-Saharan African contexts, as well as international practitioners in multicultural crisis communication. It provided new insights on Facebook crisis communication in the Global South, especially in Botswana, where the *kgotla* system as a crisis communication platform was strongly suggested. Additionally, the study introduced a Botswana focused model, the Cross Cloverleaf Relationship Model (CCRM), which may be useful in similar Sub-Saharan African and global contexts. This model allows PR practitioners to use offline cultural platforms in the digital age and advances scholarship on social media and crisis communication in the Global South. This study provided researchers with a chance to engage in comparative studies to test-drive the CCRM and investigate the relationship between Facebook and cultural crisis communication platforms in their

contexts, further enabling researchers to compare PR practice in Botswana to others worldwide.

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