



## Brand Social Media Crisis Response Strategies to Mis/Disinformation

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### Abstract

The prevalence of misinformation and disinformation in social media can lead to ill-informed public debates and dangerous decisions. Social media can catalyze misinformation to surface in an environment where factual knowledge and evidence-based reasoning may not always be prioritized. Fake news or mis/disinformation targeting brands can lead to severe reputational crises. In this simulation exercise, students are presented with a brand rumor that has become viral, and subsequently, a series of social media posts start spreading misinformation. In pairs, students will identify the appropriate response to the misinformation that aligns with the brand's voice and social media crisis guidelines. This assignment is best suited for an advanced-level course and requires students to have foundational knowledge of best practices in crisis communication, misinformation, brand voice, and social media platforms.

### Rationale

Crisis response strategies follow denial, diminishment, rebuilding, or bolstering postures (Coombs, 2007a; 2007b). Tactics include attacking the accuser, denial, blaming a scapegoat, formulating an excuse, provocation of another party, defeasibility, accidental events, claim of good intentions, justification, reminder of good works, stakeholder ingratiation, victim compensation, and apology (Coombs, 2014). Misinformation is “any contentious information that reflects disagreement between people,” while disinformation involves “deliberate alienation or disempowerment of other people or intentionally incorrect information” (Southwell *et al.*, 2018, p. 3). Social media platforms and their algorithmic nature (Adisa, 2023; Newberry *et*

*al.*, 2022; Thomas, 2018) and ability to provide emotional support and confirmation bias, make it easy for misinformation and disinformation to spread (Brady *et al.*, 2023; Kulke, 2023; Southwell *et al.*, 2018). As a result, this can lead to ill-informed public debates and dangerous decisions (Warren & Wen, 2016). Social media can catalyze misinformation to the surface in an environment where factual knowledge and evidence-based reasoning may not always be prioritized.

Companies are grappling with combating fake news, as demonstrated by recent incidents involving brands like Starbucks (see Kuchler, 2018). The coffee chain fell victim to a hoax advertising “Dreamer Day,” falsely claiming that it would give free Frappuccino to undocumented immigrants. The fake news spread

**Keywords:** Social Media Strategy, Crisis Communication, Social Media Crisis Simulation, Misinformation, Disinformation

rapidly on social media, prompting Starbucks to deny the event. The incident highlights the power of social platforms to damage reputations and underscores the need for companies to be vigilant in responding to such misinformation. The proliferation of fake news poses challenges for businesses, affecting their reputation and brand trust. Companies have long had to navigate false stories that can harm their brand or products, requiring them to respond to combat misinformation strategically.

Coombs (2014) identified inaccurate or untrue information, such as rumors, as a crisis of misinformation and recommended denial as the best response. Denial involves actively debunking the misinformation by presenting a corrective message that establishes that the prior message was false. Lewandowsky *et al.* (2012) suggested that fewer arguments are preferred in denying false information when discrediting misinformation. When brands are targeted in fake news, it can lead to a reputational crisis. Fake news intending to damage the brand will likely be categorized as a severe reputational crisis (Jahng, 2021). Crafting crisis response messages that align with the brand's voice is important (Kenan, 2023; Newberry, 2023; Thomas, 2018).

### Foundational Knowledge and Context

Students should be equipped with the following skills to participate in this simulation. First, with the proliferation of digital platforms and the ease of information dissemination, students must be equipped to distinguish between accurate, biased, and deliberately misleading messages (see Southwell *et al.*, 2018). These skills combat the potential harm of spreading false information even further while cultivating a habit of seeking reliable sources and verifying claims. Second, students should have the capacity to assess and respond to arguments. Students should be able to critically evaluate the soundness of arguments, identify logical fallacies, and articulate a proper response (see Withey, 2016). Fallacies weaken arguments, and students must learn how to evaluate arguments made, read, or heard (Withey, 2016). Third, they should understand Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) recommendations for crisis responses (Coombs, 2007a; 2007b) and the general guidelines for brands' crisis communication practices, including partnering with audiences; listening to concerns; open, honest, compassionate, and empathetic communication; collaborating with credible sources; and

providing messages of self-efficacy (Veil *et al.*, 2011). Finally, it is helpful for students to understand current best practices for communicating brand voice through social media through leading social media industry analytics and publishing organizations such as Hubspot, Hootsuite, and Sprout Social. Brand voice is a brand's distinct personality consistently communicated to target audiences (Kenan, 2023; Newberry, 2023). A brand's voice is its congruous messaging tone, aesthetic, and strategy designed to build brand recognition and foster a connection with the audience (Kenan, 2023). The brand voice should be unique and align and support organizational values to strengthen stakeholder relations (Forsey, 2022; Newberry, 2023). Therefore, these skills are essential to curate social media responses effectively when a brand crisis arises.

### Explanation

Before the simulation exercise, the instructor creates multiple websites (e.g., webpages on Blogger, WordPress) that resemble a brand's social media interface (e.g., X, Instagram, Facebook; Anderson *et al.*, 2014). See a sample web mockup interface in Figure 1. The website should include public posts and a few initial mis/disinformation comments connecting the brand to a crisis, such as an operational failure, mishandling of customer complaints, inappropriate use of social media, or a natural disaster, see Figures 2 and 3. Additionally, the instructor should prepare supplemental sets of comments scheduled to appear on the website a few minutes into the exercise. These comments should exhibit increasing public concern and the spreading of misleading or false information. Comments can be set up to resemble coming from social media user accounts. Some comments should include attached/linked media, some only with text, and some tagging the brand's social account, see examples in Figures 4–6.

### Simulation Overview

- I. Instructors will first present students with a case study in which a rumor about a brand product has become viral, and the brand is now experiencing a situational crisis.
  - a. Simulation of social media interfaces for the brand.
    - i. At least two different social media platforms should be used for the simulation (e.g., Instagram and X).
    - ii. The scenario consists of the public hav-

ing initiated the dissemination of false information or rumor either in connection with or giving rise to a situational crisis.

iii. The posts appear in timed batches on the brand's social media page/account. Posts will appear slow and sparse at first, then grow in frequency and urgency.

b. Students should be assigned to one of the social media interface simulations in pairs or groups of three.

## II. The activity:

a. First, students should review the brand's social media page and identify the problematic posts.

i. Identify the mis/disinformation posts and which posts the brand should reply to or address.

b. Second, students work in pairs/groups to complete a worksheet.

i. Identify which, if any, posts or tagged posts exemplify mis/disinformation.

a. Identify which logical fallacy the post would be categorized as.

ii. Identify which posts the brand would reply to or address.

a. Select one.

iii. Students identify how the brand would reply to a post that follows Veil *et al.*'s (2011) best practices.

a. Students brainstorm a response to the post identified in the previous step.

iv. Students reflect on their drafted response message, identify which of the best practice(s) they incorporated into their message, and describe the importance of implementing those strategies.

v. Students list a few ignored posts and explain why the brand would not respond.

c. Students should submit the worksheet at the end of class.

## III. Debrief

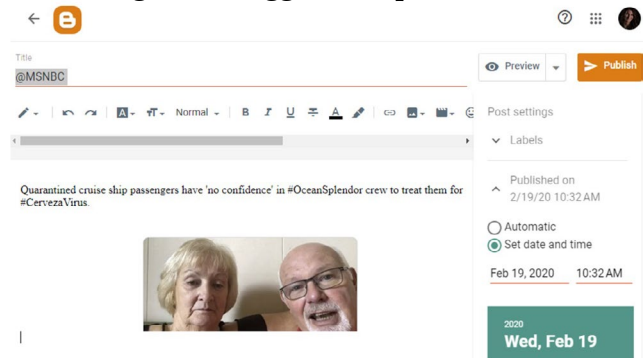
a. Start with one social media interface group. Using the classroom projector, the instructor opens the mock interface.

b. Class discussion starts with each group sharing some instances of misinformation they identified, which ones they ignored, and why.

c. Students share examples of their response messages.

## Sample Social Media Crisis Simulation Images

Figure 1: Blogger Example Interface



**Note:** Before the simulation exercise, the instructor creates blog sites that mimic the brand's social media on two platforms (e.g., X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, or Facebook). Batches of comments are set to post to the site a few minutes into the activity, each batch with increasing public concern and spreading of mis/disinformation.

d. They explain which best practice(s) were used to guide their messages.

e. Finally, they must explain how the message aligns with the brand voice.

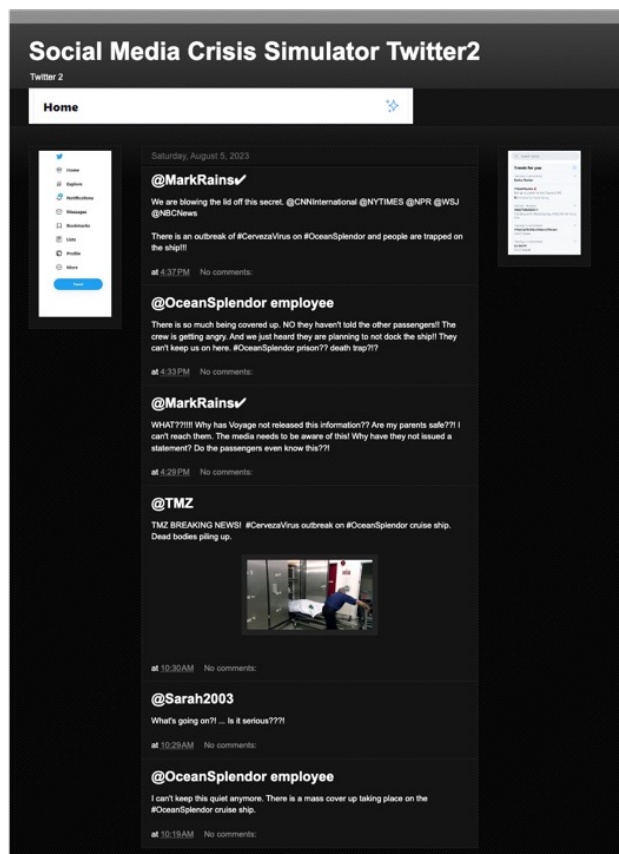
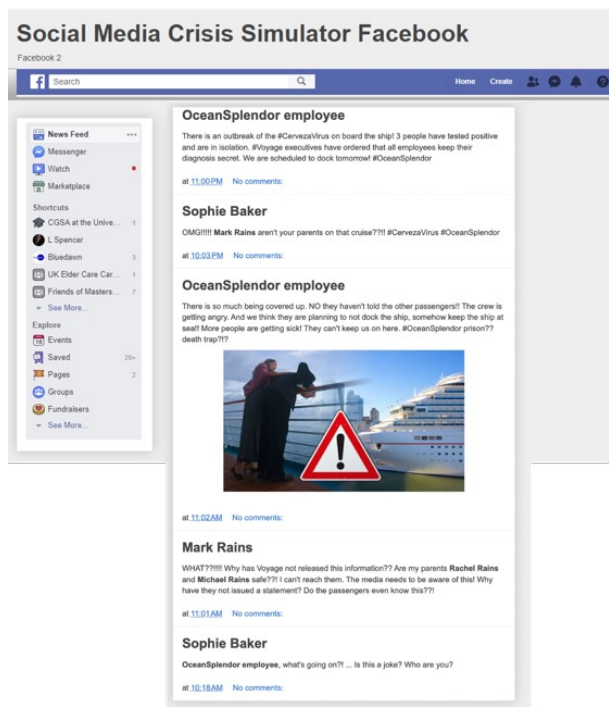
## Outcomes

By the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- Understand the typical stages of a crisis and how they are exemplified in social media.
- Identify and evaluate logical fallacies.
- Describe how communication can cause, exacerbate, and remedy a crisis.
- Apply and craft messages that are consistent with the brand voice.
- Apply and craft messages consistent with Veil and colleagues' (2011) guidelines for brands' crisis communication practices.

## Assessment

Compared to other ways of teaching social media crises, mis/disinformation, and brand crisis communication, this activity allows students to practice brand crisis response strategies and enact realistic message crafting in a simulated social media environment. Activities implementing instructional technology foster learning in innovative ways, improving student attention, memory, and thinking (Miller, 2009). This activity also creates new ways of student collaboration and engagement. A sample grading rubric is shown

**Figures 2-3: Initial Post Mockups**

**Note:** Examples of Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) feeds show how a rumor (i.e., misinformation) leads to disinformation and a crisis situation for brands.

in Table 1.

When this activity was implemented, observations included high levels of engagement and collaboration, and students expressed surprise at the realistic nature of the interface and experience. Moderation and evaluation of student submissions showed an overall average score of  $M = 96.2\%$  with the greatest opportunity for improvement in strengthening the justification of response message action strategy (e.g., the reason for ignoring with ties into brand voice) and articulation of specific message features that demonstrate the crisis response strategies selected. Student feedback was positive and demonstrated their mastery of the core outcomes of the exercise. See Tables 2 and 3 for additional assessment and student feedback.

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**Table 1: Grading Rubric**

| <b>Message analysis: Identifying misinformation</b>                                                                                        |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| <b>Misinformation post(s)</b>                                                                                                              |      |
| Identify the misinformation posts.                                                                                                         | 10%  |
| Identify which logical fallacy each of these posts would be categorized as.                                                                | 10%  |
| <b>Message strategy: Respond or Ignore</b>                                                                                                 |      |
| Identify which of the posts the brand would reply to. List a few posts that were ignored and explain why the group decided not to respond. | 15%  |
| <b>Response message</b>                                                                                                                    |      |
| Select one post to craft a reply message to.                                                                                               |      |
| Draft a response message.                                                                                                                  |      |
| Identify the best practice(s) in the message.                                                                                              |      |
| Describe the importance of integration of best practices noting their importance to the effectiveness of the message.                      | 65%  |
|                                                                                                                                            | 100% |

**Table 2: Assessment Data**

| Total student groups $n = 10$ , total students $N = 24$                           |                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Message analysis: Identifying misinformation</b>                               |                              |
| <b>Misinformation post(s)</b>                                                     |                              |
| Identify the misinformation posts. 10 points                                      | $M = 10$                     |
| Categorize the logical fallacy. 10 points                                         | $M = 9.2$                    |
| <b>Message strategy: Respond or Ignore</b>                                        |                              |
| Identify and justify action strategy. 15 points                                   | $M = 13.6$                   |
| <b>Response message</b>                                                           |                              |
| Message drafted to include best practice(s) and strategy effectiveness. 65 points | $M = 61$                     |
| <b>Total average score</b> 100 possible points                                    | <b><math>M = 96.2</math></b> |

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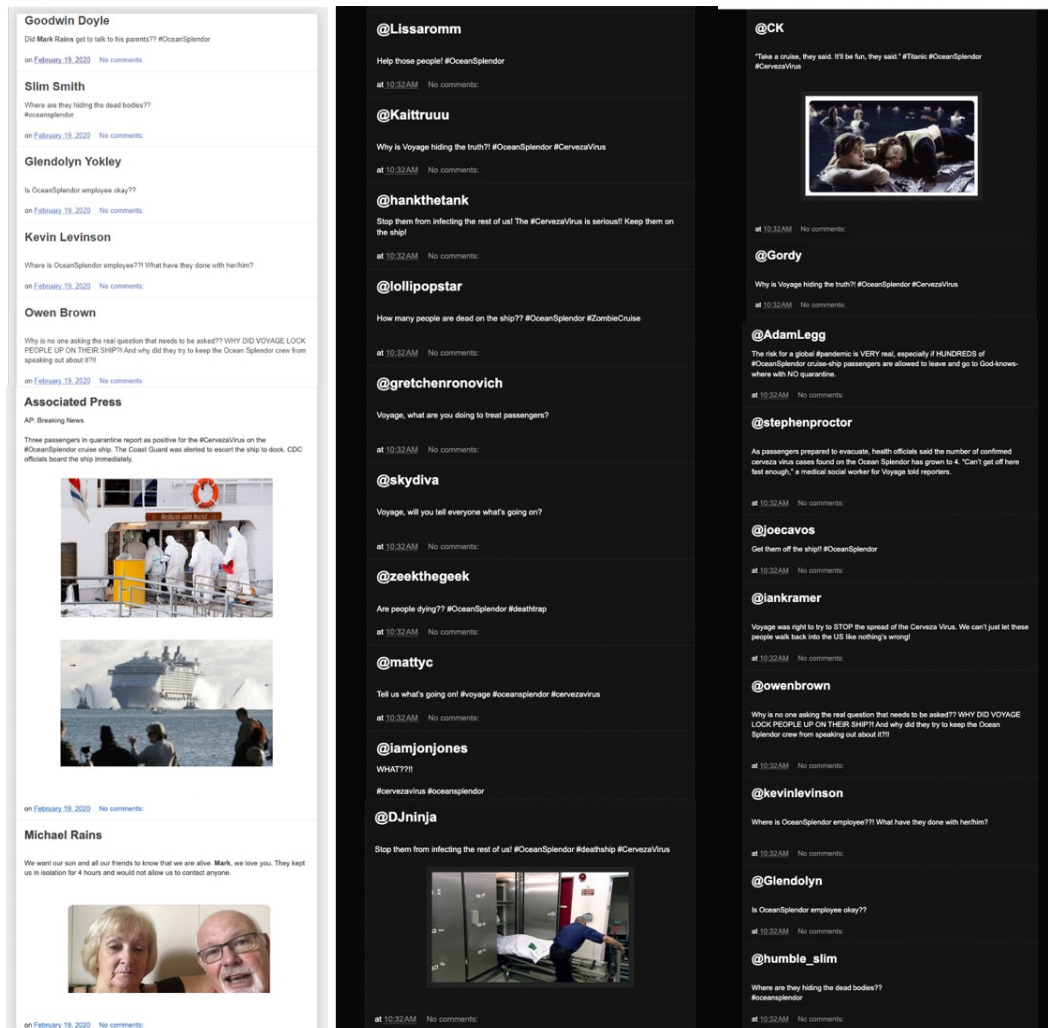
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Figures 4-6: Viral Post Mockups



*Note:* When students refresh the page, new comments fill their feeds. The viral message simulation illustrates the dynamics of a disinformation crisis in “real-time,” simulating the actual period in which these processes and events unfold.

**Table 3: Solicited Student Feedback**

Responses to, “*What did you learn in this exercise? What feedback do you have?*”

**Realistic Nature of Exercise**

“Wow, I had no idea comments could come in that fast! The thought of this happening in real life [is] exciting and shows the importance of having a good social media manager.”

“This is the only class that I’ve been in where we actually got to practice these skills that we will use in our professional career using a simulation app. I wish more classes gave us an opportunity to experience a real-world scenario like this.”

“It’s weird and scary to see how someone can just make up something about a product or brand, and it be believed by others. Not only believed, but shared by them too. That’s how stuff like becomes viral and it’s so hard for a brand to recover from that sometimes.”

“Wow, that was fun. It felt like we were trying to figure this out in the situation room.”

“[The professor]’s attention to detail in building the assignment was smart and made it feel more realistic. My group noticed that some of the Twitter accounts were verified.”

“This stressed me out. I can’t imagine dealing with this all day for a full-time job! It really shows how negative social media can be. It’s like people don’t even think about what they’re saying and reposting.”

**Application of Concepts**

“This crisis social media exercise showed what we’ve been learning about this semester, we don’t have to reply to everything that said during a crisis. The brand must stay true to its publics and brand voice and has to strategically choose what messages to put out.”

“That was the first time I felt like were able to apply what we learned in class about social media crises practically.”

“We were able to write up a plan that included partnering with health organizations and influencers through social media to combat the misinformation. This let us see that we could apply the concept of collaborating with credible sources for better crisis communication.”

“It was good to see how communication can work to resolve a crisis and silence a lie being spread. Brands need to have a crisis communication plan and strategy.”

**Overall Regard**

“This was fun!”

“My group struggled, but I think that’s more on us than the assignment. I should’ve gotten here earlier to pick better group members. My alarm didn’t go off and I woke up late!”

“Instructions were clear.”

“I’m glad we worked in groups for this. They had ideas that I hadn’t thought of. It was good to talk through different options before picking our tactic and writing out our message.”