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A Self-Concept Interactionist Model of Social Media Reputation

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1 Introduction

There is a heightened interest in social media and its profound impact on corporate reputation (Becker & Lee, 2019; Horn et al., 2015; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Lariscy et al., 2009) across the disciplines of public relations, marketing, human resources, and business strategy (Pollák et al., 2019). However, the consensus is that works on corporate reputation arose from public relations, and have grown to become a driving force in practice (Pollák et al., 2019; Hutton et al., 2001). The rise in interest in the relationship between social media and corporate reputation has influenced many organisations to invest heavily in social media to purposefully manage their corporate reputation online to appeal to a new generation of customers who are found mostly online.

A number of factors can be adduced to this rising interest in the relationship between social media and corporate reputation. These include

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increased visibility, avoiding reputational damage, improving consumer loyalty and commitment, and remaining competitive across markets. In the past, managing an organisation's reputation was easier as the audience was defined (Pollák et al., 2019) and limited to offline channels. However, in the networked world of today's customers, it is becoming increasingly challenging to effectively maintain an organisation's reputation, especially within online channels. As more people join the social media ecosystem, its ability to significantly affect corporate reputation grows stronger (Carroll, 2015). This creates a set of opportunities and challenges for organisations that consciously manage their reputation. Many corporations now rely more on the instantaneous nature of social media to tell their stories than on the offline channels of corporate communications. This creates a brand personality (Vila-López & Rodríguez-Molina, 2013) which can be cognitively, emotionally, and symbolically evaluated by consumers, thus contributing to the development and management of corporate reputation (Cian & Cervai, 2014). Today, it is recognised and understood that developing a positive corporate reputation is heavily dependent on consumer experience (Shamma & Hassan, 2009), consumer loyalty and commitment (Dehghan et al., 2014), and customer satisfaction. This knowledge has encouraged business leaders to invest in social media.

In this study, the literature review focuses on theoretical underpinnings of diverse viewpoints within existing models of social media and corporate reputation. From a wider perspective, the dominant models in this area of study include the Dijkmans et al. (2015) model of the interconnectivity between organisation–consumer engagement and its impact on perceived corporate reputation. This model is silent on the process of interaction between organisations and customers over social media and how these interactions impact heavily on corporate reputation. Rokka et al.'s (2014) model underscores the role of employees in the social media–reputation equation. Unfortunately, the model is void of customer–organisation interactions. Jankauskaite and Urboniene (2016) model of input and output in media–reputation advances our understanding of this subject, but the authors are silent about how

customer–organisational interactions impact heavily on the social media–reputation equation. Horn et al. (2015) model of social media–reputational threats are silent on customer–organisation interactions. Likewise, Aulá's (2010) viewpoint on how the concept of ambient publicity, through social impact, affects reputation, is silent on customer–organisational interactions. 'Customer engagement' is a dominant concept running through these models.

However, the review of academic literature indicates that models on the relationship between social media and the development of corporate reputation are limited in the African context. A bulk of African literature on reputation management focus majorly on South Africa, and only a limited section discussed reputation management in relation to social media. Models are quite important in research because they set the foundation for investigating pertinent research questions (Miller & Salkind, 2002). Given the need for African businesses to adopt digital technologies and technological changes to create value, and make their businesses cutting-edge, it is, therefore, important that we create models which can be used to answer pertinent research questions.

Against this backdrop, it is safe to assume that limited academic work has been done in mainstream and African literature to explicate the role of the concept of 'interaction' in customer engagement within the social media–reputation equation. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to examine how the self-concept of African managers affects social media communications and the reputation management of firms?

This chapter has been divided into eight principal sections, and this section serves as the first. The second section makes a review of existing social media–reputation models, including the points of commonalities in the models and the absence of the concept of customer engagement in these models. The third section examines the meaning of customer engagement, and section four presents a discussion on the theory of symbolic interactionism and self-concept. The fifth section introduces the self-concept led symbolic interactionism model of social media–reputation. The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings, recommendations, and conclusion, in sections 6 to 8.

2 Social Media: Reputation Models— Review and Analysis

Literature on social media–reputation models considered in this review are published between 2010 and 2020. The review of existing literature indicates that there is an intricate relationship between social media and reputation management. One such literature is the conceptual model by Dijkmans et al. (2015). The model offered an understanding of the correlation between consumers' engagement with an organisation's activities on social media and the perceived corporate reputation. The model sought to establish whether there is a positive relationship between consumer engagement and perception of corporate reputation, consumers' use of social media and engagement in company activities, and the moderating role in determining if engagement and corporate reputation are stronger for customers or non-customers.

Rokka et al.'s (2014) model conceptualises reputation management and social media and highlights the role of employees in this relationship. The researchers presented this framework to highlight the relationship between corporate reputation and branding in social media, the role employees play in this regard, and how these elements play out in various organisations. The model provided a basis for generating empirical insights that demonstrate how corporate reputation management as 'balancing acts' changes from sector to sector.

Jankauskaite and Urboniene's (2016) model underscored the concept of input-output to explicate how corporate reputation emerges through social media. The model focused on content creation, content sharing, and user-generated content as the input. The model also highlighted the roles of engagement and electronic word-of-mouth. It discussed how output, such as brand visibility, improved customer relationship, reduction in cost, and competitive advantage, is used to denote positive outcomes from reputation management.

Horn et al. (2015) opined that reputation threats on social media often manifest from three perspectives. These include the customer, the employee, and the corporate. The model outlines corporate response strategies to prevent the risks from occurring or counteract them in the event of a social media crisis.

Aula (2010) introduced the concept of ambient publicity, defined as interpretations of all manner of discourse about an organisation among stakeholders. It contended that business environments are not just economic in nature but communicative as well. These elements of communication, such as stories, images, and symbols, may pose a risk to an organisation's reputation. Aula's (2010) model highlights the key features of conventional publicity and ambient publicity as they relate to reputation, communication, and stakeholders.

2.1 Points of Commonalities Across the Models

Although there are multiple differences inherent in the models discussed in the previous paragraph, a number of commonalities were found to be running through them. A recurring point of commonality is that employees play a significant role in their employers' social media reputation. Substantiating this viewpoint, Horn et al. (2015) argued that employees pose a risk to an organisation's reputation management either intentionally or not. However, the ability of employees to express negative dissent anonymously on private social media accounts can be very damaging and often spread fast. Rokka et al. (2014) also observed that employees' role in social media is heightened regardless of whether the organisation has a presence on social media or not. As the lines between work and personal lives blur, the researchers explain that organisations need to manage employees fairly and treat them as reputation builders rather than just risks.

Another commonality is customer engagement. Dijkmans et al. (2015) conceptualised engagement on a basic level of cognition and behaviour. Where cognition has to do with the knowledge of a company on social media and behaviour has to do with following these activities online; when these preconditions are fulfilled, further behaviour towards the organisation's activities may develop. In addition, consumer engagement is deemed desirable. Jankauskaite and Urboniene (2016) also regard engagement as attracting, involving, and positively influencing users' emotions. It is a time-consuming but necessary activity.

2.2 Limitation Inherent in the Models: Absence of Customer Engagement

As seen in Table 6.1, the overarching challenge running across all the models discussed in the previous paragraphs has to do with the exact role of customer engagement in reputation management, which is yet to be fully articulated. Given the limited academic literature concerning this subject, our focus in this study looks at how customer engagement plays a critical role in the emergence of social media–reputation conversations. In order to fully explicate the role of customer engagement in this context, we shall briefly discuss the concept of customer engagement in the following section.

3 Customer Engagement in Social Media

In traditional marketing, customer engagement is mostly sales-focused and rooted in product marketing. It usually has to do with keeping customers interested in the product and purchasing it. This relationship is usually established through traditional media, like newspapers and billboards. However, this is not the case on social media. As channels of communication have continued to develop, the role of the customer has become even more significant (Rogers, 2011). Years ago, the power of communication resided predominantly with organisations with limited reactions from customers (Rogers, 2011). Today, with the emergence of the internet together with the interactive channels of social media (Rogers, 2011), the relationship is no longer one-sided with the consumers at the receiving end alone. Now, brands can get real-time feedback, either positive or negative. As customers interact with the brand online, it is important for the organisation to engage these customers. The process of interacting with customers is often called customer engagement.

Table 6.1 Summary of constructs and limitations in social media–reputation models

Models	Constructs/variables	Limitation
Dijkmans et al. (2015) model of the interconnectivity between organisation–consumer engagement and its impact on perceived corporate reputation.	Customer perception of corporate reputation, engagement in company’s social media activities, customer’s intensity of social media use	This model is silent on the process of interaction between organisations and customers over social media and how these interactions impact heavily on corporate reputation.
Rokka et al.’s (2014) model underscores the role of employees in the social media–reputation equation.	Social media, reputation, management	The model is void of customer–organisation interactions.
Jankauskaite and Urboniene (2016) model of input and output in media–reputation	Organisation’s reputation management in social media was divided according to the traditional input–process–output scheme	The authors did not provide justified attention to social media engagement or how customer–organisation interactions impact heavily on the social media–reputation equation.
Horn et al. (2015) model of social media–reputational threats	The independent variables—social media awareness and knowledge levels, social media use, and social media monitoring; dependent variable—reputation management; intervening variable—communication policies.	Silent on customer–organisation interactions.
Aula’s (2010) ambient publicity model	Reputation, stakeholders, communication, conventional, and ambient publicity	Viewpoint on how the concept of ambient publicity, through social impact, affects reputation, is silent on customer–organisation interactions. ‘Customer engagement’ is a dominant concept running through these models.

Source: Developed by authors

3.1 Meaning of Customer Engagement

Authors have defined the meaning of customer engagement as a phenomenon signifying a relationship between business organisations and customers who interpret and make meanings of all corporate communications cues. Essentially, the statements advanced by authors as definitions exemplify the concept of ‘interaction’ as a dominant phenomenon running through the meaning of customer engagement.

A striking point of interest in Table 6.2 is the presence of the concept of ‘interaction’ which runs through all the definitions of customer engagement. Given its presence in these definitions, one can safely assume that the concept of ‘interaction’ is critical to customer engagement.

Table 6.2 The unifying theme of ‘interaction’ in the definitions of customer engagement

Authors	Definition	Unifying theme
Hollebeek et al. (2019)	‘A customer’s motivationally driven, volitional investment of operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills), and operant resources (e.g., equipment) into brand <i>interactions</i> ’.	Interaction
Hollebeek (2011)	‘The level of a customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand <i>interactions</i> ’.	Interaction
Pennington (2012)	‘An <i>interaction</i> between an external consumer/customer (either B2C or B2B) and an organisation (company or brand) through various online or offline channels’.	Interaction
Brodie et al. (2011)	‘A psychological state that occurs by virtue of <i>interactive</i> , co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships’.	Interaction
Gummerus et al. (2012)	‘A consumer-to-firm <i>interactions</i> and consumer-to-consumer communications about the brand’.	Interaction
O’Brien and Toms (2008)	‘A quality of user experiences with technology that is characterised by challenge, aesthetic and sensory appeal, feedback, novelty, <i>interactivity</i> , perceived control and time, awareness, motivation, interest, and affect’.	Interaction

Source: Developed by authors

When customers interact with the brand, they are essentially interacting with the branding team in the organisation, who come up with the messaging and manage the online content. Personality, experience, and skills of the brand manager can affect social media communications and the reputation management of firms.

These variables make up the self-concept which is a construct under the theory of symbolic interactionism. Originally, the concept of ‘interaction’ is not a marketing or relationship management phenomenon. It is rooted in sociological theories, such as the symbolic interactionist (SI) theory. In the following section, we will be examining the theory of SI and self-concept more closely.

4 The Theories of Symbolic Interactionism and Self-Concept

The foundation of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is posited in Mead’s (1934) seminal work. It states that the members of a society are active participants in the determination of their social world. They do not merely react to social situations but rather interpret them and shape them through responses stimulated by those interpretations.

The theory of SI has its origins in social psychology (Aakhus et al., 2014), and its key terms are symbol and action. *Symbols* are the learned stimulus to which the individual attaches meaning, while *actions* are the responses to symbols (Aakhus et al., 2014). The process through which this reaction takes place is called *enactment* (Gopal & Prasad, 2000). In this way, Symbolic interactionism establishes the entwined relationship between the meanings people attach to symbols such as social media and the way they perceive and use the media.

SI de-emphasises the comprehension of a general meaning across different situations over ‘local meanings held in multiple contexts’ (Prasad, 1993). This is due to the underlying assumption that an individual’s particular social situation holds a certain degree of influence on the way they interpret symbols. Different societal contexts exist with the individuals who operate within them having different roles and thus different

expectations from their interaction with their social environment, which are dependent on those roles (Rajao & Marcolino, 2016).

West et al. (2010) distilled Mead's (1934) SI theory into three dominant assumptions. First, individuals construct meaning via the communication process. Second, the idea of self-concept is a motivation for behaviour. Third, a unique relationship exists between individuals and societies. Importantly, this study is interested in the idea of self-concept as a construct under the SI theory and how this concept drives the relationship between customer engagement and the development of corporate reputation.

As a component of SI, self-concept refers to a variety or a collection of beliefs held in one's mind about oneself (Flook et al., 2005; Leflot et al., 2010). It is about finding answers to the question 'Who am I' (Myers, 2009). Broadly, the dominant features of the self-concept theory include personality, skills and abilities, occupation and hobbies, physical characteristics, gender (Rogers, 1959), and experience. Three of these features, namely (1—skills and abilities; 2—occupation and hobbies; and 3—gender) will serve as some of the components for conceptualising a framework that explicates the relationship between customer engagement and the development of corporate reputation. The concepts of personality and character are isolated in this study given that previous academic research (Davies et al., 2001, 2004) on corporate personality and corporate reputation; corporate character and corporate reputation have been fully articulated.

Beyond these three features, we introduce the concept of experience, which is pivotal to customer engagement. It is believed that customer engagement improves customer experience over time (Healy & McDonagh, 2013; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). The perceptions held by customers arising from their experience set the stage for their positive or negative dispositions in the discussions with the representatives of organisations that engage them.

Besides, customer experience is fundamental to defining the degree of relationship between a corporate brand and its customers (Jung & Soo, 2012). Customer experience can either strengthen or weaken customers' relationship with the corporate brand.

5 The Self-Concept Led Symbolic Interactionism Model of Social Media–Reputation

It was argued in the previous section that there is limited knowledge in the mainstream literature on the relationship that subsists between social media and corporate reputation. This section of the study introduces the ‘self-concept led symbolic interactionism model of social media reputation’ as a means of filling the gap in academic literature. The model—see Fig. 6.1—begins with the symbolic interactionist assumption that the society or the environment plays a critical role in defining customer skills and abilities; occupation and hobbies, gender roles and experience.

The components of self-concept impact heavily on managers within organisations. Consequently, one or a combination of these components of self-concept influences the formulation and the development of strategy, communications, and policies, which may reflect through actions and attitudes to customers. In the process, customers react positively or negatively to the cues arising from organisations through social media. When repeated over time, these communication activities pave the way for the development of positive or negative reputations of organisations through social media.

6 Discussion of Findings

Five important findings emerged from this study. First, the review of literature paved the way for the emergence of ‘customer engagement’ as a dominant concept ignored through social media-reputation models. Second, the study located the concept of ‘interaction’ as a dominant theme recurring through the meaning of customer engagement. The study expounds on the concept of interaction as a critical phenomenon for understanding the meaning of customer engagement. Third, the study expands the frontiers of academic literature by introducing the theories of self-concept and symbolic interactionism into the relationship between social media and reputation. Fourth, the study added the

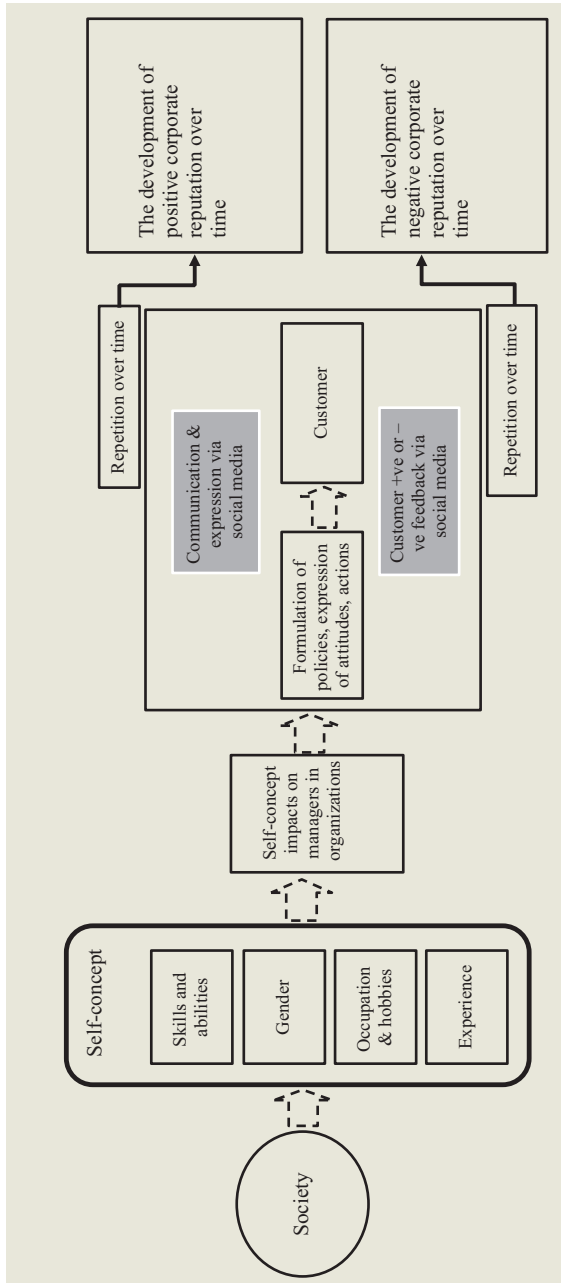


Fig. 6.1 A self-concept led symbolic interactionism model of social media-reputation. (Source: Developed by authors)

concept of experience to the existing components of self-concept and argues that the concept of experience is pivotal to customer engagement. The authors argue that customer engagement advances customer experience and perceptions held in the minds of customers; following their experience in the consumption of a brand offering sets the stage for perceptions which informs engagement or otherwise. Fifth, the authors introduce the self-concept led symbolic interactionism model of social media reputation. The model gives insight into how the concept of self composed of 'skills and abilities', 'occupation and hobbies', 'gender', and 'experience' heavily impacts managers who formulate strategies and policies communicated to customers through social media. The model highlights the channelling of feedback from customers to managers and how the repetition of this communication process, over time, paves the way for the development of positive or negative corporate reputation.

This study contributes to marketing and public relations research on reputation management by arguing theoretically that self-concept can impact brand reputation via social media communications. There is currently a dearth of data in African research relating to reputation management and social media; however, for future research, we recommend that the model can be tested using African organisations.

7 Recommendations for African Managers

Africa is taking a leap in social media usage due to the growing youth population and middle-income class. Between 2014 and 2016, the number of Facebook users across Africa increased from 100 million to 120 million (Parke, 2016); by December 2020, this number had increased to well over 230 million (Boakye, 2021). In order to take advantage of this growing population, organisations need to hire qualified managers whose skills, experience, beliefs, personality, and goals (elements of self-concept) align with the organisation's social media adoption intentions.

To improve customer engagement and reputation management, managers need to have in place a social media strategy. As Aula (2010) noted, social media–reputation management isn't just about putting out fires, but also finding ways to boost brand perception to followers and

customers. In order to do this, every brand needs its own social media strategy. This should align with the business aims and strategy and highlight how the organisation wishes to represent the brand on social media. Examples of effective social media strategies are good content creation, getting the right influencers, community creation, campaign planning, and storytelling, to mention a few (Adeola et al., 2020).

Another aspect to consider is monitoring and listening tools which help the brand stay abreast of discussions that customers are having about the brand. This is highly important to capitalise on positive engagement or respond swiftly to negative feedback. There should also be established guidelines for creating content or responding to customers, especially during crises, and these guidelines should coincide with the organisational values. An organisation whose value is 'timely response' should not be responding to customer messages hours later, for example.

As mentioned earlier, employees are vital corporate assets in formulating, enhancing, and sustaining a positive corporate reputation (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001), and senior managers have a great role to play in ensuring a favourable corporate image. In carrying out this responsibility, companies must take cognisance of self-concept components and how it impacts the senior managers, consequently influencing the development of public relations and communication strategy.

In Africa, societal norms and values play a part in stereotypes and biases (Ofoha, 2013). For instance, gender bias and stereotypes can have an impact on strategy, which would affect how the business communicates on social media, which can affect reputation positively or negatively. The implication is that companies must put in place service standards, integrated communications mechanisms, and social media–reputation management systems to facilitate customer engagement and enhance social media–reputation management. This would ensure coherence and harmony in communication, reduce biases arising from self-concepts, and promote shared identity. Messages on social media platforms must consistently aim at developing and promoting a positive corporate reputation over time. This must be a deliberate act and can be achieved through coaching of managers and other employees to promote positive attitudes and forgo negative attitudes arising from self-concept inherent in the society.

8 Conclusion

This study merges theory with practice by introducing a self-concept and symbolic interactionism theory of social media and corporate reputation. In addition to exploring the concept of ‘customer engagement’, the authors also expand the framework of self-concept by adding the notion of ‘experience’ to it. The knowledge generated through the introduction of the self-concept led symbolic interactionism model of social media reputation is limited given that it is conceptual and void of empirical evidence. Empirical based research in future will strengthen academic literature on this subject. This chapter adds to the literature on social media and corporate reputation management through the contributions highlighted in the previous paragraph. Specifically, the self-concept led symbolic interactionism model of social media reputation makes a significant contribution and gives a non-positivistic dimension to the study of social media and corporate reputation management.

We hope that business managers responsible for social media and corporate reputation in Africa will find the ideas generated from our model useful. It is hoped that our model will draw the attention of business managers to how ‘skills and abilities’, ‘occupation and hobbies’, ‘gender’, and ‘experience’ impact heavily on the formulation of policies which, if communicated through social media, repeatedly impacts on the management and development of corporate reputation.

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