Exploring the influence of social media on digital reputation and e-commerce: Insights from Saudi SMEs

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Abstract: This study examines the influence of social media platforms on the online reputation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Saudi Arabia, with a broader focus on their impact on e-commerce. Additionally, it explores the strategies SMEs employ to effectively manage their online reputation across different social media platforms. A qualitative, interview-based approach was utilized to gain deeper insights into the response strategies adopted by SMEs on social media. Interviews were conducted with experts from Saudi SMEs, and thematic analysis was applied to interpret the collected data. The study highlights key strategies businesses use to build and maintain their online reputation on social media. The thematic analysis provides practical guidance for SMEs on effectively leveraging social media platforms to enhance their digital presence and engagement. This research aims to advance the understanding of online reputation and its significant role in shaping business success, particularly for SMEs. By identifying effective strategies, the study contributes to the broader discussion on digital reputation management in the e-commerce sector.

Keywords: Crisis man-agement, Online reputation, Response strategy, SME reputation, Social media crisis.

1. Introduction

In today's digital age, reputation management has become essential due to the significant influence of online platforms and the potential consequences of public opinion on individuals, businesses, and institutions. The goal of online reputation management is to ensure that the information presented aligns with the desired image of the organization or brand [1]. Online reputation management involves a strategic effort by businesses or organizations to influence and manage the information that appears when people search for a brand or corporate name on social media platforms. Consumers are more inclined to choose businesses with a strong corporate reputation, demonstrating a willingness to pay higher prices for their products and services, according to Graham and Bansal [2] cited in Dijkmans, et al. [3]. Aula [4] contended that social media platforms do not follow a one-way engagement model but rather function as unregulated spaces for interaction, potentially posing a risk of reputational damage for companies. As a result, managing corporate reputation has become increasingly complex due to the surge in online discussions that are challenging to control.

Managing online reputation as intangible assets is especially valuable for enterprises in the context of their social media activities [3]. However, the rise of social media has led to significant changes in communication, collaboration, consumption, and innovation among individuals. This development has profoundly impacted the business landscape, representing one of the most significant outcomes of information technology on commercial activities [5]. Presently, many organizations actively leverage social media platforms to engage with various stakeholders, including customers and affiliated entities. Having a presence on these platforms is now considered a crucial element of advanced strategic planning [6]. Thus, it is crucial for SME owners to proactively create a comprehensive reputation

strategy. This strategy should specify the roles and responsibilities of team members, outline procedures for handling various types of emergencies, and ensure consistent communication across all social media platforms. By preparing for potential crises ahead of time, organizations can respond quickly and effectively, thereby reducing the risk of harm to the brand's reputation.

However, there is still a lack of understanding regarding the long-term effects of social media, especially concerning the management of potential negative feedback [7]. While experts have made considerable progress in understanding how social media activities during a crisis can affect the image of SMEs, the complex and ever-changing nature of this phenomenon necessitates ongoing research. Majority of studies have concentrated on examining the impact of social media activities on reputation using data from a single platform. This research overlooked the distinct capabilities, tools, and features of different platforms, which are crucial considerations for devising an effective reputation management strategy [8-10]. This underscores the necessity for research that thoroughly investigates the effects of utilizing various platforms alongside appropriate strategies. For this reason, several research suggestions suggested the need for more holistic examination on studying multiple social media platforms to identify platform-specific response strategies that can enhance business reputation. Thus, this research will undertake a comprehensive and meticulous examination of how SME owners' responses on various social media platforms may affect their firm's reputation during times of crisis. This research will provide valuable insights that can guide SMEs in effectively managing their reputation across multiple social media platforms during crises.

For this study, a particular focus area is to explore the impact of social media platforms on the online reputation of SMEs within the Saudi Arabian context, alongside identifying the strategies employed by businesses to effectively manage their online reputation across various social media platforms. With the government 2030 vison, social media is already a part of Saudi Arabia's digital landscape, and its significance is only expected to grow. 94.30 percent of Saudi Arabia's population, use social media, a significant increase over the previous ten years. By 2024, there will be 35.33 million social media users worldwide, up from 7.60 million in 2014 [11]. With the country's digital transformation strategy and the encouragement of companies and organizations to do so, it is necessary to study how companies formulate their reputation strategy faced from various social media platforms.

This study contributes to the existing research on online business reputation by examining the intricacies of reputation management across various social media platforms. Its significance lies in providing guidance to SMEs on effectively utilizing and strategizing the management of social media platforms to build and oversee their online reputation. The rationale for undertaking this research stems from the need to advance the understanding of online reputation and its significant impact on businesses, particularly SMEs.

2. literature Review

2.1. Social Media

Social media encompasses digital platforms that enable interpersonal connections, information sharing, and communication among individuals. Pütter [12] described social media in the business realm as the strategic use of digital platforms to improve communication, engage with clients, and enhance brand recognition. Additionally, the emergence of social media has profoundly changed the ways in which people communicate, collaborate, consume, and create content.

The depiction of information technology's transformative effects on companies, both internally and externally, is deemed significant Aral, et al. [13]. Dong and Wu [14] defined social media as an online community that offers organizations a diverse and abundant pool of resources, which can be leveraged to foster creativity within the organization.

Social media platforms are valuable tools for acquiring new customers, staying in touch with existing ones, and promoting new products, promotions, offers, and events. This allows companies to create a comprehensive and effective public relations strategy tailored to their specific needs [15]. Different social networking sites offer various features for business promotion. On some platforms,

users can share multiple types of content, such as hyperlinks, videos, images, fan pages, groups, and advertisements [15].

2.1.1. Twitter In Business (X)

As stated by Curran, et al. [15] Twitter stands out with its distinct framework compared to YouTube and Facebook, yet it holds significant potential for fostering an innovative ecosystem involving individuals, corporations, and media entities. This potential is evident in its facilitation of interactive dialogues on relevant topics. Initially focused on individuals sharing immediate experiences, Twitter has expanded its capabilities to enable global information dissemination, brand discussions, and rapid news distribution. This evolution is reflected in its current tagline: "The best method to discover new developments within your domain" [15]. However, Twitter has recently undergone a major transformation and rebranded as the X platform. This change could have both positive and negative implications for how businesses engage with their audience, develop their brand, and enhance their performance.

2.1.2. Snapchat In Business

Snapchat has become a widely recognized social media platform, particularly known for its video content and unique features enabling users to share ephemeral stories lasting 24 hours [16]. In the corporate realm, businesses leverage Snapchat for diverse marketing initiatives. This application of the Snapchat platform for marketing, branding, consumer interaction, and communication objectives is commonly referred to as "Snapchat in business.". As per Abbas [16] in Kuwait, Snapchat has gained notable recognition as a valuable marketing asset. This approach provides a unique and innovative method for promoting products and services of businesses. Through Snapchat, both individuals and businesses can utilize various features, such as photo and video capturing, text and drawing incorporation, and the option to distribute content privately or as public stories. Consequently, this platform enables the creation of captivating and compelling marketing content.

2.1.3. Instagram in Business

The photo-sharing platform offered by Instagram serves as a cost-effective and impactful marketing tool for enterprises. This platform enables businesses to effectively showcase their brand, engage with customers, and improve their online visibility for search engines [17]. Instagram's interactive features facilitate direct engagement, fostering the development of relationships and building brand loyalty. By sharing behind-the-scenes content, businesses humanize their brand and establish genuine connections with modern consumers who prioritize authentic interactions. The increasing popularity of Instagram underscores its significance as a crucial platform for businesses looking to expand their audience and enhance their online presence, highlighting the growing importance of social media in marketing [17].

2.1.4. TikTok In Business

As observed by Weimann and Masri [18] TikTok, an app developed by the Chinese company ByteDance, has amassed a significant user base, comprising both young individuals and adults. This platform allows users to create and share short lip-sync videos and memes, offering a variety of innovative and engaging features. With its rapid expansion, TikTok has become the seventh-most downloaded app over the past decade [18]. Notably, businesses have recognized TikTok's popularity as an advertising tool for their brands, as indicated by several researchers. Araujo, et al. [19] for example, have explored how brands utilize TikTok videos to effectively engage with their customers, providing comprehensive information about their products and services. They highlighted that TikTok content created by corporations is characterized by its emotional appeal, entertainment value, and informative content

2.1.5. Facebook in Business

Facebook, much like other social media platforms, provides users with the ability to share photos, videos, and information [15]. The shift in advertising strategies from traditional mediums such as newspapers, cinema, and radio to digital platforms like Facebook has been noted [15]. Before the rise of new social media platforms, Guidry, et al. [20] emphasized Facebook's effectiveness as a marketing tool for businesses and its superior capacity for customer engagement. Moreover, businesses have come to recognize Facebook as a valuable tool for effectively reaching and connecting with their customer base.

2.2. Online Reputation Management in Social Media

Gu and Ye [21] noted the increasing impact of online social media, prompting companies to adopt a proactive approach in engaging with consumers through these platforms. Many organizations prioritize managing replies in their initial engagement with online social media, actively addressing customer feedback related to the firm, its products, and services. This section will focus on online reputation management on social media and its influence on other aspects such as consumer loyalty, financial performance, and investors' trust. Jackson [22] discovered a positive correlation between organizations' reputation and their financial performance. The study demonstrated that a strong reputation could offer several benefits for companies, such as informing consumers about product quality, alerting investors, and providing more opportunities in capital markets.

Sadeghi, et al. [23] found that organizational reputation has a substantial impact on e-satisfaction, e-trust, and consumer loyalty. As a result, social media platforms have become increasingly essential in the marketing and advertising strategies of businesses worldwide. Many companies are now exploring ways to engage with their clients through social media marketing campaigns [7]. Moreover, Rana and Arora [7] emphasized the potential of social media advertising to raise consumer awareness, enhance consumer knowledge, influence consumer perceptions, and stimulate consumer purchasing behavior. Additionally, leveraging social media can contribute to the development of a strong and distinctive brand image.

In today's business landscape, organizations increasingly rely on online social networks to improve their overall operational efficiency [7]. Consequently, it is crucial for business owners to prioritize reputation management as a fundamental component of their comprehensive strategic approach.

2.3. Crisis Management and Social Media

Crisis management on social media is intricately connected to an organization's control over its image, which directly influences its overall reputation. Through effective communication and crisis management strategies, the extent of reputational damage can be significantly mitigated. The statements made by organizations during a crisis carry profound implications for their reputation and can have long-term consequences [24]. However, it's crucial for organizations to recognize that their actions must align with their ethical principles, and their communication efforts should meet audience expectations, rather than solely serving their own business objectives [4].

Within the realm of social media and its profound influence on business reputation, the expressions of contentment and concern conveyed by customers through their feedback play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and outcomes. As highlighted by Khan, et al. [25] the importance of customer satisfaction in upholding a firm's reputation and cultivating customer loyalty is paramount, especially in dynamic marketplaces where a company's reputation hinges significantly on customer satisfaction. Additionally, their research suggests that customer satisfaction serves as a mediator in the relationship between customer relationship management, corporate reputation, and customer allegiance.

From the provided information, it's evident that customer responses are pivotal in influencing perceptions and outcomes in the realm of social media's impact on business reputation. Key factors such as customer satisfaction and corporate image greatly influence how customers respond to service failures and their overall perception of a company's products and communication. This investigation

underscores the intricate relationship between customer reactions, corporate image, and the dynamic landscape of customer loyalty and satisfaction across different market conditions.

In a different line of research focusing on customer responses, the significance of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) via social media emerges as it elucidates the intricate dynamics between online consumer interactions and the establishment of a business's reputation. eWOM is defined in various ways; some researchers describe it as recommendations exchanged between customers Barreto [26] while Aditi, et al. [27] highlight that through word of mouth (WOM), products and services can be promoted effectively via viral marketing, as customers enthusiastically share or advocate for offerings with others. Aditi, et al. [27] assert that the impact of Word of Mouth is significant in shaping consumer interest in purchasing as well as their perception of the brand's image. Therefore, it is crucial for businesses to acknowledge the importance of effectively managing and leveraging Word of Mouth to optimize these influential dimensions of consumer behavior and brand reputation.

In another area of research focusing on customer responses, the importance of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) via social media becomes evident as it sheds light on the complex interactions between online consumer engagements and the formation of a business's reputation. The concept of eWOM has been defined in various ways; some scholars refer to it as customer-to-customer recommendations [26] while Aditi, et al. [27] argue that through word of mouth (WOM), businesses can effectively promote products and services via viral marketing, as customers enthusiastically engage in discussions or endorse offerings to others.

2.4. Response Strategies on Social Media

Several studies have delved into how businesses respond to and mitigate crises within social media. For instance, Sun, et al. [28] conducted a comprehensive examination of the impacts of social media crisis response strategies on electronic word of mouth (eWOM), resulting in a profound understanding. They employed methodologies such as topic modeling and sentiment analysis, testing them on general manufacturing firms. The research findings offer valuable managerial insights aimed at enhancing customer perceptions.

Moreover, the study reveals that implementing an accommodative response strategy leads to a higher level of overall eWOM compared to an indifferent response strategy. However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, including external factors such as organizational specifics and crisis type, as well as the dynamic nature of crisis response. Therefore, the study's conclusions should be applied cautiously, considering both its limitations and the constantly evolving nature of the social media landscape.

In the study conducted by Al Balawi, et al. [29] they examined how a brand's crisis impacts the effectiveness of its customer relationship management (CRM) strategies implemented on social media platforms. Specifically, the study focused on the effects of the United Airlines crisis on three key aspects of social CRM efforts: the provision of relevant information, timely responsiveness, and attentiveness to customer needs. The research methodology utilized a natural experiment setting, and data was collected from the Twitter platform. The results of the study revealed that the brand crisis heightened the emphasis on providing informative content. However, it concurrently diminished priority given to timely responsiveness and attentiveness to customer needs. In addition to these findings, the study has notable limitations. Firstly, it predominantly focused on prominent companies, potentially neglecting smaller or lesser-known brands. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings to such entities may be limited. Furthermore, the researchers acknowledged the necessity for caution when extending the conclusions of this study to alternative social media platforms.

In their studies, Lappeman, et al. [9] and Loureiro, et al. [30] set out to investigate effective crisis strategies for addressing the onslaught of negative word-of-mouth (WOM). The first study aimed to evaluate how a company's response policy during an online firestorm impacts its perceived brand reputation among observers. Specifically, it explored the relationship between response policies and brand reputation within the context of an online firestorm. The findings of the study indicated that

when companies were faced with the decision of responding collectively to a group of complaints or individually addressing each complaint, individualized responses resulted in a more favorable brand reputation. Despite the extensive research in digital marketing for promotional purposes, negative aspects of social media, such as online firestorms, have received limited attention. The methodology employed an online survey of 300 participants on the Facebook platform, with the focus on a mobile phone manufacturer in South Africa. However, the study had several limitations, including the exclusive use of Facebook for the survey, a relatively small sample size, and reliance on a single measure for assessing brand reputation. While the findings contribute significantly to crisis management knowledge, it is important to acknowledge and consider the limitations identified in the study.

The second study delved into the comparative effectiveness of corrective actions versus apologies in handling customer complaints, particularly their impact on brand attitude. Additionally, the research explored how the choice between corrective action and apology affects customers' attitudes toward the brand. By delving into these dynamics, the study aimed to offer insights into effective complaint management strategies and their ramifications for brand perception. The study utilized a survey encompassing diverse demographic groups, including public-sector employees and students in Portugal who are active on the Facebook platform. The results indicated that brand attitudes, influenced by the chosen crisis response strategy, significantly influenced individuals' intentions to refrain from spreading negative word-of-mouth (WOM). Apologies emerged as the preferred response strategy overall. These findings underscore the importance of meticulously selecting and implementing crisis response strategies to mitigate the proliferation of negative WOM and protect brand reputation. It's essential to acknowledge various limitations within this study, including the possibility of sample selection bias, which might skew towards frequent Facebook users. Moreover, the study may have oversimplified the intricate nature of crisis response strategies. While contributing to our understanding of crisis management, further research is warranted to expand platform inclusion comprehensively and delve into the factors influencing decision-making regarding response strategies.

In the study by Wang, et al. [31], it is proposed that companies adopting a defensive corporate response strategy, along with incorporating emotionally framed announcements, tend to receive more positive electronic word-of-mouth (E-WoM) from consumers. This underscores the effectiveness of blending defensive approaches with emotionally resonant messaging in fostering favorable consumer discussions and online recommendations. Employing an experimental vignette methodology, the authors analyzed Twitter content, specifically examining 21,960 consumer comments from 50 UK food retailers. The study aimed to explore how corporate responses to service failures during the COVID-19 crisis influence electronic word-of-mouth (E-WoM) and trust recovery within the context of lockdown. The research, drawing from multiple data sources, investigates the impact of companies' actions and communication during the unprecedented crisis on customer discussions and trust restoration. While the study provides pertinent relevance, robust methodology, and practical insights, its limitations include limited generalizability due to its focus on a single country and industry. Additionally, it may overlook certain consequences of crisis communication and relies solely on Twitter data. While offering valuable insights into pandemic-era crisis management, cautious interpretation is advised when applying the findings to diverse contexts.

The study by Gannon, et al. [32] explored the efficacy of service recovery strategies, such as firm-level apologies and feedback loops, in cultivating customer forgiveness and reinstating trust post-service failures. Using mixed methods, the research gathers data from a singular platform within the Iranian food delivery sector. Survey findings highlight the substantial impact of these recovery strategies on fostering forgiveness and rebuilding trust subsequent to service mishaps. Furthermore, gender disparities are uncovered through multi-group analyses. Furthermore, customer interviews complement the quantitative results by emphasizing the necessity of proactive, transparent, and immediate recovery protocols to prevent adverse consumer reactions and alleviate emotions like anger and frustration arising from service failures. The practical implications underscore the importance of swift and proactive rehabilitation procedures. However, it's essential to recognize that the study's

conclusions are context-specific, confined to Iran, and reliant solely on data from a particular company. Therefore, caution is warranted when seeking to apply these findings to other settings.

Yuan, et al. [10] conducted research to explore the influence of consumer engagement in online brand communities during product crises on cognitive responses and behavioral reactions toward the brand's recovery efforts. Their findings showed a dual impact: consumer engagement directly affects repurchase intention and also indirectly influences it through the mediating factor of consumer forgiveness. On the contrary, the study revealed that the brand's super-recovery efforts have a limited direct impact on repurchase intention. Instead, its primary influence is mediated through consumer forgiveness. These findings emphasize the crucial role of consumer engagement and forgiveness in mitigating the negative repercussions of brand scandals. Thus, actively fostering customer engagement within the brand's online communities emerges as a vital strategy to counteract the adverse effects of such crises. The research was conducted using data from Samsung's online brand community in China during the Galaxy Note 7 battery crisis. However, it's important to acknowledge certain limitations, such as the study's focus on a single crisis event and its exclusive examination of a specific type of crisis response. While offering valuable insights, these limitations underscore the necessity for further research encompassing diverse crisis scenarios and response strategies.

Roshan, et al. [8] have provided a valuable contribution to understanding organizational crisis communication, particularly in the context of social media usage. Their research offers practical insights for crisis managers by delineating six distinct crisis response approaches and providing a comprehensive categorization of social media crisis messages that stakeholders may communicate to organizations during critical situations. By scrutinizing seventeen leading Australian organizations' activities on Facebook and Twitter, the research uncovered a notable lack of awareness regarding social media's role as a crisis communication tool. Many of these organizations either ignored stakeholder messages or adopted crisis response strategies that could exacerbate reputational risks. However, it's essential to recognize the study's limitations, such as its narrow time frame, exclusive platform focus, and limited geographic scope, when interpreting the results. Further research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of crisis communication in the digital age.

In a study led by Crijns, et al. [33] the central focus was on analyzing how organizations respond to both positive and negative consumer comments on crisis-related posts and identifying the most effective strategies they employ. The findings indicated that personalized responses from organizations to customer remarks on crisis message posts have a positive impact on the organization's reputation. This positive effect is attributed to the enhancement of the perception of a conversational human voice (CHV), which subsequently reduces consumer mistrust. While the study demonstrates practical applicability and well-defined research objectives, limitations include potential sentiment manipulation in comments, a narrow focus on a single platform (Facebook), and limited exploration of response timing.

In a recent study conducted by Sun and Li [34] enhancing strategies and diminishing strategies were identified as the most important strategies in improving public perceptions and containing the health crisis. This study has some limitations such as: the study examined the influence of multiple strategies on a single platform, without considering the role of other platforms and the strategies employed on them. Furthermore, the study adopted a citizen user perspective, without elucidating the managers' or owners' point of view or the rationale behind their choice to utilize these strategies on YouTube rather than other platforms. In order to gain insight into the manner in which Chinese organizations respond to crises through social media, researchers Chen, et al. [35] conducted a study utilizing social-mediated crisis communication model. Despite the belief that the use of multiple platforms is essential for effective crisis management, the study focused exclusively on Chinese social media applications, such as WeChat and Weibo.

In summary, the influence of social media on a company's reputation is a noteworthy area of inquiry. Nevertheless, the enduring implications of social media on corporate reputation, particularly in managing crises and negative feedback, are still not fully comprehended [7]. The preceding sections

highlight various limitations in understanding the impact of social media activities during crises on SME reputation and strategies for managing online presence.

Many studies have primarily examined the impact of social media activities on reputation by analyzing data from a single platform, such as Facebook Lappeman, et al. [9] or focusing on platforms like Twitter [31]. However, this approach overlooks the distinct capabilities, tools, and features of each platform, which are crucial considerations for devising an effective reputation management strategy.

Sun, et al. [28] advocated for flexibility in crisis response strategies, emphasizing the importance of avoiding a rigid approach. They suggested that exploring the effects of employing multiple or alternating strategies could provide valuable insights. This underscored the necessity for comprehensive research that investigated the impact of various platforms alongside suitable strategies. Similarly, other researchers such as Al Balawi, et al. [29] and Crijns, et al. [33] recommended studying multiple social media platforms to uncover response strategies tailored to each platform, which could bolster business reputation. Moreover, Yuan, et al. [10] proposed examining diverse response strategies, including denial, excuse, justification, recompense, and apology, to understand their effects. Additionally, Roshan, et al. [8] highlighted the absence of an analysis of the reputational consequences of replies in their research, underscoring the necessity to investigate the impact of reactions on corporate reputation.

Despite the increasing volume of literature on reputation management on social media platforms during crises, there remains a notable lack of comprehensive research specifically exploring the impact of SME owners' responses to consumer comments on multiple social media platforms during crises on their business reputation. Therefore, conducting a thorough analysis of how SME owners' reactions on different social media platforms may influence their firm's reputation during crises is imperative.

3. Methodology

3.1. Philosophical Approach and Research Design

The aim of this study is understanding how the SMEs formulate their response strategy on different social media platforms. The foundation of the current research was the analysis of the meanings assigned to the opinions and perspectives spoken by business owners. Therefore, the interpretive epistemological approach served as the study's foundation. Interpretivism, which places emphasis on individual understanding and interpretation, are two schools of thought in epistemology [36]. The current investigation utilized an inductive methodology because it was expected that this strategy would produce new interpretations that could advance the field.

3.2. Research Method and Data Collection

The research used a qualitative research methodology to get further into the subject and gain thorough knowledge. This methodology was in line with the main goal of the study. This study concentrated on the perspectives of business owners concerning the impact of social media on their business performance and how they manage their online reputation. To achieve this objective, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the data collection method. Saunders, et al. [36] argued that employing a semi-structured interview approach provides a reliable means of gathering data when examining business owners' views on a particular issue. This methodology allowed for flexibility in questioning and facilitated follow-up inquiries to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. Additionally, it enabled the interviewer to obtain feedback from business owners through open-ended questions about their strategies, thoughts, and beliefs.

3.3. Sampling and population

The researchers employed a criteria-based strategy to establish specific criteria for participant selection, ensuring that the information provided would effectively address the research question. The selection of participants was guided by three specific criteria:
1. Social Media Platforms: The company must use at least three different social media platforms.

2. Company Size: The company must be categorized as an SME (Small and Medium-sized Enterprise).

3. The Owner/Company Representative: The participant must hold a strategic-level position or a management role in online reputation management.

Six respondents would represent an appropriate sample size for this study. The rationale for selecting six participants was to provide sufficient depth of insight into the interviewees' opinions. Furthermore, given that data saturation was achieved in this research, there was no need to collect further data [37]. Each response was given a unique code, P1 through P6, in order to respect ethical considerations.

3.4. Interview Procedure

The interview questions were developed based on earlier research studies. Two pilot studies were carried out before the primary interview data was gathered. The purpose of this process was to guarantee the validity and dependability of the interview questions. Some questions were changed as a result of the feedback, with some of the inquiry being rephrased. The interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams Application according to the participants' requests and also to facilitate the process of recording the interviews and saving the transcripts to be used in the analysis with ease.

In the first session of interviews, the researcher gave the participants a thorough rundown of the study's goals and explained why they were important to the research. For ethical consideration, each participant received an information sheet to read and then signed a consent form. General demographics questions were collected such as company sector, participants' corporate position, number of platforms in their companies, and experience in social media management. The characteristics of the interview sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the Interview Sample.

Interviewee	Gender	Managerial level	Experience	Social media	Industry
P1	Female	Senior social media supervisor	2	TikTok-Instagram-X	Fashion Products
P2	Female	Social Media Management Specialist	3	X-Instagram-Snapchat	e-commerce
P3	Female	Social media manager	3	Instagram-WhatsApp-Snapchat	Cosmetics
P4	Male	Social media manager	2	TikTok-Instagram-X	Restaurant
P5	Male	Social media manager	4	TikTok-Instagram-X	Coffee
P6	Male		2	X-WhatsApp-Instagram	Transportation

The researcher then went on to ask the main interview questions. For ensuring proper documentation of discussions and interactions for in-depth analysis, the research used the Stream function inside the Microsoft Teams Application to extract the transcript and capture the exact words from participants during virtual meetings.

3.5. Data Transcription and Translation

Arabic was used for communication during the entire interview. Nonetheless, because English is their second language, the respondents were asked questions in that language. The researcher ensured that the English translation accurately expressed the semantic content of the original Arabic text by using available methods to transcribe the interview notes and recordings into Arabic and then translate them into English. As a result, the final transcript included all relevant information on the research question.

3.6. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then translated. Thematic analysis was conducted, and coding was used as the basic analytic strategy, following Braun and Clarke [38] guidelines. Their method involves different phases:

1- Transferring the row data to text. The researcher converted the audios transcript to text transcript. Thus, it is easy to do analysis and follow the data.

2- Categorizing the concepts into groups. The relevant comments from the text were grouped.

3- Adding themes to each group. Based on the purpose of each group, specific subthemes were given.

4- Based on the research objectives, naming the subthemes. The correlated subthemes were grouped under associated themes.

5- Writing report based on the above steps. Final analysis report was produced.

4. Findings and Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of social media platforms on the online reputation of SMEs within the Saudi Arabian context, alongside identifying the strategies employed by businesses to effectively manage their online reputation across various social media platforms. This section represents the findings based on the interviewees' answers. Two themes were found from the participants data. The first theme states that using multi-platform crisis response is the most important strategy. The second theme states that the nature of the strategy plays a role in favoring one platform over another.

4.1. Theme 1: Utilization of Multiple Platforms

The study investigated the participants' opinions regarding the use of various social media sites and what are the response strategies for using different platforms. The result shows that every participant uses at least three social media sites to maintain their online reputation. Most of the interviewees agree that using numerous platforms as a tool to facilitate easy consumer interaction during times of crisis. In addition, they all stressed how important it is to use a range of applications, regardless of the business, that would help in maintain their reputation online.

This supports the conclusion that utilizing a variety of social media platforms can significantly reduce the impact of a business crisis. Many scholars have underlined this fact, including [39, 40]. They argue that in order to prepare for future organizational crises, it is critical to develop expertise and maintain a strong presence across numerous social media platforms. Also, participants proposed that using a variety of platforms makes it easier to build stronger relationships with a wider range of consumers, which makes it possible to effectively address their concerns. Their personal experience gave rise to this concept when they observed that a certain user base or generation was drawn to each platform. In a similar vein, Chen, et al. [35] has highlighted the significance of employing a multifaceted array of communication channels to disseminate information or strategies such apologies to customers.

" *They felt modern multi-platform technologies made it easier for them to keep an eye on and reply to client feedback. Because of the owner's prompt action and open lines of communication, the matter was resolved to the satisfaction of the customer.* " Participant (P6)

"*A customer discovered a problem with the car and immediately contacted us via WhatsApp to get a solution. We then sent him a letter of transparency from X, and after reading it, he accepted the promotion and understood our position.*" Participant (P1)

"*... in the emergency situation of an incorrect product, we got a customer complaint on X. We addressed that by expressing regret and instructing him to send his contact information in order to get a special promotion. The customer then follows us on all of our platforms and becomes a devoted customer*". Participant (P5)

4.2. Theme 2: The Nature of the Tactic

All participants agreed that there is a relationship between the nature of the strategy and the type of platform used, meaning that not every strategy can be used on all platforms. Through their experience and having their own statistics for each platform or general statistics, they choose the strategy accordingly. Although they might use all strategies across all platforms, they prefer to use a particular strategy on a particular platform. This depends to some extent on the number of followers and also the nature of the interactive activity for each platform.

However, most participants agreed that the best course of action was to start with an apology strategy with real-time feedback and then go on to an offering strategy as a useful crisis management tactic.

4.3. Apology Strategy

Referring back to the literature, Roshan, et al. [8] discovered that the first step in crisis management to reduce possible harm might be the use of apologetic tactics. This result is also consistent with research by Balaji, et al. [41] referenced by Loureiro, et al. [30] which found that a general apology is often accepted as a positive sign of a company's commitment to fairly managing a customer's complaint. Indeed, this study proved this result in addition to the most important platform that participants use to implement this strategy.

The majority of participants agreed that the X platform, with its large user base and quick response times, is the best application for putting apologetic ideas into practice. From their perspective, they consider Twitter to be an official platform for apology policy and attribute this to the fact that the nature of society in Saudi Arabia views Twitter as an official platform and reference. Also, the nature of society is a determining factor in the type of platform that is established. This outcome was achieved by a number of researchers such as Khan, et al. [42] and Zhu, et al. [43]

"... following a food crisis, we attempted to make customers satisfied as soon as possible. We believed that Twitter is the most popular platform for...and we quickly apologized via tweet there" Participant (P4)

" We look at social media statistics frequently, Twitter is the most common reference point for our customers… that's why we prefer twitter " Participant (P2)

In addition to twitter, participants discovered that TikTok is a great way to share amusing videos, informal apology and offers a casual and interesting way to keep customers engaged in emergency situations.

"We utilize TikTok as a platform to... and create entertaining videos, and the outcome is that our customers feel comfortable interacting with us and accepting our error of using the incorrect promotion and..." Participant (P5)

4.4. Strategy of Offerings

This study also found that offering discounts at the beginning of a crisis can minimize the negative impact on the company. Similar patterns of results were found in Sun, et al. [28] who backed the idea that businesses should make offers to clients in the early stages of a crisis in order to satisfy them. Also, this study found that using Instagram is the most media to communicate the offer with customer. The reason from the participants' point of view was Instagram's visuals such as pictures resolution attract the customer more than any other platform [35].

As it was mentioned earlier in literature that compensation is a decent policy to contain the crisis, this study did not find a significant difference but noted that the utilization of this strategy is very rare according to the research sample. This finding contradicts previous studies such as Yuan, et al. [10] and Gannon, et al. [32]who among other things found that compensation was a particularly main tactic for handling crisis situations.

*" We offered a special deal through Instagram customer that customers may utilize at any time and at any branch of our coffee shop as one of our ways to make them happy when the issue recently arose…"*Participant (P5)

"*Most of our crises we found that the best solution was to offer a discount to the customer quickly... Sometimes the customer wants an offer more than an apology…colorful image on Instagram was good solution for us* " Participant (P1).

"*… furthermore, the full compensation approach is a good one because we observed its benefits; many customers accepted our offer of full recompense for their meal and thought it was a nice one.* ". Participant (P4)

4.5. Real-Time Feedback Strategy

From the results, it is clear that using real time strategy on social media is an effective in maintaining the crisis. Some participants adopted a real-time feedback technique, which allowed them to reply to multiple clients at once, regardless of the type of platform. They discovered that this was a useful tactic at difficult times. A similar conclusion was reached by Khan, et al. [25] who stress that contacting customers across a variety of platforms is crucial since customer satisfaction plays a significant role in a company's reputation. A similar pattern of results was obtained in Al Balawi, et al. [29] who made the following claim about real-time functionalities: they help managers to make decisions more quickly in instances where time is of the essence, which can enhance crisis management and lessen the risk of organizational harm.

" *We implemented real-time response on WhatsApp for a full day, and that proved to be quite beneficial for us as our client's expressed gratitude*

r our prompt response. When a customer inquired about anything, we responded right away, apologizing and outlining the issue for them. " Participant (P6).

"*… the use of live chat WhatsApp is to reply to the affected customers with the apologies and full refund for their order.*" Participant (P3).

5. Conclusions and limitations

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of social media platforms on the online reputation of SMEs in the Saudi Arabian context, as well as to identify the strategies used by companies to effectively manage their online reputation across different social media platforms.

In order to address this aim, semi-structured interviews as a qualitative data collection method were used to obtain insightful opinions from small- and medium-sized business (SME) owners in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The interviews that were performed gave us the chance to learn more about the participants' perspectives, methods, and experiences with managing their online reputation. Moreover, the study sought to provide customized recommendations for effective reputation management on digital platforms, specifically focusing on the Saudi Arabian context. Our study's findings show that, when faced with a crisis, SMEs employ a range of tactics to manage their internet reputation. While the particular methods utilized may vary based on the platform, a prevalent trend noted is the efficacy of launching public apologies as a first step, succeeded by more marketing initiatives. Furthermore, it is evident that small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) frequently use many platforms to improve their capacity to interact with a variety of customer groups.

Even though this study has yielded valuable insights, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. This study focused on SMEs in Saudi Arabia as its main focus. It is noteworthy that the research findings may not be as applicable to SMEs functioning in different cultural and business contexts due to their limited scope. Subsequent research endeavors could perhaps go into examining the cultural differences in reputation management strategies employed by small and medium-sized enterprises. Although this research reached data saturation, we also recommend the inclusion of additional control variables such as company size, industry, or location to account for potential confounding factors. Finaly, more insight and other investigations of crisis management strategies on social media platforms might be discussed in depth by using mixed methods to obtain quantitative and qualitative data.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC Number: SEUREC-4632; Approval Date: 13/1/2025). The study adhered to the relevant "Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice" set out by the committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Copyright:

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