

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**EXPLORING THE CONSEQUENCES
OF CEO INFLUENCERS' SOCIAL
MEDIA FIRESTORMS ON SHAPING
ONLINE PUBLIC OPINION**

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ABSTRACT

Public relations in the digital age have been reshaped by how public opinion is formed, shared, and amplified, with social media platforms emerging as decisive arenas for organisational communication and information dissemination. CEO influencers—leaders who merge corporate leadership with carefully curated personal branding—now stand at the centre of these volatile exchanges. Yet scholarship lacks an integrated framework that explains how reputational shocks travel through digital networks and why some controversies escalate into large-scale firestorms that ultimately affect brand equity and organisational reputation. This thesis addresses these gaps through five objectives. Firstly, it explores why netizens participate in social media firestorms, focusing on the dynamics that drive engagement and amplification. Secondly, it evaluates how such participation shapes perceptions of brand equity, including shifts in brand awareness and loyalty. Thirdly, it examines how CEO influencers' reputations are affected, particularly through heightened scrutiny and backlash. Fourthly, it identifies the communicative strategies CEO influencers deploy to manage online outrage, including response tactics, emotional management, and image surveillance. Lastly, it explains how CEO influencers strategically leverage firestorms to rebuild trust and generate positive brand recall. Using a qualitative research design, fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Malaysian netizens and five with CEO influencers who had experienced social media firestorms. Data were analysed using NVivo 15 and guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to capture lived experiences while triangulating insights from multiple data sources and theoretical perspectives. Key findings reveal that netizens' engagement is fuelled by strong public sentiment—where online outrage, visibility in digital spaces, and peer interactions converge—and amplified by cross platform sharing and the mediation of key opinion leaders. Within public relations practice, social media firestorms have become a prominent current issue that many netizens actively follow, often seeking to stay informed about unfolding controversies and public conversations. This constant monitoring reflects how firestorms are no longer isolated incidents but integral to the way online publics track and evaluate the behaviour of businesses and their leaders. For CEO influencers, these firestorms disrupt brand awareness, challenge brand loyalty, and often lead to reputational risks such as diminished trust or boycotts. Yet the findings also reveal that firestorms can carry a positive dimension: they surface the genuine opinions and values of the public, offering unfiltered insight into how a brand or issue is perceived. In response, CEO influencers employ layered strategies that combine reputation repair with careful emotional management and ongoing image surveillance to monitor sentiment and activate supportive networks. Beyond mitigation, some influencers successfully transform these crises into opportunities for trust building, strategic branding, and authentic engagement with audiences. Based on these findings, the thesis introduces the Strategic Influence Cascade (SIC) Model, a hybrid framework integrating the Two-Way Asymmetrical Model and Multi-Step Flow Theory. Positioned firmly within public relations, the SIC Model explains not only how CEO influencers manage reputational crises but also how they can strategically harness firestorms to heighten visibility, deepen audience connection, and enhance long-term brand equity. In sum, this study contributes a timely and practical framework for understanding, predicting, and strategically leveraging the dynamics of social media firestorms in contemporary public relations practice.

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“Cogito, ergo sum.”
— René Descartes

This thesis was never meant to be just an academic exercise. It is the continuation of something far older and more intimate—my quiet contribution to a family tradition of seeking knowledge, not for prestige, but for purpose. In our family, knowledge was never abstract. It was lived and passed on gently without ceremony. This work is for that legacy, and for those who will carry it forward.

I have never been driven by ambition, but rather by trust. Trust in the pursuit of never-ending knowledge, and faith in the quiet signs God places along the way. Each time I was lost, He gently nudged me back, through redirections disguised as detours, through the calm that followed surrender. Somehow, I always found my way.

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Cogito, ergo sum.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Social media, embraced by billions worldwide, has redefined how public opinion is shaped, shared, and amplified. Crucially, social media has also redefined how public relations practitioners manage organisational visibility and public opinion. Originally designed to foster connections, these platforms have evolved into powerful public relations and information dissemination tools. In Malaysia, platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Kemp, 2024). They are not only central to communication but also serve as dynamic arenas where public sentiment is formed and reshaped in real time. Netizens, as active participants in these platforms, represent the collective voice of online public opinion, contributing to the discourse through interactions such as sharing, commenting, and engaging with content. Features such as hashtags and trending topics accelerate content spread, magnifying its reach and influence on public opinion.

In recognising the transformative potential of social media, businesses have leveraged these platforms as essential public relations tools. They use social media to engage with stakeholders, manage public sentiment, and craft brand narratives. As Pooi Leong (2021) assert social media has become a "barometer of public opinion," offering real-time insights into societal attitudes and expectations. This shift underscores the growing relevance of public relations strategies in navigating the opportunities and challenges posed by digital platforms. Given the enormous potential audience that spends many hours daily on multiple platforms accessing social media, businesses see it as a crucial space for reaching their stakeholders and managing their public image.

The increasing prevalence of social media in daily life has prompted businesses to re-evaluate traditional public relations strategies. As consumer behaviour becomes increasingly influenced by digital interactions, companies must adapt their communication approaches to effectively engage with audiences, manage online reputations, and leverage social and digital marketing opportunities. Appel et al. (2020) highlight how social media has permeated nearly every aspect of modern life, making