

# CROWDS AND CLOUDS SOCIAL MEDIA IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Social media has evolved as important media for corporate communication but the issue of Return on Investment (ROI) from social media promotional and marketing activities remains unsettled. This paper examines arguments for a different approach for conceptualizing ROI when applied to social media marketing and advertising. It cites practical cases involving companies in the soft drink industry, with particular reference to the case of Coca Cola in three countries: USA, China and Ghana. Social media attributes may present both limitations and benefits to corporate communication, particularly, in the area of corporate marketing and promotions, and there is ample evidence that a quick fix approach enabled by sharing buttons and simple advertorial posts may not generate the needed returns in terms of direct and immediate sales lift. Rather time-demanding and engaging strategies and tactics provide better results.*

**Keywords:** Social media, Corporate communication, Social media Return on Investment, Advertising, Marketing, Social media crowds and clouds

## INTRODUCTION

Willard, (2009) defines social networking as a social system comprising of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are linked together by one or more specific types of interdependency variables. He identifies the variables as including values, vision, financial exchange, friendship, kinship, dislike, conflict or trade. According various accounts such as one by Goble, (2012) social media started with the Bulletin Board System (BBS) which were online meeting places. Kaplan & Haenlein, (2010) state that, the growth of social media over the years has been phenomenal and comes along with both challenges and opportunities. They note that historically, companies have always been able to regulate the kind of information about them that goes out into the public sphere but with the emergence of social media that kind of control has been lost. They note that, in contemporary times, corporate organizations have been relegated to the sidelines not having any power to control what is published about their organization in social media. They cite the example of Wikipedia, which outrightly forbids the participation of firms in its online community.

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Mangold & Faulds, (2009) also argue that social media presents “a hybrid element of the promotion mix because in a traditional sense it enables companies to talk to their customers, while in a nontraditional sense it enables customers to talk directly to one another”. In this regard they refer to the Integrated Marketing Communication approach to corporate communications and emphasize the revolution that communication disciplines have undergone through integration in a digital age. They enforce the assertion that successful IMC strategies clearly reflect the values expressed in an organization’s mission and central to the attainment key corporate performance goals.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

The increasing influence of social media does not only provide opportunities, but also challenges and potential liabilities for individuals, corporate organizations and other institutions. There is the recognition that activities of netizens can have adverse effects on corporate organizations hence it is important for corporate organizations to address the potential threats of social media and also utilize the potential benefits of social media by effectively integrating social media in the corporate governance activities (Chaher & Spellman, 2012, PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012, Kendall, 2012). Some security and computer experts have identified social media as a security threat not only to individuals but also to corporate organizations noting that concerns over the breach of privacy poses and the issue of erosion of customer trust as a result of the activities of online hackers and scammers poses serious threats if not addressed.

Social marketing software company, Awareness, in the second part of its biannual report State of Social Media Marketing report for 2012 quoted by award winning blogger and author Danny Brown noted that a survey of 469 marketers showed that 44 percent of companies with social marketing budgets of \$100,000 or more were using social CRM software. The study also indicated that 68 percent were interested in expanding their social coverage while 50 percent saw the need to strengthen integration between social and more traditional marketing.

The study noted that while social media was definitely seen as a core strategy for many businesses going in the subsequent year and beyond there was still some lack of clear understanding about social media use and impact and what it means for the bottom line. It also revealed that the issue of Returns on Investments (ROIs) in respect of social media investments continued to raise concerns as did building a strong presence where results can be actionable and measured (Brown, 2012).

It’s sad to say, but integrating social media continues to be a challenge for many businesses in 2012, despite many seeing the tipping point of social media as 2010, when the ROI question and the business benefits of social media were really taken into the mainstream. So, what are the challenges that businesses continue to face when it comes to social media? While the lead challenge is still measuring ROI, what’s interesting is the percentage that are struggling to integrate with the rest of the marketing vertical, which accounts for almost 1/3 of businesses surveyed. This is a clear indication that businesses are finally starting to realize that

social isn't a standalone strategy, but a core part of the bigger marketing picture. While it may be a struggle at the moment, the recognition that it needs to be integrated bodes well for the future of these businesses (Brown, 2012).

### **Research Aim**

This paper seeks to explore the state and level of social media use for corporate communication relative to Coca Cola in three culturally, socially and economically distinct jurisdictions, drawing out the differences and similarities as well as strengths and weaknesses of social media use for corporate activities in the different jurisdictions, USA, China and Ghana.

### **Objectives**

To determine the nature and pattern of social media use for corporate communication activities for the cases studied. To examine the perceived impact of social media on corporate communication activities in areas such as public relations, advertising and marketing. To investigate any threats and opportunities in the use of social media for corporate communication.

## **RELEVANT THEORIES**

Five theories will underline this proposed study; The Uses and Gratification Theory, Media Richness Theory, Adaptive Saturation Theory and Technological Determinism.

### **Uses and Gratification Theory**

The Uses and Gratification Theory explains effects, benefits and uses derived from the media (Matei, 2010; Dunne, Lawlor & Rowley, 2010). Lane, (2001) explains that "Blumler and Katz's uses and gratification theory suggests that media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. This study looks at the uses to which social media is put to and also the uses that social can be put to and also the gratification that is and can be derived from social media. It also examines how such uses and gratification from social media influence the relationship and interactions between corporate organizations and their publics.

### **Adaptive Structuration Theory**

The adaptive saturation theory examines the interaction of groups and societies with the use of information. According to Desanctis & Poole, (1994) the theory "provides a model that describes the interplay between advanced information technologies, social structures, and human interaction". They add that the theory examines human activity founded on or driven by social structures, rules and resources provided by technologies and institutions. In a study to analyze the use of social media for corporate management, such a theory may be useful as it relates the application of social media and their highly technological instruments and tools, to modern corporate management principles with particular emphasis on the main characteristics and nature of communication and how information is used on social media platforms.

### Network Theory and Analysis in Organizations

Network analysis (social network theory) is the study of how individuals are influenced by the social context within which they operate. In this regard reference is made to interpersonal, organizational and group relationships within the social system (University of Twente, n.d.). Placed in the context that the key role of social media is to serve as a communication and networking tool, this theory, underlined by the principle of networking, can provide a context and framework for understanding behaviors of various publics, who use social media, and can help explain some of the trends that the study may reveal. It helps provide a theoretical framework for understanding the workings of social media stimuli and pressures; how they impact behaviors and how they are utilized or exploited by both, corporate organizations (and their managers) and consumers/patrons (or the general public) to drive desired changes in behavior, outputs or trends, products and services.

### Study Approach

The paper explores the topic using a case study approach to understand social media use and patterns for corporate communication. Three cases are studied: Coca Cola USA, Coca Cola China and Coca Cola Ghana. The social media activities used by these corporate organizations over a period are analyzed and comparisons are made to draw out similarities and differences. Relative strengths and weaknesses are also analyses (Tables 1 & 2).

**Table 1. Data on Social media campaigns for the three corporate entities studied over the period of the study (Coca Cola 2007-2013).**

SMC	Year	Nature of Social Media Campaign	CCUs	CCCh	CCGh
Sprite Yard	2007	In 2007, Coca Cola launched in China a branded mobile social network, dubbed the Sprite Yard as part of its strategy to help build targeted networks around its brands (Nicole, 2007). As noted by Nicole (2007), closely linked with these networks was the concept of virtual worlds such as second life and Coca Cola was the first to adopt this strategy of second life. Murphy (2007) notes that the Sprite Yard campaign was “a real-time digital ‘on-the-go’ community that provides social connections and downloadable content via consumers’ mobile phones, anytime, anywhere”. The campaign was first launched in China in June 2007 even before it was introduced in the US a month later, emphasizing China growing stature as a very important market and digital platform for Coca Cola.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Expedition 206	2010	In 2006, Coca Cola introduced a campaign that presented a real-life experience to three persons who were chosen as Coca Cola Global Ambassadors. The three ambassadors were chosen from an online voting process (Warren, 2009; Coca Cola, 2013). With this campaign, the selected team was provided with funding to travel around the world and make stops at destinations of their choice. They were given the option of choosing where to stay, what to eat	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes

		and the local people to meet. While they travelled around they made stops around the globe with a schedule that tasked them to visit 206 markets across the globe. As they travelled across the globe they shared their experiences on social media (Warren, 2009). The campaign at that time was tagged by Coca Cola (2013) as the largest social-media project ever; Coca Cola described it as “largest-ever social media experiment” and in the end the three ambassadors who were all their 20s covered more than 275,000 miles and visited 186 countries from January 1, 2010 to December 29, 2010. Their journey was tracked on social media and received what impressive response, getting about 650 million media impressions across the globe (Zmuda, 2011A).			
Coke Hit Single	2011	The Coke Hit Single, was a campaign by Coca Cola Ghana during which teens from all over Ghana were invited to compose, produce and perform their version of a Coke inspired song bringing alive their expressions of happiness and was aimed at unearthing the creativity in the youth in turn be publicized by Coca-Cola through a comprehensive publicity campaign.	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Share a Coke	2011	The Coca Share a Coke Campaign has been lauded as the most popular and visible social media campaign globally. According to Digital Marketing and Ecommerce Group, EConsultancy (2018), the campaign which was launched in 2011 resulted in a “seven percent increase in sales and also earned a total of more than 18 million media impressions, and traffic on the Coke Facebook site increased by 870 percent, with page ‘likes’ growing by 39 percent”.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Friendship Experiment	2013	In a collaboration with Chinese photographer, Kurt Tang, Coca Cola invited people who were virtually unknown to each other to become friends. Gonzalez (2013) states that the Friendship Experiment was inspired Kurt Tang’s observation of “a disappointing sense of isolation and loneliness in many Chinese people living in the country’s major metropolises”. Yip (2013) explained that, the “Friendship Experiment”, campaign by Ogilvy & Mather Shanghai witnessed the photos displayed in an exhibition in a gallery in Guangzhou; they, along with the “making of” videos would be shared in an online gallery and through Coca-Cola’s Happiness Network on YouTube and through Chinese social media channels like Sina Weibo and Renren.  The Coca Cola China Friendship Experiment was adjudged as one of the 10 most inspiring digital campaigns from Coca Cola by a UK based consultancy firm, E-Consultancy (Moth, 2013).	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Digital Handshake		In May 2013, Coca Cola launched a series of activities dubbed “Shake up your senses party”	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes

		during which they also published the Coca Cola Digital Handshake Promo that has been shown on the global Coca Cola YouTube page. As at December 20, 2013, it had recorded 332,836 hits on the global Coca Cola YouTube page. It was rated as one of Coca Cola’s 10 most watched videos on YouTube in March 2013 (Modern Ghana, 2013: YouTube, 2013)			
Plant Bottle and Weibo Micro Interview	2013	In April 2013, Coca Cola launched the Plant Bottle packaging technology in China, a campaign that created a lot of buzz on social media and the launch was coupled with the first ever micro interview on Weibo (Liu, 2013). The interview was also an innovation and placed Coca Cola at the forefront of innovative use of social media in communication with consumers and other interested members of the public. After the launch, Coca Cola started collaboration with Sina Weibo through the Weibo Wallet to promote the sale of the bottles. In the first day, 300 bottles sold out in one hour; the second day, 500 bottles sold out in half an hour: the third day, 500 bottles sold out in five minutes and the fourth day, 300 bottles sold out in one minute. (Sabrina, 2013)	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Tweet a Coke	2014	Tweet a Coke was a six-week pilot programme by Coca Cola that was seen as an extension of the Share a Coke Campaign. Under this promotion, fans were able to buy Cokes for their fans at Regal Cinemas via Twitter, now X (Lacy, 2014). Participating consumers were expected to connect their credit cards to their Twitter accounts. Lacy (2014) further explains that they tweet the intended recipient with @TweetACoke, the word “enjoy,” and the friend’s Twitter handle. The recipient will then receive a \$5 e-gift for a small beverage at Regal via the social network”. According to Saettler (n.d.), the effort was similar to a Starbucks promotion that allowed X users to buy gift cards worth \$5 to send coffee to friends.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Happiness Flag	2014	In 2014, Coca Cola embarked on a campaign across 207 countries. It was described as the “world’s largest digitally produced Photomosaic flag, containing more than 220,000 fan photos voluntarily submitted across 207 countries (that’s at least one photo from every country where Coca-Cola is sold)” (PRNews, 2014). Coca Cola allowed fans to submit the photos via social media or email. The images were assembled in a design to produce what was called the World’s flag, which was representative of everybody (PRNews).	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
Half and Half	2020	Amidst the surge of the Covid-19 Pandemic, Coca Cola China launched a campaign to celebrate medical doctors and promote a better understanding of the role doctors play in providing quality healthcare. As part of the	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

		campaign, Coca Cola China launched a short film titled, 'Half and Half' online in its bid to provide insights into the working lives of medical doctors and the motions they go through on a daily basis.			
Wuhan Special Edition		Wuhan was speculated by some as the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic and faced tremendous challenges as a result of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns. In the midst of the challenges, Coca Cola China devised a way to share some joy and motivation on social media. The Special Coca Cola cans were only available to people in the Hubei province had designs of Wuhan and other cities forming the shape of heart and the designs were accompanied with uplifting messages. This initiative also had an associated social campaign dubbed 'Wuhan, forge ahead with love', and the weeklong campaign generated about 143,000 discussions on social media within a week of its launch, and hit more than 946 million views on Weibo (Dao Insights, 2020).	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Weibo Eye Logo		Weibo is one of the biggest social media platforms in China with about 260 million active daily users as at the September 2023 (Thomala, 2023). In 2023, Coca Cola partnered with Weibo to customize the social media giant's drowsy eye logo.  The idea was to encourage more young people to take a coca cola drink when they take their digital breaks, recognizing that many young people tend to go to Weibo for their digital breaks.	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Year of Rabbit	2023	In January 2023, Coca Cola China launched the Year of the Rabbit Campaign in response the declaration of 2023 as the Year of the Rabbit in China. The campaign used short animated videos that helped to digitize and shape younger generations' appreciation of the century old lunar year rituals.  The campaign was created by the Shanghai Office of advertising giants, Ogilvy, with the aid of Augmented Reality elements and Artificial Intelligence, and emphasized that irrespective of the generation one belonged to, there were common interests and themes to share in celebrating the lunar year.  As noted by Yuen (2023), the campaign was enhanced "with a digital experience that turns every can of Coca-Cola into a portal for families to reimagine existing traditions and connect in playful, interactive ways, given one of the New Year traditions is organising a family photoshoot".	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

**Table 2. Number of major social media campaigns over the period studied.**

Country	Major social media campaigns studied over the period
Coca Cola China	10
Coca Cola USA	6
Coca Cola Ghana	5

## DISCUSSION

### Commercial and Benevolent Users

Findings reveal the growing adoption of social media inspired in good measure by the penetration of the internet and also the diffusion of technology. This enforces the theoretical basis that from the perspective of the use of social media, there are two evident approaches; the commercial or corporate user of social media and a “benevolent” user who otherwise may also be described as the “patronizing” user. Evidently, there is the recognition that there has to be a reason for a patron to continuously visit a social media page to find the page useful. In a sense it enforces the theoretical foundation that users of media will adopt a particular media for as long as they find some use or gratification in that particular media and Coca Cola seem to respond to that interest. While this study stops short of collecting data on reported gratifications sought by users, social media use from both perspectives of the commercial user and the patronizing user.

If there is obvious use, then there has to be some sort of gratification; this has been an area Coca Cola has responded well with campaigns such as the Friendship Experiment and the Coca Cola Expedition Campaign (Gonzalez, 2013; Yip, 2013; Warren, 2009; Zmuda, 2011). In this regard, there is deliberate attempt to generate some entertainment as gratification for the benevolent user. This evolution seems to emphasize that social media may provide a vent for the patronizing user to be gratified in a way that traditional entertainment channels can offer. In all jurisdictions studied, Coca Cola enforced and emphasized social media gratification although in this use or regard, it seems to be more pronounced in China than in the US and Ghana. Global campaigns such as Coca Cola Expedition 206 received tremendous response from the Chinese public while in Ghana localized campaigns such as the Coke Hit Single, a music competition among teens and the Coca Cola Digital Handshake Ad campaigns which have both been promoted on social media also received good response.

The underlying observation is that if there is potential for gratifying entertainment then it is likely that it will be received with good response from the patronizing user irrespective of the commercial corporate interest that drives such campaigns. The patronizing user seeks a gratifying benefit while the corporate user seeks a commercial benefit.



The Adaptive Structuration Theory presents an approach for studying the role of advanced information technologies in organization change from two vantage points: the types of structures that are provided by the advanced technologies and the structures that actually emerge in human action as people interact with these technologies. The organization change as observed in Coca Cola can be seen in many ways and in this regards the structures that are provided by advanced technologies such as the internet and wikis include social networks and social media pages; In Coca Cola's social media campaign dubbed Expedition 206, human interaction also provided other tools such as videos and photographs which served as some of the key contents that made social media networks and pages gratifying.

In analyzing the adaptive response of corporate organizations to social media reference can be made to the observation by Desanctis & Poole, (1994). Desanctis & Poole, (1994) refer to the adaptive structures as; structures in technology (in this regard, websites and social media platforms or networks) and also structures in action (in this regard, social networks and social media content and interactions as formed on social media networks and platforms). For many corporate organizations, marketing including advertising represents an important use of social media and the integrated marketing communication approach to corporate marketing has placed social media as important media for corporate organizations. At the global level Coca Cola has adopted Integrated Marketing Communication approach although traditional marketing channels also represent an important channel of marketing. This integrated approach reflects the changing trends in global corporate communications and the emergence of online platforms as important information and communication platforms.

### **Reconceptualization of social media ROI**

One of the key issues that have confounded many social media experts as well as communication and marketing business executives has been the issue of Return on Investment on social media advertising or marketing campaigns. The value of social media marketing and in particular reference to Return on Investment (ROI) has been a critical area of research by communication, marketing and advertising scholars as they try to establish the short term as well as the medium and long-term benefits of social media. In 2012, Coca Cola stated that a research it had conducted indicated that social media buzz or chatter did not directly result in sales lift or increases. According to Coca Cola, the research showed that while there may be medium to long term benefits that could ultimately result in sales lift, there was no evidence of immediate sales lift as a result of social media buzz or chatter (AdAge, 2013: Clarke, 2013). Coming on the heels of the comprehensive social media campaign dubbed Expedition 206 campaign, it reflected a very significant finding although it was disputed by some experts leading to a debate as noted in a commentary by AdAge, 2013). In 2010 both Coca Cola and Pepsi embarked on innovative social media campaigns to create some buzz on social media. Coca Cola's year-long campaign dubbed the Expedition 206

received good headlines and as noted by Zmuda, (2011A) and was it was dubbed as Coca Cola's biggest social media campaign ever.

Around that same time Pepsi Cola embarked on a social media campaign that sought to emphasize its brand in a move some analysts said cost it so much as it meant withdrawing its traditional ad from the American Super bowl for the first time in 23-years. The money that would had been spent on Super Bowl advertisement, an amount of \$20 million was rather invested in a social media project dubbed Pepsi Refresh Project in which the money was given as grants to individuals, businesses and non-profits that promote a new idea that had a positive impact on their community, state, or the nation (Clarke, 2010: Warren, 2009). Coca Cola meanwhile, retained its advertising spot on the super bowl while at the same time it embarked on its global social media campaign, Expedition 206, which was hailed for its innovation, fanfare and entertainment value. The Expedition 206 campaign was a global campaign while the Pepsi Refresh Project was restricted to entries from the US. The Pepsi Refresh project was described as a philanthropic project that although useful for its philanthropy was deficient in a strategic approach that would lead to sales lift. Eventually, it did not deliver the results desired (Zmuda, 2011B).

While the Pepsi Refresh Project was running, Pepsi had consistently been losing market share and volume, leading to a humiliating drop to lowly third place behind Coke and Diet Coke. Add to that widespread investor pressure on CEO Indra Nooyi to focus on driving core businesses, and the handwriting was on the wall. The Pepsi Refresh Project was simply not helping sell more fizzy stuff. Given this lackluster performance, Pepsi, without much fanfare, shut it down (Bida, 2012).

A more relevant understanding of social media marketing may emphasize the importance of evolving communication strategies that are more engaging and similar in content to traditional marketing modules.

The debate on Return on Investment from social media campaigns or marketing seems still seems pretty much unsettled more than 10 years after Coca Cola's research showed that impact was more in the medium to long term. Yet, increasingly, there seem to be greater empirical evidence that direct sales lift is not easily attained with social media buzz, irrespective of how loud the buzz may sound. In the light of this, some experts argue that social media ROI should be conceptualized differently from traditional advertising and marketing ROI.

Following Coca Cola Expedition 206, a report by Arthur (2011) quoted data by MarketSherpa indicated that social media ROIs could be as high as 150 percent and averaged about 95 percent, however, the report was quick to add that high ROIs from social media may not be a 'quick fix' outcome of 'fast and easy' tactics such as sharing buttons on pages and emails. Rather much more time demanding strategies such as blogger relations and SEO deliver "much higher level of effectiveness". More advanced social media marketers work from a strategic plan and know that often the most difficult and time-consuming tactics are worth the extra effort because they are the most effective (Arthur, 2011). The reference to 'time-consuming tactics' perhaps provides some justification to the Coca

Cola's research that indicates that high ROIs may be recorded after longer periods for social media campaigns when compared to traditional advertising and marketing. But some scholars still argue that social media ROI should be reconceptualized. According to Lal et al (2020), traditional metrics of ROI measurement from traditional advertising may not be easily applicable to social media. In other words, direct and immediate sales lift may not be the pragmatic approach to measuring social media ROIs.

This view is enforced by Influencer Marketing Agency, Markerly, (2024) which notes that: Unlike traditional investment scenarios where returns are typically evaluated in terms of direct revenue, social media returns often involve abstract parameters like engagement levels, brand recognition, and customer sentiment. These metrics, while valuable, are not straightforward to translate into monetary terms. How much is a 'like', a 'share', or a positive comment worth in the context of your overall business objectives? (Markerly, 2024).

### **MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE**

In essence, social media may provide some attraction as marketing and advertising media but that attraction can only be useful if marketing or advertising on social media is seen as marketing or advertising and not public relations. From the nature of the Pepsi Cola Refresh campaign, it is easy to describe it as more of a public relations activity with a steep slant towards corporate social responsibility than a pure advertising or marketing activity. Thus, any such campaign that borders on PR and, more particularly, Corporate Social Responsibility should be seen as offering medium to long term benefits of building brand image and goodwill among the external publics and not as a direct strategy for immediate sales lift.

The erroneous impression that because of the huge numbers of people on social media, any exposure of a brand should generate some sales lift can rather lead to losses for corporate organizations. For many marketers trying to understand the communication potential of social media, it is important to emphasize that unlike direct marketing that is more engineered towards numbers, social media driven marketing or more precisely advertising, as a communication-bias activity is driven more by effect and not only by numbers. An understanding of media effects is critical for advertisers and marketers seeking to exploit social media in that regard.

Within the context of the introduction of the Pepsi Refresh Project and the withdrawal of Pepsi adverts from the Super Bowl one clearly notices that while the objectives were probably the same for both initiatives, however, the two approaches were at variance; the Super Bowl advertising was a purely advertising activity while the Pepsi Refresh Project was a public relations activity more precisely, a corporate social responsibility activity. Thus, although it was commended for its emotional appeal because of its philanthropic nature, it was criticized for lacking the energy and thrill of a marketing activity. It was simply not a marketing campaign and any expectation of immediate sales lift was clearly

misplaced. In this regard, it may be important to examine the research of Coca Cola and their assertion that social media buzz or chatter does not result in direct sales lift. Because Coca Cola did not give details of the nature of its research, it may be difficult to analyze it in critical terms and endorse the validity of such a finding. Yet, subsequent research seems to support this claim. And, coming on the heels of the Coca Cola Expedition 206 campaign, which generated so much buzz on social media, it was likely that the campaign, at least, in part influenced such findings.

The Expedition 206 Campaign was also not a purely advertising campaign. It was a campaign that was valuable for its adventurism and novelty and for its public relations value; this time with a steep slant not towards Corporate Social Responsibility like the Pepsi project, but with a considerable slant towards Publicity; it was not necessarily a campaign that had the kind of characteristic to create sales lift.

In both cases, it may sound ironic that while no direct effort was made to influence sales, there seems to have been some expectation that sales would be lifted immediately, primarily because of the high number of people hooked onto social media. This can also be viewed in the context of the assertion by Marshall McLuhan that “the medium is the message” in the related concepts of the impact on technology on the media message as captured in his theory, Technological Determinism Theory (Munday, 2003; Kappelman, 2001). McLuhan, (1964) in explaining what he meant by the “medium is the message” stated that:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (McLuhan, 1964:13).

Many scholars have examined McLuhan’s assertions, and in some respects, some have described him as a “prophet” who predicted the emergence of a multimedia newspaper. Goodman, (2011) states that although McLuhan did not propose the theory in the era of social media, his theory still applies to the era of social media and to social media. Goodman, (2011) explains that “when stating ‘the medium is the message’, McLuhan believed that it was not what we said, but the way we said it that mattered most; the words we use are not as important as the way we choose to say them”.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA CROWD**

Two concepts can also help explain the moderated impact of social media in respect of immediate sales lift or ROIs. These are the concepts of Social Media Crowd and Social Media Cloud. Social media harbors both crowds and communities and the transitions between the two can be very fluid. The crowds are emphasized here because of the issue of the sometimes-irresponsible acts on social media ranging from threats, false rumors, pornography, violence, and other issues of and related to a

disorganized “mass crowd”. Another form of crowd is also emphasized; the crowd of digital, textual and electronic resources and information. For many corporate organizations, maintaining distinctiveness in the “crowds” around them, both in a real world or in a virtual world is a challenge; that has been a very daunting challenge. Their visibility is sometimes erased by the plethora of voices, images, videos and texts that presents more than enough choices for media consumers, and without startling creativity and searing prominence, corporate organizations suffer the effects of crowded social media space, platforms or networks. In this vein, the operation, influence and actions of the crowds in relation to social media and how they can be utilized for corporate communications in an Integrated Marketing Communication model can be viewed or explained in two contexts which are, as already explained, founded on two principles; “Medium is the message” by Marshall McLuhan & Gustave Lebons, (1996) explanation on the psychology and behavior of the crowd.

### **Mass of enthusiastic patronizing users who create communities or form crowds**

While social media may not completely break a Spiral of Silence it is remarkably successful at stifling a Silent Spiral; social media networks provides accommodation for all viewpoints and people can associate with many different networks that supports their views and orientation, be it extreme or moderate. The opportunity to be anonymous on social media usage also breaks up the fear of isolation as a result of expressing a particular viewpoint even in a non-supportive network. These unique characteristics of social media and its usage help create a big mass of social media users. While introduction of appropriate legislation is critical to effective governing of the social media, appropriate engagement of the “social media crowd” is perhaps one of the most effective ways to address the threat of the crowd; In a way, it makes sense for corporate organizations not just to play the commercial user seeking direct commercial benefits but also infiltrate the crowd and play the role of an influencing member in the crowd, skewing views and opinions in their favor. In understanding the crowd, it is important for corporate organizations to note that, the crowd has no compulsion to act in a sane and responsible manner, a view that has been espoused by (Gustave Le Bon,1996). who describes a crowd as akin to primitive beings? Of the crowd, Gustave Le Bon writes:

It acts far more under the influence of the spinal cord than of the brain. In this respect, the crowd is closely akin to quite primitive beings. The acts performed may be perfect so far as their execution is concerned, but they are not directed by the brain, the individual conducts himself according as the exciting causes to which he is submitted may happen to decide... It is a slave of the impulses it receives. The isolated individual may be submitted to the same exciting causes as the man in a crowd, but as his brain shows him the inadvisability of yielding to them, he refrains from yielding. The truth may be physiologically expressed by saying that the isolated individual possesses the capacity of dominating his reflex actions while a crowd is devoid of this capacity (Gustave Le Bon, 1996).

Yet, as Gustav Le Bon, (1996) notes, the crowd is capable of reasoning; “It cannot be absolutely said that crowds do not reason and are not influenced by reasoning” (Gustav Le Bon, 1996). The presence of the influencer in the midst of the crowd can induce reasoning in the crowd. While the crowd may lack the capacity of “dominating its reflex actions”, the influencer in a crowd can reason for the crowd. Thus, the influencer, although a member of the crowd, is not a “compulsive” member but a “compromised member” of the crowd. He wears the garb of the crowd but does not walk in the irrationality of the crowd. In one breadth he is a member of the crowd, in another breadth he is an isolated individual. And aside the issue of crisis management, there is also an important role in respect of the use of influencers to direct sales, marketing and advertising efforts. The crowd poses risks to corporate organizations not only in terms of the inducing crisis but also in terms of creating so much buzz and chatter that shuts out corporate activities such as marketing and advertising. That seems to be a logical way of utilizing the numbers of the crowd or in other words the “mass crowds”. It is however, prudent to add that aside the crowds there are also more organized communities in virtual spaces such as social media networks and platforms, and it is easier to engage the community than a crowd. Yet, if one considers the age group of social media users, it is always likely that because of the relatively youthful nature of social media users, there is the tendency for many users to transition more into a crowd than a community.

### **Convergence of “digital, textual and electronic crowds” on new media platforms**

It may also be useful to add to the conventional description of social media as media of mass patronage and also enforce a description of social media as convergent media platform; the nature of social media platforms as convergent platforms for text, video and audio no doubt serves as one of the strongest attributes of social media networks. Convergence also has the potential to create more crowds: the crowds of voices, images, texts and videos, as there are more voices, more text and more videos competing for the attention of the media consumer. How much can the consumer of mass media take, and in what time limit or time frame? For many media and corporate executives, understanding the promise and challenge of the “digital, electronic or textual crowd” is critical to efficient and effective utilization of social media as a corporate communication platform. Also important is an understanding of the various communications modes and which are suited for an intended effect.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA CLOUD**

As evident in the study, the seeming lack of purposefulness or directness in social media usage for corporate marketing, sales or advertising can serve as a cloud that dims the intended effect or brightness of the message. The cloud is induced by both the medium and the message. The medium influences the attributes of the message and shapes its character. In one respect or on one side, the message looks bright; on another side, the message looks dull. It seems that in social media all sides

of the Integrated Marketing Communication mix cannot be lighted at the same time and in the same manner; and the light on one side creates a shadow on another side.

The medium may brighten the message but may also cloud the intended objective if the message attributes or characteristics are not in agreement with the intended objective; in that sense the medium may cloud the intended or desired impact of message. So, for instance, in the case of a public relations endeavor, the medium may lighten up the humanitarian aspect of a corporate social responsibility activity but the brightness such a public relation endeavor generates by way of visibility on social media should not be expected to be translated into short-term market appeal or sales lift. That objective could be clouded by the subtle nature of the message can only emerge after a longer period of consistency, regularity and engagement.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study also showed that there is an increasing appreciation and understanding of the use, value and strength of social media as a communicative tool by corporate organizations.

As in the case of Coca Cola, the study established that the initial inadequacy perceived of social media as a sales channel because of the initial records of low Returns on Investments from social media campaigns seem to have given way to a more pragmatic approach and understanding of the sales potential of social media, when the right strategies are applied. China has demonstrated more innovative use of social media for promotional campaigns and could have contributed the growth of the company in China (Zhuoqiong, 2024).

ROI from social media campaign should not be expected in the form of direct and immediate sales lift but rather medium to long term gains derived from sustained, interactive and time-demanding strategies that can more effectively address challenges posed by disorganized and indifferent social media crowds and ‘clouded’ social media campaign objectives. More deliberate strategies and tactics that take into consideration the unique attributes, strengths and weaknesses of social media are required to generate high ROIs.

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