How effective is digital marketing for government organisations in times of crisis: the case of Kuwait's fire force during COVID-19

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Abstract: Digital marketing is increasingly used by government organisations during crises to improve information dissemination as well as foster citizen and general public participation. This paper explores the adoption of digital marketing by Kuwait Fire Force. Qualitative data was used to understand the strategic approach and effectiveness. Secondary data was collected from social media platforms to determine participation of citizens, the impact of the strategies, the sentiments of the information and the reach of information through the platforms. This paper argues that commercial digital marketing strategies can be applied in crisis management through social media channels. the results show that to a certain extent, the digital marketing strategies are effective. However, care should be taken to ensure that all platforms are well-integrated, have similar messages and the tone of these messages need to be clearly defined in the digital marketing strategy. Recommendations have been provided to improve the impact of these strategies.

Keywords: Kuwait; marketing; digital; government; crisis; pandemic.

Biographical notes: Yousef Mohammed is a Captain at the Kuwait Fire Force (KFF). With a degree in Marketing and MSc in Business with Marketing Management from Northumbria University in Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK. He is a Member of the emergency coordination team for natural and man-made disasters at KFF. Marketing and international relations consultant for Xpress International company based in Kuwait. He is a military and civil defence consultant at Rigways international company based in GCC. VP for postgraduate's affairs at the national union for Kuwaiti students in UK. His main research areas are government marketing and digital management, crisis and emergency management.

1   Introduction

Digital marketing and social media have huge impact toward the public in the recent years. Therefore, government organisations use social media to market the services to the public (E-government) through platforms that are specific to that region during different events, crises and many other local or global situations as they have a faster reach compared to the traditional methods. Application of social media through using the commercial digital marketing framework has been brought to the fore especially with research looking at how Emergency Management Authorities and Crisis Agents can effectively use such strategies and artefacts to convey messages effectively to the public. While there is research on how digital marketing techniques can be used in crises, there is a dearth of empirical research on how government organisations effectively use digital marketing strategies and implement social media communications for crisis communication. Government use of social media is different compared to private sector or commercial use. E-government systems are being incorporated into the existing processes and system applications of the government (Alshehri and Drew, 2011). While e-government systems are shown to be welcomed by the public, this has also led to governments being under pressure as they are now bound by the expectations of the public to offer efficient, effective and contemporary services using internet technologies (Rabaai et al., 2017).

E-government literature focuses on aspects of information availability and reach while there is not much importance given to crisis management. The advances in technologies have now transformed the way in which crisis management professionals as well as researchers are able to view, interact and disseminate information in a crisis situation to communities that are affected. Researchers (Wright and Hinson, 2009) argue that these new media platforms enable ideas, information and opinions to be expressed effectively and provide wider communication opportunities as well as new ways to reach out to specific localities, communities or nations especially for communication during crisis. Furthermore, research shows how online and on-site response activities happen simultaneously and how to a great extent they are intertwined (Palen et al., 2007). Social media technologies have ensured that communities are not part of the actual response in terms of crisis communication. First-hand reporting has been made possible through social media and several crises were reported through Twitter (for instance, the Haiti earthquake, 2010; US Airways Flight 1549 crash in 2009) by people who were on the scene with access to a mobile phone, which led to news being made instantaneous (Robinson, 2010). Social media ensures that openness, participation, community, conversation and connectedness which are all part of core human communication are facilitated (Mayfield, 2008). Digital media is perceived to be highly influential and is trusted more than mainstream media on several occasions (Colley and Collier, 2009).

There are several theoretical works discussing the role of E-government and the determinants of E-government adoption in developed nations (e.g., Irani et al., 2007; Shareef et al., 2011; Krishnan et al., 2013). The other gap in the literature is that not much work is done in the Middle East and Arabian/Persian Gulf region despite there being huge investment in several information and communications technology programs and governments adopting several E-government initiatives (Al-Shafi and Weerakkody, 2008). One of the best examples is that of Kuwait which is in the Arabian-Gulf region. In 2000, several ICT development initiatives were started by the Kuwaiti government.

Globally, the E-government program of Kuwait is ranked 49th in the E-government readiness report by the UN in 2014.

Despite the effectiveness of social media and digital marketing being researched, the impact of using these from a government point of view especially in crises situation has not been studied. To bridge these gaps, this study uses the case of Kuwait Fire Force which is a government organisation that is related to many military organisations or civil defence in Kuwait, the organisation assists the public during many disasters that happen within the regions of Kuwait and the aim is to provide protection to life and property from fires, collapses, events and natural disasters and their prevention. Moreover, Kuwait's Fire Force like many different international government organisations use social media platforms to market the services before, during and after crises, which takes us to a key research area that has not been searched for Kuwait as how effective and what strategies are being used by the organisation to utilise digital marketing.

To this end, the main research questions this paper seeks to answer is:

How effective are digital marketing strategies when applied to public administration for crisis management?

To answer this question, the overlaps between digital marketing strategies, public administration models and crisis management are discussed, and the applicability of these concepts tested using primary data collected through interviews and secondary data collected through Twitter. This enables to see the reach of social media communication and how when this is integrated with the larger digital marketing strategy can lead to better public engagement.

1.1 Digital marketing, public administration and social media

Several studies focus on how e-participation is being promoted by use of social media by public administration and governments. However, it is imperative to understand how social media is implemented in the context of digital marketing before understanding how this can be efficient in bringing the public closer and ensuring communications are reliable. Researchers (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002) postulate that one of the pivotal reasons that governments implement digital marketing strategy through use of social media is to change the way bureaucracy is able to engage better with the public. The government organisations were described earlier using the old public administration model and this model postulated that these organisations had a lot of red tape and bureaucratic. The New Public model that is used by researchers show that organisations including public administrative units of the government are more dynamic and ministries and government authorities are using the digital marketing principles well in the public-sector environment. In the framework of the new model, the focus is on the outcome's contrary to the old administrative model where the focus is on outputs (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000). The New Public Service is a more recent model that shows that the administration is no longer isolated from public individuals, but they play a huge and significant role. The New Public Service model also argues that business and digital marketing principles used by governments alone will not be enough and only through making them part of the administrative activity will they remain actively involved and constantly engaged. This requires and necessitates the need for governments to constantly communicate with and reach out to the public in order to ensure process efficiency (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000).

Researchers argue that when the new public service model is being used for e-government adoption, the public become the core of the process around which the government would revolve (Dunleavy et al., 2008). This is to a great extent seen as an improvement as this engages better with the public, however, there is a huge criticism that this still does not improve transparency about the government policies in most countries. Table 1 provides an analysis of the three models given the review done by Denhardt and Denhardt (2000).

Table 1   Public service model

Aspect	OPA	NPM	NPS
Public individuals	The government organisation or the public administrative body are superior, and all other public individuals and agencies are considered below the government	Public in this model are able to utilise the government services and are deemed to be customers of the government	This model considers the public to be the core of the government around which democratic processes revolve – this leads to the public being considered the most important part of the framework of the government
Process	The key focus for this model is on the outputs	The key focus for this model is on the results	The key focus for this model is on the outcomes
Technology usage	Technology is being passively used and governments use technology in order to convey information to the public or technology is used essentially for public to submit online forms	In this model there is more responsiveness in terms of communication and technology, or specialised software is being used to ensure that the communication between the public and government is improved	The spirit of democracy is enhanced, and this is the point of using e-government digital marketing techniques. Social media platforms are used by the government heavily in order to ensure that e-participation is enhanced
Policy and decision making	It follows a top-down approach whereby flow of information is from the government to the people	The decisions are taken by the government; however, the views of the public are always considered	The public usually initiate policy changes and in this case, information flows are both ways from governments as well as the customers. The needs of the public are responded to by the governments

E-government or digital marketing by governments can also be segmented given the services that are being offered as well as considering the beneficiaries of the service which could be the public, charities or non-profit organisations, business organisations or in some cases even government employees. The categories thus encompass Citizen-to-Government services (C2G), Government-to-Citizen services (G2C), Government-to-Government (G2G) services or Citizen-to-Government (C2G) services (Al Nagi and Hamdan, 2009).

From the evidence presented in the table, it is clear that for government's digital marketing policies to work efficiently, it is imperative that there is more openness to

using technologies under the New Public Services model (NPS) with an integrated framework of democracy. Similar to digital marketing strategies, the NPS postulates that citizens are to be at the core of the process. It is noteworthy that Kuwait has a semi-democratic political system and unlike other Middle Eastern countries that are completely not democracies, the government has to find the right balance to ensure that the public are more responsive and are able to initiate changes to policies. For e-government and digital marketing practices for the government to work, public individuals could be encouraged to use services at a more basic level – in terms of making queries or access information. Some categories of e-services could also work much better in partial democracies. Two-way communications could be made possible by technologies and social media platforms, it could offer flexibility in terms of availability of information 24X7, offer customer services that are enhanced and can result in businesses savings costs in terms of information accessibility or reducing transactional costs.

1.2   Social media in crisis

Crisis is defined as "*A critical change in an important variable that endangers or destroys either parts of or the entire system*" (Glaesser, 2004, p.12). The design principles that are applicable in the commercial digital marketing arena can be applied in crisis situations (Chandra et al., 2015). In essence, there is an overlap in such principles for ensuring that the decisions and knowledge that are relevant can be manifested through the methods, artefacts, systems and processes (Mirbabaie et al., 2020). One such artefact that can be used for digital marketing is social media. With the advent of internet technologies and the proliferation of such technologies has led to a dramatic growth in the use of social media in the Middle East. Studies show that internet penetration in the Middle Eastern regions is extremely high with 97% of population having access to such technologies followed by Bahrain with 93% access and UAE with 92% access. There is a widespread diffusion of these technologies with the social media platforms being used for public engagement (Dennis et al., 2016). Though the growth and use of social media platforms are high in the Kingdom, studies (Dennis et al., 2016) show that the arguments supporting social media as an effective tool that brings together government and the public could weigh more in democratic societies. In case of autocratic societies, researchers posit that these diplomatic efforts and usage of social media reflect more the existing regime's agenda and that there is some resistance from the public to participate in such efforts.

There is potential for social media to be used during time of crisis, while traditional methods are limited like television, radio and newspapers (Kavanaugh et al., 2012) it is still believed that traditional methods must be used alongside digital marketing. This can raise the challenge of communication with the public, as postulated by researchers (Daj and Chirca, 2009) who say that during crisis there should be a constant activity in social media communication. They also say that these messages should be posted more frequently than normal even if the organisation's social media communication during normal times is not high as this improves effectiveness during crisis.

On the other hand, Alexander (2014) found that there are procedures suggested to be used during crisis to overcome the challenges of communication which encompasses listening functions, monitoring situations and crowd sourcing, adding that it is difficult to analyse the information during crisis. The author found that this can be controlled with the above methods which when used effectively can provide government officials insight

on how to effectively communicate with the public during crisis. However, it is imperative to note that there might be a negative side to using social media. The researcher postulates that social media can create reactions from the public which can result in panic. The researcher cites an example of 2018 floods in Kuwait and how social media has caused a lot of panic due to fake news and false information being fed and shared on digital media. At this point, the fire force of Kuwait had used digital marketing strategies for identifying such false information and helping take down such information through denial. This had helped calming the public through varied social media channels.

Thus, it can be said that social media can be used keeping in mind the commercial digital marketing concepts as it would be suitable particularly to overcome the challenges pertaining to dissemination of information or support Emergency Management Agencies in crisis at real-time (Ahmady and Uchida, 2020; Maniou and Veglis, 2020). Engagement through social media can thus be seen as an application of commercial digital marketing during crisis (Tsai et al., 2019).

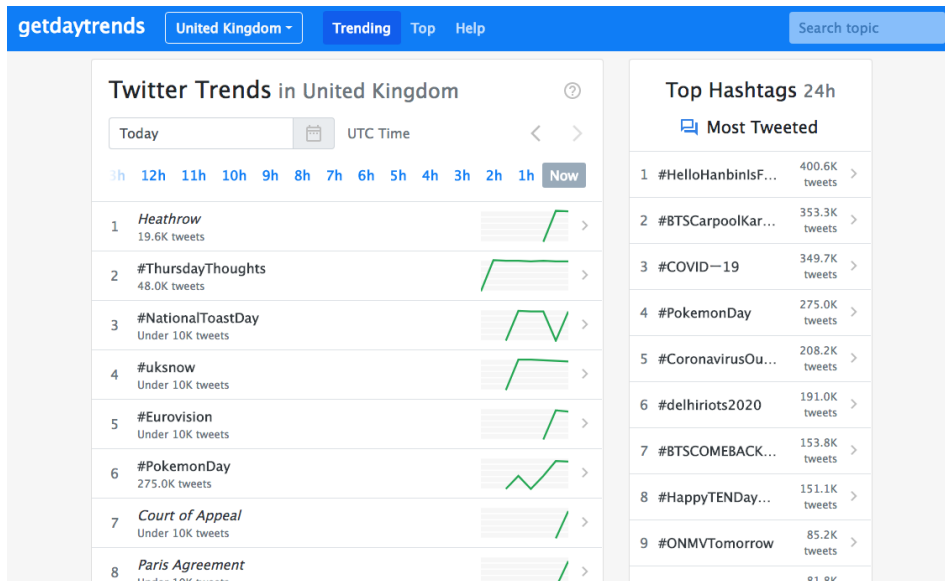## 1.3   Social media platforms

There are several technologies and platforms that are used by e-Governments to connect with communities and individuals. While research suggests that Facebook is preeminent social network globally, education, interest connections and business connections are popularly sought by users of LinkedIn. Studies suggest that the success of businesses to reach out to people and target groups depend primarily on the type of applications they choose and the extent to which these networking platforms enable members to find groups, friends or other communities to connect with them virtually. Web 2.0 technologies have also paved way for photo-sharing tools and sites like Snapfish, Flickr or content creation and sharing tools such as Wikis and media sites whereby users are able to create as well as disseminate content effectively and efficiently.

Bryer and Zavattaro (2011) postulate that there are several social media platforms that governments use. The author argues that networks and social media platforms provide an opportunity for the public to participate better with the government processes. This is also used commonly by governments specially to counter any mistrust that the public have in the bureaucracy that usually occur between proverbial doors that are closed and are usually away from the eyes of the public. In this research, the author looks at different platforms including Facebook which is a popular networking site to keep in touch with family, friends and communities and enables creation and sharing of information; Twitter which enables connected members to disseminate shorter messages frequently using 280 character-tweets and embed videos, links and pictures; Instagram which is a photo-sharing and video-sharing service which can also be integrated well with other websites and platforms, blog which is shortened form on weblog whereby it is an alternative to maintaining information chronicle and diary-type commentary. Among all social media platforms, Twitter has more updated information and can be used for digital marketing although there could be restrictions in certain countries which reduces its usefulness. In Kuwait, however, Twitter is being used by government officials as an information dissemination channel (Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

Twitter is one of the most used platforms during crisis. Yin et al. (2012) and Kavanaugh et al. (2012) also believed that platforms carried large volume of information. Social media platforms provide active communication during crisis (Alexander, 2014; Wukich, 2016; Kavanaugh, 2012). For instance, the UK department of health and social

care which is a government department responsible for health and adult social care aspects in England has used social media effectively to feed public information through using digital marketing strategy of interaction. The strategy ensures that the public awareness is high and thereby false information, fake news is avoided and that an interaction-style communication is made possible (as shown in Figures 1 and 2). During crisis social media can have a positive effect towards the public when the platforms are used for interaction between government organisations and the public is accessible (Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

Figure 1 Interaction-style communication England HSC (see online version for colours)


Worldwide government usage of social media and messages running through the platforms during disaster phases can cause challenged and difficult communication with the public. Alexander (2014) has suggested ways to improve the communication challenge with the public by developing effective messaging strategies mentioned previously. Adding from findings of the literature that messaging strategies present a more comprehensive message typology.

A 24×7 crisis coordination centre was established by the Australian government (Imran et al., 2015) in Canberra. The aim of this centre was to handle all operational facilities with 100 officers monitoring the speed and high-secured communication linked to video conferencing facilities that have been established. This is done to ensure that the government is able to handle any emergencies from natural disasters to man-made ones (Emergency planning, 2011) and effective digital marketing strategies have been deployed with the aim to increase public interaction and to ensure two-way communication occurs. This agency successfully handled the earthquake that occurred in Australia in 2010. Compared to this, nothing much has been done by Kuwait's fire force or the government council as this is seen as a one-way information portal. No other government bodies or agencies also have communication channels facilitating two-way communications have been established. If similar strategies like what has been done by

the Australian government are taken, it could ensure that Kuwait fire force is successful in implementing digital marketing and disaster response will significantly be improved. This will also help to weed out any false information feeds before, during as well as after the crisis has occurred. This is part of the 2035 vision.

Figure 2   HSC coronavirus update (see online version for colours)
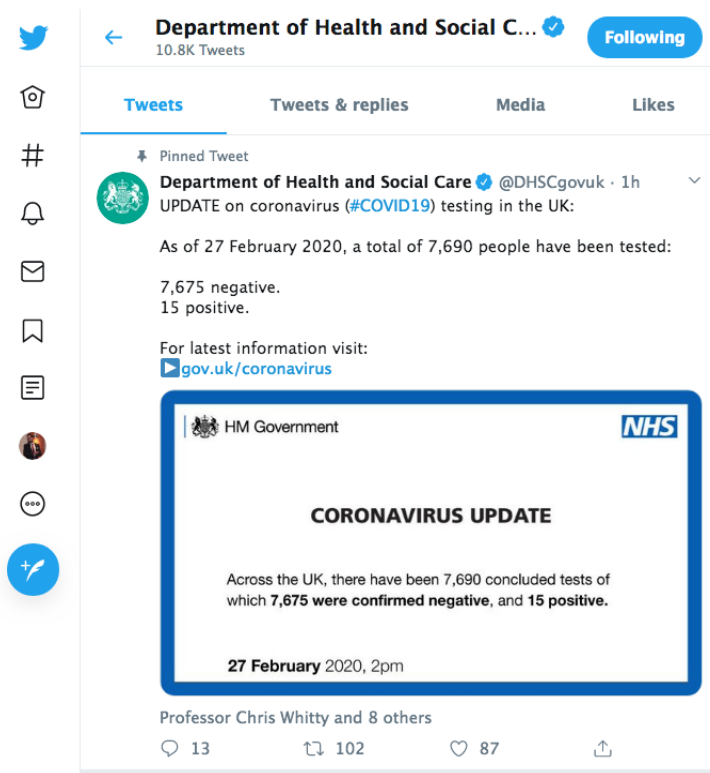
Further looking into platforms in social media that are being used traditionally by the Public Information Officer (PIO) relied on providing information about crisis events (Hughes and Palen, 2012). The public expect faster communication and information to be available which now a PIO can face challenges in this area as they used to market the services through radio and public speech or televised news, with the new age of digital marketing government organisation tend you use the platforms to send messages and interact with the public faster, thus having PIO's in coordination centres like the Australian 24/7 national coordination centre (Imran et al., 2015) is seen to be relevant nowadays and can have a better outcome. Finding that more awareness posts for minor crisis than major crisis (Alexander, 2014; Kavanaugh, 2012) both relate to this finding.

As seen previously the procedures that were suggested to use during crisis by Alexander in 2012 listening function, monitoring a situation and crowd sourcing were found to be used by PIO (Hughes and Palen, 2012) and the Australian coordination centre (Imran et al., 2015) which can be agreed of its effectiveness in digital marketing and communication strategy.

The literature review points out that fewer agencies employ interactive tactics, which is seen as an important strategy to be used later on in the research, looking for better digital marketing strategies to be implemented in government organisations, which is believed to be very important for Kuwait fire force. Furthermore, content issues like micro blog messages, which is found by (Kavanaugh, 2012) can be problematic because it is short and brief, this can be argued as the messages need to brief and straight to the point to reach the public rather than having long messages that do not affect the reader.

This suggests more work is needed to pursue the full potential of social media and digital marketing. Alexander (2014) found that institutes can help in this matter, Kuwait fire force do not have these institutes, adding that data size during crisis can be difficult to analyse (Yin et al., 2012) which relates to institutes and systems that can help with this issue.

1.4   Data collection and methodology

This research aims to answer the question "How effective are digital marketing strategies when applied to public administration for crisis management?" To answer this question, qualitative primary data is collected through interviews as the research follows interpretivism philosophy. Given COVID-19 restrictions at the point of data collection including lockdown, the initial plan of face-to-face interviews had to be moved to using online sources. The interview participants were officers from different department like Training and Development Affairs, public relation affairs and social media department. The individuals were chosen due to their rich knowledge and information about the organisation as they hold leading positions and departments related to the study, more specifically in the development and media sector which will enrich this study and help the research. The interview questions are structured into three parts. The first sub-section focuses on understanding the tools that are used by KSFD and their digital marketing strategy. The second set of questions focus on understanding the specific skills sets in the digital marketing area that the staff currently possess along with development plans (for skills) that KSFD has for its staff. This will also help understanding to what extent KSFD is well-suited in the contemporary world in terms of staff possessing the necessary technical skills as well as awareness of the ever-changing and dynamic digital marketing landscape. The third set of questions focus on application of digital marketing strategies in crisis management.

The interviews were not as long as it would have been as the authorities were engaged with the crisis situation. In order to substantiate the interview answers and to explore further, secondary data has been used by scraping information from the social media pages, more specifically, Twitter over a 7-day period.

From the literature, it was clear that there was a dearth of research academically on digital marketing adoption in crisis situations. The interviews were conducted to get further insights on how digital marketing strategy has been applied to communicate effectively during crisis. The interviews also helped understand the contemporary practices that were used and the digital marketing channels that were used frequently by government organisations.

This research looks at these areas, in order to probe the types of digital marketing channels that the government organisations use.

2   Secondary data analysis

Secondary data has been obtained from the social media pages of the organisation. This has been done in order to explore their pages, understand the trends and to substantiate the interview answers obtained from the officials. The analysis is exploratory in nature and data obtained is descriptive.

    An analysis of Twitter page of the organisation has been done using the tools TalkWalker and foller.me. Data has been gathered on 17/04/2020. Out of the 17,500 followers, 34.5% were female and 65.6% male. People in the age range of 18–44 are followers of the official page of which 37.5% of them are in the age range 18–24, 25% are in the age range 25–34 and 37.5% are in the age range 35–44. Over the last 7 days, there has been 471 conversations where the reach of the tweets is 5.1 million people. A sentiment analysis shows that there were 41% positive and 31% negative tweets. Figure 3 shows the number of tweets over a 7-day period. Figure 4 shows the conversations and sentiment for a 7-day period. Figure 5 summarises the tweets and sentiments.

Figure 3   Tweets over a 7-day period (see online version for colours)
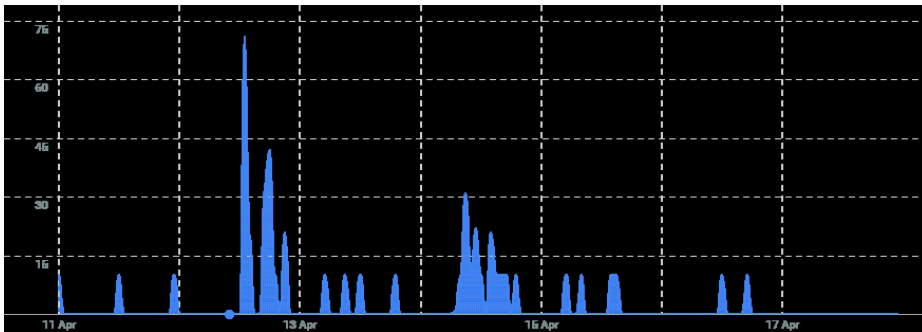
Please note the conversations are in Arabic. This diagram has been added as a summary
to show activities and whether they are positive or negative (sentiments). Not all of these
activities relate to the crisis, hence have not been translated.

Figure 4   Sentiment analysis of tweets (see online version for colours)
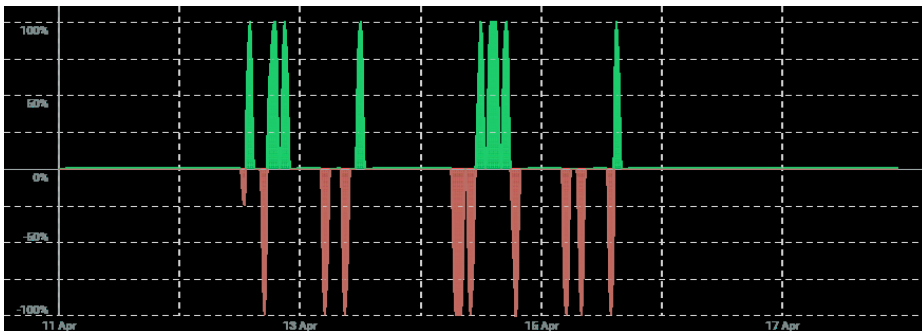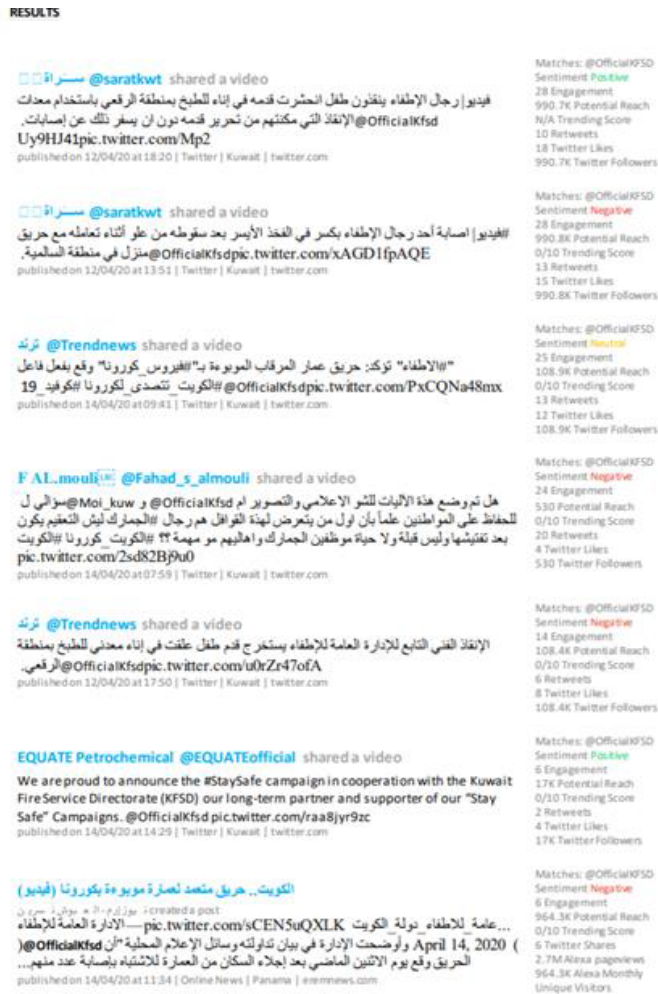
Figure 5 Top tweets, sentiment analysis, reach and trending score (see online version for colours)

Translation of these tweets is provided in Appendix.

3 Discussions and findings

From the interviews it was evident two people are responsible for media information dissemination with one person responsible for the social media marketing division and the other officer being responsible for the communications within the Public Relations group. The captain currently in charge of the DM and social media communications confirmed that this is going to be added to the organisational hierarchy shortly and would become a sub-department in its own right. Two of the interviewed officials believe that there is no social media communications division or department, and it all comes within the purview of the IT department while the others think that the PR department also takes care of social media communication. The remaining two officials interviewed believe there is no specific workforce division that deals with the social media and digital

marketing. These officials believed that a few employees within the KFSD manage the social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The next set of questions comprised six questions focusing on Digital Marketing Tools used and the strategic approach in the immediate future and in the long-term. All the interviewees mentioned Twitter and website.

One of them thought that Twitter is popular, and a Facebook page was just recently launched. Four employees mentioned they also use Instagram for communication. Figure 6 shows a break-down of the tools used by KFSD

Figure 6   Tools used for social media DM communication (see online version for colours)
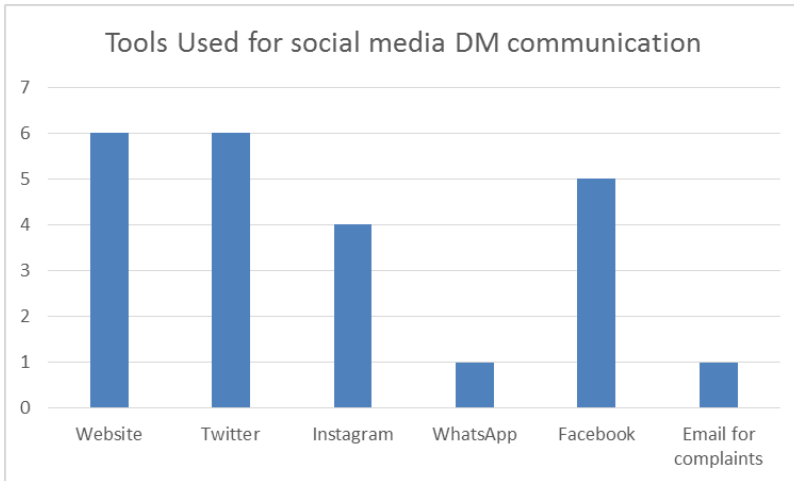
All employees agreed that the most popular choice was Twitter and that most engagement was on Twitter channel. To quote the interviewee:

> "We have one main Web site, which is which has been down now for almost two months due to a hacker. And this is not an off unfortunate event that we do not know how to fix."

The next question highlighted discusses about other methods used for communication and most of them point out that they commonly use the radio and the local TV channels as this has a very high reach, and many people have access to these – including the older population in the country.

The use of emails seemed to garner different answers. While most employees did say that emails are not used, one of them mentioned that emails were for inter-department communication while another mentioned that even for inter-departmental communication and communication among employees emails were never used. The answers were quite on the extreme ends, and it seemed that there was not a very clear guidance or awareness amongst employees in terms of how/when emails are used.

For instance, to quote interviewee 4, "We do not use email at all to communicate with the public. And we do not use email also to communicate with our employees in the organisation". Interviewee 2 on the other hand mentions, "We use emails, just not for public". Interviewee 5 corroborates this statement claiming emails are not used stating that it is older form of communication. To quote the interviewee, "No email or letters are used due to old methods." Contrary to this, interviewee 6 mentions, "we use emails and

WhatsApp for complaints". Interviewee 1 also mentions use of email saying, "We usually we asked to with old methods, some through phone and some through official letters. That's how we communicate within the department with officers and employees. It's always through email and letters, through Fax".

Relating to cost-effectiveness and efficiency, all of the interviewees agreed that social media is indeed a very cost-effective measure. They felt that when used in the right manner, social media will be effective in reaching to a large number of people and this will very much be essential especially when dealing with crisis or while passing on information in a timely manner. It is interesting to note that interviewee 2 mentions that social media and digital marketing are effective, however, there is a steep learning curve for KFSD to ensure it is efficiently used. To quote the interviewee, "*However, efficiency depends on how well we understand digital marketing – still more to learn*". Similarly, interviewee 2 mentioned, "*We lack the professionalism towards digital marketing*".

The next question was about success of using online platforms. Several points were discussed by the interviewees. For instance, while 2 of the interviewees mentioned Twitter as being the most effective platform, one of them mentioned that there is a lot more engagement on Instagram. Interviewee 5 for example mentions, "*Instagram that has high views while twitter is very low in views*". Similar to this, interviewee 6 discusses success across all platforms based on the number of followers. Engagement through content sharing and commenting are also deemed to be success factors as interviewee 6 quotes, "*I believe it is successful, because the feedback from the public is always positive. We do have a measure through seeing the number of followers and through the comments, today we can see the comments with positive, which shows us how successful our official accounts in all the social media platform*". Interviewee 1 mentions that there is no specific measurement for success and is quoted saying, "*I believe personally it has been successful although could be much better, but to how we measure the success, we do not have a specific, specific process to measure the success of the effectiveness of our digital marketing use because we're still new at this. We do not have enough expertise around digital marketing. We still do not have the capability to fully use and understand how to measure the success.*" Interviewee 2, had a different opinion about success saying that in the current crisis, it is indeterminate while the last year plans were successful with 2018 being not so effective. To quote the interviewee, "*For me I have been around since the flooding in 2018 and 2019 and the 2020 covid-19 crisis I would say we failed in 2018 and 2019 as we did not know how to communicate and use digital marketing correctly. In the current crisis I cannot judge yet on the success, but we changed the way we use social media in general and posting more frequently*".

In terms of immediate plans, all the employees mentioned about the growing issue with the COVID-19 crisis and that their plan is to use social media channels to pass on information from the Government, to reassure the public and to make sure they are not panicking. All interviewees also agreed that posts to social media are done more frequently and officials are all working together to ensure that fake news is weeded out and that all citizens are able to have access to accurate information in a timely manner.

Interviewees mentioned that there are plans for Digital Marketing strategies and over the next few years the priority is to set up resources who are trained in dissemination of information. They all agree on the need to have a clearer strategic focus and to ensure that all channels are integrated. The officials mentioned that not only KFSD but also other public service departments are working alongside the government to facilitate better communication and e-government strategy to reach out to the citizens. For instance,

interviewee 1 mentions, "*whole government is going digitally and trying to use the full capability of digital marketing, especially by seeing global or internationally recognised countries that are very good with digital marketing and how they use the full potential of digital marketing.*" In developing capabilities, the aspect of training is also seen as an important point to consider as interviewee 2 mentions, "*think it is because we lack the knowledge and training but the head management should send officers to train and study digital marketing to better implement.*" One interviewee mentions that a top-down approach should be taken as the higher officials first need to be made aware of the impact that digital media has and the organisation as a whole should revamp and digitise and says, "*We need to understand digital marketing and use it more because the higher ranking officers, they do not understand this digitalisation. They do not think it is important*".

In terms of skilled resources, the officials are united in specifying that while people within the directorate have degrees pertaining to marketing or understand basic digital marketing concepts, there needs to be more training. One of the interviewees also mention that while training plays a major role in ensuring capabilities of the organisation is increased, personal experience and learning through work is also important as not everything can be learnt out of a book. Understanding and handling digital media is different as information is disseminated faster and interactions are permitted, employees need to also use their discretion on engaging with the public and is quoted saying, "*I learnt to be very patient especially with social media and the information every second goes around. Most of the posts during crisis from random and non-official sources are from old or from movies which only add panic to the public unless we stop it.*"

4   Key findings

4.1   Multichannel integration and trust

While the interviewees have acknowledged that they use multi-channel digital marketing strategy, this is shown to be inconsistent. Researchers (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kannan, 2017) assume that it is imperative for digital marketing strategy to consistently use all marketing channels in a consistent manner. This will ensure that the consumers (citizens in this case) trust brands that use all digital marketing channels in a similar manner and show the same information. When there is discrepancy of information or information not available across all sources or channels, research has shown that there is a lack of interaction between the customers and the brands and the marketing strategies are not deemed to be effective in achieving its end goal. In a similar manner, when governments or government agencies use multiple digital marketing channels, researchers postulate that information should be consistently updated and made available across these channels. Looking back at the NPS model of governance discussed in the literature, for citizens to become active customers and participate actively in digital marketing strategies of the government trust needs to be created. From the analysis, it is clear that the Facebook page is not updated and used frequently while Twitter is used more. On the other hand, it is hard to determine the extent to which the website is updated and how these are all integrated given that the website has been hacked recently. In a crisis scenario, trust is particularly important as this is the basis for citizens to abide by the regulations and the demands set by the government (Van de Walle, 2017). Citizen

engagement can be achieved only when the trust is established which is seen very weak for Kuwait government organisations at the time being. Also, from the analysis, it can be seen that while there are retweets and mentions, the engagement score is not as high which indicates that there is no two-way communication between the organisation and the citizens. One of the primary reasons for social media communication and adoption of digital marketing strategies in e-governments is to move to the NPS model where citizens feel included. The spirit of democracy is not enhanced, transparency and governance are not improved when the two-way communication and interaction needs proposed by the NPS model are not met (Navarro, 2016). This also poses a greater issue especially with crisis management. If citizens are unable to interact and communicate, they would gradually lose interest in the social media channels proposed thereby leading to communications to larger groups becoming ineffective in the future as the reach is restricted.

4.2   Content and digital marketing talent management

From the interviews, it is evident that there is no specialised team supporting the content creation and digital marketing strategies of the department. Having a small specialist team focussed on content management and maintaining consistency is important. Hence, the first issue to consider here is assigning resources both human resources and economic resources. Specially trained human resources who understand platform management and are able to reach out to the public effectively.

The second issue to consider is that content creation and management for social media channels require special expertise and careful consideration needs to be given to how information is being disseminated to the customers. This is essentially useful when large-scale crisis situations need to be managed like what we have seen during COVID-19. Researchers (da Silva Avanzi et al., 2017) postulate that for crisis management, one of the main steps is issue management whereby it is pivotal for identification, tracking and manageability of information. There are several potential implications in issue management practices and how vigilant monitoring becomes imperative and internet becomes part of the critical communication process. Researchers postulate that information management in crises plays a major role in the safety and wellbeing of the stakeholders and in case of public organisations such as the Kuwait fire force, this refers to the public safety. When the organisation is not able to clearly create and disseminate content in a timely manner, this results in public safety not being addressed efficiently and hence intensifies that potential damage that the crisis can cause. Information dissemination in crisis management is thus a pivotal step which helps to protect the organisation as well as the stakeholders (citizens and general public in this case) or reduce the impact that the threat can inflict (Roshan et al., 2016).

The organisation's employees who are responsible for other activities and are in the front-line of crisis solving mechanism will not be able to effectively disseminate information in real-time. The use of new technologies and social media in particular are useful when disseminating timely information and also take preventative course of actions before a crisis becomes more serious. When employees who are not dedicated in creating content are responsible for it, there is a time lag and the crisis by this time could have caused irreversible damage. Technology as argued by Zhao (2019) now enables audiences from being passive to active and hence they are able to now play a more dynamic role in its management. Researchers (Spaling et al., 2018) also argue that these

technologies have disruptive power through aggregation and can have huge influence in how communication flows and reaches the larger population in a timely manner.

The findings from the interviews, analysis of the social media accounts of Kuwait fire force and discussion themes mentioned it would be essential for the government organisation to ensure that their digital marketing strategies work towards achieving the NPS model of e-government. For NPS model to work efficiently, it is essential that the government bodies consider the public to be the core of all of its processes and procedures and take a democratic approach for problem resolution.

Radical changes and implementations are needed by assigning human and economic resources – having specific resources (not just IT department staff) but people who are responsible for content generation, management, and governance. Consideration can be given to using external services or agencies to develop a good digital marketing framework. Further looking to integrate all communication channels – all digital marketing channels should produce the same content and citizens should be engaged in the same manner. This will help ensure consistency in the information that is being sent across.

It is seen by establishing an online monitoring system – an alert system that will help monitor the newsgroups, websites, and content of all other digital marketing channels. This will also help with the issue of negative content being generated on Instagram. An online monitoring system will allow for comments while ensuring the negative ones are filtered. This would provide a more 'democratic solution' compared to turning off comments. This discourages the two-way dialogue and engagement of citizens.

Government organisations need the training and development – while having staff that are competent is important, it is also equally important to have a training and development plan in place that will help staff keep abreast of the technological advancements as well as familiarising themselves with the developments in the virtual world. While from the interviews, it is clear that the officials are aware of this gap, it is unclear whether or not they have a training plan in place. The Captain in-charge of the social media mentioned about the training courses that are offered by Government institutions and local training centres, this needs to be formalised and part of the staff personal and professional development.

Understanding influencers and connecting with them – this is a key step in crisis management. Influencers will be greatly useful to make an impact and particularly for information dissemination in a large scale. This makes it very much useful in crisis management as larger population can be reached and impactful messages can be conveyed to the citizens (especially when there is a need for adherence to specific instructions, influencers can motivate citizens to follow the rules). Also using other channels – blogging is also seen to be a good way to connect with online communities and this can help expand the reach that Kuwait fire force has with the citizens.

A clear strategic vision – while the organisation (Kuwait fire force) has been engaging with social media, the strategic approach is missing. It is imperative to have guidelines and strategic plan set up which will describe the language, approach and tone that is dialogue-appropriate in an online environment that is dynamic. This is essential as the tone is less formal and distant compared to the official traditional communications that government agencies usually adopt. This is needed to ensure that citizens now become participants and engage well across all channels used.

5 Conclusion

This paper is aimed to investigate the digital marketing (e-government factors) that were effective in social media communications during crisis situations within the context of a government department (Kuwait Fire Force). The theoretical framework of e-government models suggested by Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) was used to evaluate which of these approaches are used by the organisation and to also provide a guideline on how government agencies can engage better with the citizens and make them the centre point around which content is being created and facilitate better engagement. Primary data collected from officials at Kuwait fire force through interviews to understand and evaluate the tools that they are using currently and the extent to which they deem this to be successful.

This helped to also assess the extent to which social media channels and strategies are being deployed in the face of problems and how effective these were. The pandemic situation made it possible to see how the trends in social media and official communications were specifically targeting on information dissemination and how the citizens engaged with the government bodies. The strategic vision of Kuwait's government aims to leverage digital technologies both in the public and private sector that will help bolster its e-government offerings and engage the younger population more ("New Kuwait", 2020).

Conflict of interest

The Authors declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Introductory questions (demographic questions)

- Could you tell me your rank within the organisation?

- What is the size of the organisation (in terms of number of employees)?

- Do you have a marketing (or digital marketing) department (or personnel)

Digital marketing tools used

- What are the digital marketing tools your organisation uses?

- What are the other communication methods you use (e.g., telephone, email, letter)?

- Do you feel it is cost-effective and efficient to use digital marketing to disseminate in-formation about crisis?

- Has it been successful? If so, how do you measure success?

- What are your key priorities for digital marketing strategy:

In the immediate future?

This year?

The next couple of years?

Competencies, skills and gaps

- In terms of digital marketing, what are your main skills/competencies your staff have?

- How would you like to develop these?

- What, in your opinion are the skills/capabilities that your organisation does not possess in terms of digital marketing?

- Do you see how these skills can be addressed in the coming months/years so that your digital marketing strategies are harnessed better?

E-Government

- How has social media use affected bureaucracy?

- How have you used social media in the current crisis situation (COVID-19)?

If so, how?

Has it been effective? How do you know?

- Could you explain how Kuwait fire force used social media earlier for crisis?

Was this effective? How did you measure success?

- What are the lessons learnt from the current and previous crisis situation (in terms of digital marketing)? What are the digital marketing aspects you would change and how?

- Do you think some departments are better at using digital marketing compared to the others? If so, why?

- Further comments?

Appendix 2: Translation of Tweets

First tweet translate:

Tweeted by @saratkwt: shared video: Firemen rescue a child's foot that was stuck in a cooking pot with rescue equipment without any injury to the child's foot.

Tweeted by @saratkwt: shared video: Fireman injured and broke his thigh after falling from high grounds during a fire fighting mission in a house at alsalmiya area.

Tweeted by @trendnews: Kuwait Fire Force Official's confirm that the fire broken out in one of the quarantine buildings was done deliberately by someone. Hashtags: (#Kuwait_fights_Corona) (#Covid_19)

Tweeted by @Fahad_s_almouli: My question is were the fire force equipment put in place for showing off and taking pictures or to preserve and protect the citizens @officialkfsd @moi_kuw? knowing that the first to be exposed to the virus are the customs employees, so why is sterilization done after inspection and not before? or the health and lives of the customs employees not important enough?

Hashtags: #Kuwait_Corona #Kuwait

Tweeted by @trendnews: Fire rescue save a child legs after being stuck in alregai area @officialkfsd

Tweeted by @equateofficial: We are proud to announce the #staysafe campaign in cooperation with the Kuwait fire service directorate (KFSD) our long-term partner and supporter of our 'Stay Safe' campaigns @officialkfsd

Tweeted hashtag #Kuwait_Fire: Kuwait fire force has announced on April 14 2020 that last Monday a deliberate fire broke out in a quarantine building and evacuated the quarantined.