

Contested Digital Publics and Public Sentiment: CEO Influencers and Public Relations in Social Media Firestorms

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Abstract

In today's hyperconnected communication landscape, public sentiment is no longer a passive reflection of public affairs, but it is a catalytic force that mobilises collective outrage, shapes reputational narratives, and drives the escalation of social media firestorms. This study explores how public sentiment dynamics contribute to the mobilisation of these firestorms, particularly those targeting CEO influencers in Malaysia. Despite growing scholarship on digital crises, limited research addresses how emotional intensity, platform visibility, and social conformity converge to amplify reputational threats. This qualitative study adopts an interpretive paradigm, utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to conduct in-depth interviews with 15 netizens and 5 CEO influencers. Data is analysed using NVivo 15. Findings reveal two superordinate themes: *Public Sentiment* and *Digital Amplification*, each comprising subordinate dynamics such as online outrage, algorithmic visibility, networked participation, media virality, and the agenda-setting role of key opinion leaders. Firestorms are not simply eruptions of spontaneous criticism; they are mobilised through emotionally resonant content, strategic digital behaviour, and the performative logics of platform engagement. From a public relations perspective, this study underscores the urgent need for real-time sentiment monitoring, narrative agility, and ethical responsiveness in navigating the volatile dynamics of digital publics. In an era where reputational outcomes are shaped not only by facts but by visibility, emotion, and credibility, this research advances a deeper understanding of how firestorms evolve and what it takes to survive them.

Keywords: *public sentiment, social media firestorms, CEO influencers, public relations, digital activism, online reputation management*

1.0. Introduction

The rise of social media has radically reconfigured how public sentiment is formed, expressed, and mobilised. Once designed for social connection, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter now function as potent arenas for digital discourse, emotional expression, and reputational scrutiny. In Malaysia, where social media penetration is among the highest in the region [1], these platforms serve as a vital infrastructure for public engagement. Hashtags, algorithmic curation, and real-time sharing afford netizens the ability to voice dissent, circulate critiques, and escalate issues to national prominence. The immediacy and virality of these interactions have transformed everyday users into active agents in shaping public narratives.

While scholars have acknowledged social media's role as a "barometer of public sentiment" [2], classic theories such as Lippmann's [3] concept of pseudo-environments and Grunig and Hunt's [4] models of strategic communication remain essential in understanding how perceptions are shaped and manipulated in mediated environments. Within this terrain, CEO influencers have emerged as new communicative archetype — business leaders who leverage personal social media visibility to humanise their organisations, promote brand narratives, and engage directly with audiences. Unlike conventional corporate executives who operate behind institutional boundaries, CEO influencers integrate their professional identity with influencer-style communication, using self-disclosure, authenticity, and personal branding to cultivate trust and emotional connection with stakeholders. Scholars increasingly describe CEO influencers as hybrid communicators who combine corporate leadership with personal branding strategies to strengthen organisational authenticity and stakeholder trust [5]. Their social presence humanises corporate messaging and fosters parasocial connections, yet it also blurs the boundary between personal and organisational identity, heightening vulnerability during online crises.

This heightened visibility, however, makes CEO influencers uniquely exposed to reputational volatility. As the symbolic faces of their brands, their personal actions and online statements are closely monitored and interpreted by digital publics. The blurred boundary between the individual and the organisation means that a personal controversy can rapidly evolve into a corporate crisis. In Malaysia, figures such as Vivy Yusof, Dato' Aliff Syukri, Dato' Seri Vida, and Tony Fernandes exemplify this convergence of business leadership and influencer culture — where entrepreneurial success, celebrity appeal, and public scrutiny coexist. Their prominence invites admiration but also amplifies risk, as any perceived misstep can trigger large-scale criticism.

One of the most powerful manifestations of such backlash is the social media firestorm — an intense wave of online condemnation directed at an individual or organisation, often initiated by a single controversial act or statement. Fuelled by emotional contagion, virality, and algorithmic reinforcement, firestorms escalate rapidly as users participate in sharing, commenting, and amplifying discontent. What distinguishes a firestorm from routine online criticism is its intensity, scale, and ability to influence public discourse and institutional responses [6]. Although the phenomenon has received growing attention in digital sociology and media studies, public relations scholarship has yet to adequately explain how emotional, technological, and social mechanisms interact to mobilise collective outrage.

In order to bridge this gap, this study examines how public sentiment dynamics contribute to the mobilisation of social media firestorms involving CEO influencers in Malaysia. Adopting a qualitative, phenomenological design through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research investigates how netizens and CEO influencers interpret and respond to digital controversies. From a public relations perspective, it explores how CEO influencers manage reputational threats and engage digital publics amidst volatile online conditions. The study aims to uncover how emotion, visibility, and social conformity transform digital interactions into coordinated expressions of outrage, positioning social media firestorms as socially constructed events shaped by both individual sentiment and the communicative affordances of digital platforms.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Drivers of Netizens' Participation in Social Media Firestorms

Emotional, psychological, and moral factors primarily drive the mobilisation of public sentiment during social media firestorms. Previous research identifies various motivations for participation, including altruistic concern, the need to seek justice, expressions of frustration, and retaliatory intent [7]. Emotions such as anger, indignation, and moral outrage have been shown to catalyse online engagement by providing individuals with a sense of purpose and social belonging [8]. Likewise, emotional contagion and cognitive dissonance influence how netizens collectively respond to perceived violations of social norms. However, participation in firestorms is rarely a purely emotional act; it is also reinforced by social mechanisms such as validation, recognition, and the desire for solidarity. Studies have shown that individuals are more likely to engage when they anticipate support or affirmation from like-minded communities [9]. This phenomenon reflects how collective emotion legitimises individual action, transforming personal grievances into networked activism. Moreover, ideological and identity-based motivations further strengthen participation, as individuals align their online expression with broader movements or moral causes [10]. Collectively, these studies reveal that netizen mobilisation arises from a confluence of emotional resonance, moral reasoning, and communal affirmation. Yet, much of this scholarship remains situated in Western contexts, with limited insight into how cultural values shape the interpretation of moral transgressions or social justice issues in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, where cultural and religious sensitivities influence online discourse, understanding the lived meanings behind participation requires a qualitative, interpretive lens — one capable of unpacking the interplay between emotion, morality, and public expression.

2.2 Platform Features and the Amplification of Outrage

While emotion motivates participation, the structure of social media platforms determines how outrage spreads. The minimal editorial control and participatory architecture of social media enable users to circulate content rapidly and collectively [11]. Algorithms prioritise engagement and visibility, amplifying emotionally charged posts that resonate within echo chambers [12]. As a result, firestorms are not merely spontaneous acts of collective anger but outcomes of platform logics that reward virality and controversy. Hashtags and trending tools, for instance, act as digital rallying points that allow users to coalesce around shared sentiments [13]. Research in the Malaysian context highlights how hashtags serve both expressive and organisational functions — signalling moral positions, mobilising communities, and amplifying calls for accountability [14], [15]. Micro- and nano-influencers, with their trusted followings, further intensify this process by personalising outrage and driving it into mainstream visibility. However, existing literature often examines amplification as a technical or algorithmic process, overlooking its *affective* and relational dimensions. Outrage does not spread solely because of algorithms; it proliferates because it taps into shared feelings of injustice, validation, and belonging. Few studies explore how platform design interacts with cultural discourse and emotional contagion, particularly in Malaysia's hybrid digital environment, where religion, identity, and commerce intersect. This gap underscores the need for qualitative exploration into how netizens and influencers themselves interpret and navigate such digital architectures during firestorms.

2.3 Consumer Empowerment and Brand Opposition in the Digital Space

Digital technologies have shifted the balance of power between brands and consumers, enabling individuals to shape perceptions, co-create experiences, and mobilise collective action [16], [17]. This process of *consumer empowerment* enhances agency and participation but also facilitates oppositional

behaviours such as anti-brand activism and brand hate [18], [19]. While empowerment fosters engagement through social media marketing and brand communities, it equally enables consumers to voice discontent and challenge brands in public arenas [20], [21]. Research shows that empowerment mediates online engagement outcomes: it strengthens loyalty when paired with positive brand experiences [22] but fuels negative reactions when moral or value misalignments occur. In these contexts, *anti-brand communities* emerge as relational spaces of shared dissatisfaction, where consumers exchange narratives of moral critique and resistance. Such opposition often reflects the same emotional intensity as brand love and, if mishandled, can escalate into digital firestorms. From a strategic perspective, empowerment represents a double-edged sword. Brands that encourage meaningful participation, transparent communication, and integrated omni-channel experiences can convert empowerment into sustained engagement [23]. Conversely, neglecting empowered publics amplifies reputational risks, as online communities can rapidly mobilise around perceived wrongdoing. In summary, consumer empowerment reshapes the dynamics of brand relationships by heightening both advocacy and opposition. Effective management requires acknowledging empowerment as a relational force — one that demands ethical responsiveness, dialogue, and agility to navigate the volatile expectations of digital publics.

3.0 Methods

In order to bridge the gap in research, this study addresses the limited understanding of how public sentiment operates within non-Western digital cultures. Past research has centred around Western contexts, often focusing on large-scale quantitative analyses of social media crises and influencer scandals [24], [25], [26]. Such studies have largely measured audience reactions through numerical metrics or computational models, overlooking the interpretive and experiential dimensions that shape how individuals engage with online outrage. Quantitative methods, while helpful in mapping trends, often overlook the nuanced psychological, emotional, and cultural dimensions that drive participation and perception in these events. This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate how public sentiment dynamics contribute to the mobilisation of social media firestorms in Malaysia. Therefore, qualitative design was chosen to address a critical gap in existing literature, where research on social media firestorms and influencer crises remains largely quantitative, descriptive, and dominated by Western contexts.

Qualitative inquiry allows for a deeper exploration of lived experiences and the contextual meanings participants attach to social phenomena [27]. This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that public sentiment and online behaviour are socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives of those directly involved [28]. Such an approach acknowledges that netizens' engagement in firestorms is not random, but shaped by moral reasoning, collective emotions, and social validation processes embedded in Malaysia's digital culture. Furthermore, Malaysia's communication environment is characterised by collectivist values, moral sensitivity, and hybrid online activism which are elements that are difficult to capture through numerical data alone. A qualitative approach allows these socio-cultural influences to emerge organically through participants' narratives [29]. As social media firestorms involving CEO influencers remain an emergent and underexplored phenomenon locally, this design provides the flexibility to uncover new conceptual patterns rather than test predetermined hypotheses.

IPA was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of how individuals make sense of their personal experiences and the meanings they construct from them. It reflects the "double hermeneutic" process — where participants make sense of their experiences, and the researcher interprets that sense-making within broader social and cultural contexts [30]. This analytical depth makes IPA particularly suited

for exploring how digital publics and CEO influencers navigate reputational crises and emotional turbulence in the online sphere [31]. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with two participant groups: (i) netizens aged 20–35 who have previously engaged in controversies involving CEO influencers, and (ii) CEO influencers who have personally experienced the impact of social media firestorms. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on the Klang Valley due to its high internet penetration, digital engagement, and business concentration. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, with redundancy observed by the ninth interview [32]. In total, 20 informants participated: 15 netizens and 5 CEO influencers.

This dual-perspective approach strengthened data triangulation and ensured a more balanced understanding of how reputational crises unfold and are perceived. Interview data were transcribed and analysed in NVivo 15 following iterative coding and reflexive memoing. To maintain analytical rigour, peer debriefing, audit trails, and verbatim excerpts were employed for transparency and traceability. Ultimately, the qualitative design allowed this study to illuminate the emotional, relational, and cultural mechanisms underlying public sentiment mobilisation, offering insights that extend beyond numerical representation to the meanings people ascribe to digital outrage, visibility, and influence in the Malaysian context.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

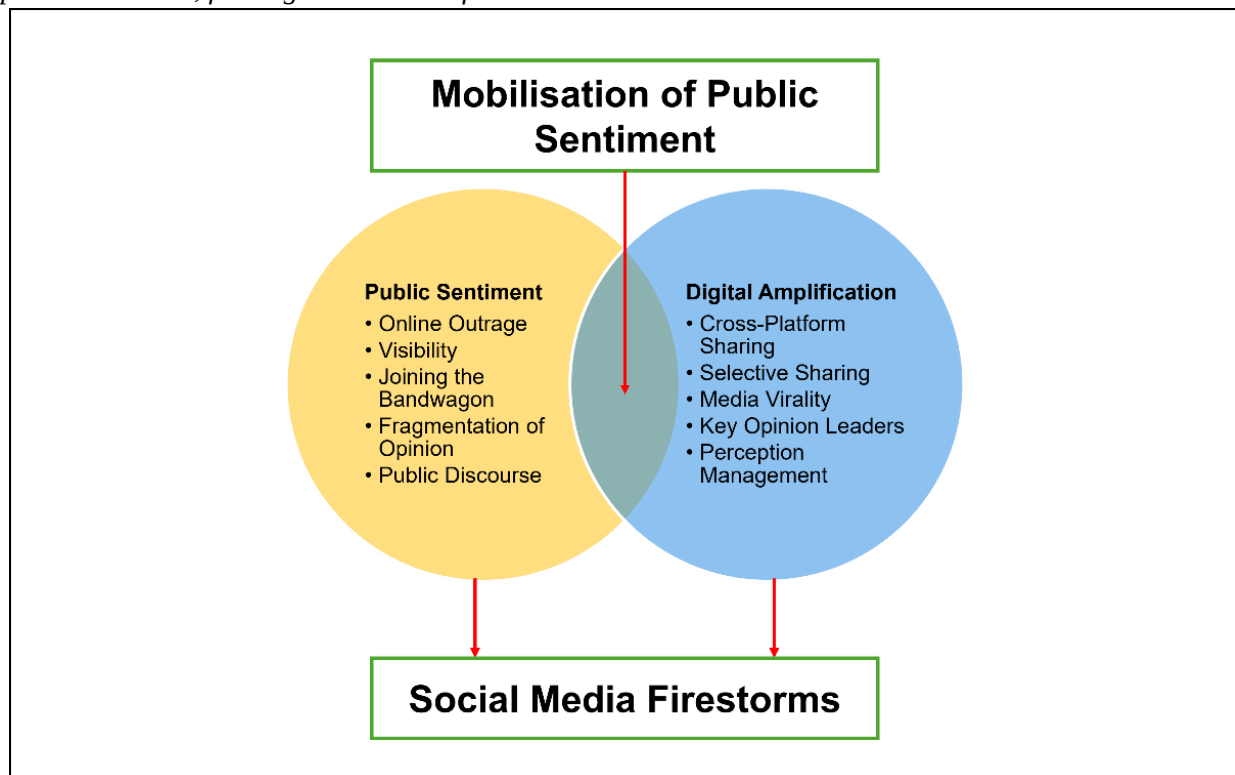
This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how netizens and CEO influencers in Malaysia make sense of their experiences during social media firestorms. This method was chosen to uncover how participants interpret, negotiate, and emotionally respond to the complex realities of digital outrage and reputational crises. By conducting in-depth interviews, the study delved into the subjective, relational, and emotional dimensions of participants' experiences as they navigated reputational turbulence online. The IPA approach was particularly suited for this inquiry, as it enabled a detailed examination of how meanings are constructed and reinterpreted within the fluid and often volatile context of social media. It also allowed the researcher to capture the dual perspective of both ordinary netizens and public figures, revealing how individual sense-making processes contribute to collective expressions of public sentiment [33].

Social media has redefined the landscape of public sentiment, transforming audiences from passive observers into active co-creators of discourse. Users no longer merely consume information but collectively construct and amplify dominant narratives that shape online opinion [34]. When these narratives gain traction, fuelled by emotional triggers and repetition, they contribute to the formation of online outrage and wider public sentiment [35]. Netizens often engage in digital controversies to seek validation, recognition, or moral alignment, especially when they anticipate support from their online communities [36]. For CEO influencers, this environment presents both opportunity and risk. Their online visibility makes them highly susceptible to scrutiny, where any perceived misstep may spiral into a reputational crisis [36]. Firestorms often tap into deeper emotional currents within society, enabling users to express outrage as a form of collective action or symbolic protest [37].

The findings of this study revealed two superordinate themes, each comprising subordinate dynamics representing the perspectives of both netizens and CEO influencers. As illustrated in Figure 1, public sentiment and digital amplification function as two interrelated forces that converge to mobilise collective outrage. This mobilisation serves as the catalyst for social media firestorms, driven by emotional intensity, visibility, and social conformity. These intertwined dynamics hold significant implications for public

relations practice, particularly in managing reputational risks and fostering ethical responsiveness within Malaysia's volatile digital culture (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Visual representation of how public sentiment and digital amplification converge to mobilise public sentiment, fuelling social media firestorms



4.1 Public Sentiment

Public sentiment on social media is often driven by emotionally charged reactions that quickly escalate into collective mobilisation. Emotions such as anger, moral indignation, and frustration act as powerful triggers, compelling netizens to participate in firestorms by voicing dissent and amplifying controversy [38]. These reactions are further intensified by the digital architecture of social media, which rewards emotional engagement through likes, shares, and algorithmic visibility. This study reveals that netizens often join firestorms not only due to emotional conviction but also to gain social validation and visibility. Influence is now measured less by follower count and more by engagement, a reflection of emotional connection and perceived relevance [37]. For CEO influencers, this public sentiment becomes a double-edged sword: while it can elevate their reach, it also exposes them to heightened scrutiny, emotional strain, and reputational risk.

i) Online Outrage

Online outrage in social media firestorms rarely emerges as a spontaneous emotional reaction. Instead, it builds through a structured and predictable pattern driven by emotionally provocative content, algorithmic amplification, and collective moral judgment. Informants in this study described how controversies often begin with a single triggering event, be it a controversial video or an insensitive remark, and then gain

momentum as content circulates and reactions escalate. Outrage deepens through visibility and repetition, pulling even neutral observers into emotionally charged discourse. Netizens consistently described their attraction to emotionally intense content. As one put it:

I think it is human nature to be more attracted to negative and emotionally charged issues circulating on social media. I find myself resonating more with the heated, intense topics rather than the calm, positive ones. I enjoy reading through both sides of the argument, mainly because there is usually a lot of drama involved. (Netizen 14)

This emotional draw is reinforced by platform design. High-engagement posts are surfaced more frequently, making it difficult for users to remain disengaged [37]. Repeated exposure often leads to emotional fatigue, irritation, or even action, as described by another participant:

I remember when that music video was released by Aliff Syukri. It was insensitive and frankly, stupid. Sometimes I wonder why he is still able to do business despite his continuous cycle of controversy. I guess there are still people who prefer that type of content. (Netizen 1)

CEO influencers perceive firestorms not as spontaneous backlash, but as emotionally driven and often targeted attacks. These findings highlight how outrage, once ignited, serves as both a personal response and a public mobilisation force, transforming sentiment into a sustained reputational threat.

ii) Visibility in Digital Spaces

The mobilisation of social media firestorms is shaped not only by emotional reaction but also by the pursuit of visibility. In the context of online public sentiment, visibility operates as both a motivator and a mechanism for participation. Informants in this study repeatedly noted that netizens are drawn to digital controversies not just to express outrage, but to be seen, heard, and validated. Social media platforms reward emotionally provocative content with algorithmic amplification, encouraging users to curate their engagement around visibility-maximising behaviours [39].

Several participants described how netizens often assess the visibility potential of an issue before engaging. For many, joining a firestorm becomes a way to increase their digital presence and align with dominant narratives. This was exemplified by Netizen 2, who described how visibility acts as a form of strategic participation:

We are living in a society where going viral means you will get all the attention. Some people add to a controversy to get noticed. Like, if they're the ones sharing a story or perspective that could go viral, they know it'll grab people's attention. So, they'll post stuff they're sure will boost their visibility and engagement. (Netizen 2)

Beyond strategic self-promotion, visibility also enables expression in ways that offline spaces may restrict. As Netizen 5 explained, social media provides a unique avenue for commentary that would otherwise be constrained by social or cultural expectations:

I think these netizens are motivated to express their opinions because it's the only place for them to do so freely. Unlike their communities, social media allows them to share thoughts without direct confrontation. Some aim to express their views, while others might seek attention. (Netizen 5)

These excerpts illustrate that visibility is not merely a consequence of engagement; it is often the objective itself. Netizens leverage firestorms as moments of high public attention to position themselves within trending conversations. For CEO influencers, this creates a precarious environment where heightened visibility may quickly turn into reputational exposure. In this dynamic ecosystem, visibility acts as the condition that enables firestorms to escalate, transforming isolated sentiments into collective mobilisation through the logic of public attention.

iii) Joining the Bandwagon

Social media firestorms are not only ignited by strong opinions, they are sustained by collective momentum. A recurring insight from participants was that netizens often wait, observe, and assess before joining a controversy. This process reflects the bandwagon effect, where individuals align with dominant public sentiment based on its visibility and social traction, rather than personal conviction [40]. For many, participation is shaped by the desire for inclusion, relevance, or validation. Netizen 8 illustrated how engagement is often staged and strategic, emerging only after an issue reaches a threshold of attention:

When a trending topic arises, I try to be quick to catch it. I wait 3 to 4 days for it to spread, then pay attention when others start discussing it. Then I start to invest time in understanding the issue so I can talk to them about it. (Netizen 8)

This calculated involvement reflects how collective discourse influences opinion formation [41]. Public silence is often interpreted as dissent or complicity, pressuring users into contributing. CEO 1 revealed how even past acquaintances used their controversy for self-promotion:

I always avoided controversies, once my name has been involved in one, I get comments from my classmate in university who started commenting things like "I used to be her classmate. She was always so full of herself. If anyone wants the full story, message me." This really hits me hard when people ride on my personal experiences for their own gain. (CEO 1)

Such opportunism turns participation into performance. Whether driven by social belonging, strategic self-positioning, or fear of exclusion, bandwagon engagement reinforces dominant narratives and accelerates digital outrage. As public attention snowballs, users mobilise not always out of belief, but because joining becomes the social default. These dynamic transforms fleeting controversy into full-blown reputational crises.

iv) Fragmentation of Opinion

The dynamics of social media firestorms are often propelled not by unanimous outrage but by the fragmentation of public sentiment, where conflicting interpretations coexist and collide. This study found that firestorms gain momentum through users engaging with a wide spectrum of opinions, which not only prolongs discourse but enhances its reach and emotional resonance. Rather than seeking agreement, netizens often share content to spark dialogue, debate, or even dissent, turning controversy into a forum for

collective meaning-making [42]. This is evident in Netizen 1's reflection, who uses Twitter to observe opinion diversity and test public responses:

I use Twitter as my daily newspaper. So, I started retweeting or quoting and sharing it with my followers to see how they responded to the issue. And they will share more sources for me to do my 'research'. (Netizen 1)

Such engagements reflect the public's willingness to explore and contest dominant narratives, often influenced by emotional stimuli. Fragmentation does not deter participation, but instead, it draws users deeper into the discourse. Netizen 3 shared how their position on a controversy evolved through exposure to conflicting perspectives:

I think the factor is that I want other people to know and hear my opinion as well. If they are my follower on my social account, so, I feel like they might want to hear a third opinion from me. Perhaps my opinion might be different than what others think. If someone shares a different perspective with me, I'm not afraid to rethink my own stance. Like, if a friend says, "Hey, Vivy isn't wrong," then I will look into other perspectives. (Netizen 3)

These findings support [6], who argue that firestorms thrive when emotional conviction is met with discursive negotiation. Fragmented opinion sustains mobilisation by keeping the controversy alive emotionally, socially, and algorithmically.

v) Public Discourse

In digital spaces, public discourse has transformed into a participatory, emotionally driven phenomenon. Social media firestorms are no longer isolated expressions of dissatisfaction but manifestations of networked dialogue shaped by trending topics, strategic timing, and emotional resonance [43]. Informants in this study highlighted how firestorms become forums for public sentiment, where netizens deliberately engage with controversy to exchange views, clarify positions, and be part of the discourse. Netizen 1 described using their platform not merely to voice an opinion, but to test reactions within their digital community:

I expect to see how my close followers or friends will react to controversies. Sometimes, they agree with my opinion; sometimes, they also have their own opinions on this. So then, from there, we will have a discussion, not like, seriously, but to know why. And also, because most of them are educated. So, it does not mean that my opinion is true. Other's opinions can also be true, but they are different ways of thinking. (Netizen 1)

This behaviour aligns with the concept of networked publics, where digital users move from passive consumers to active curators of discourse [44]. For many, firestorms offer opportunities for information-sharing, identity expression, and community bonding. Netizen 10 echoed this, reflecting a more analytical approach:

Usually i will like just read it when it like go through my timeline. If it's interesting I would search for more information because I want to know what's going on from the CEO's side. So, you know, people will quote tweet and then I would go through the CEO's social media and see everything. I

would analyze it and get perspectives from both sides. My friends will share these issues, and if I find other articles related to it, I will share those with them. (Netizen 10)

Such engagement illustrates how public discourse becomes a mobilising force, shaped by emotional connection, performative credibility, and the desire to contribute meaningfully. These deliberations strengthen the participatory nature of public sentiment, where even contentious topics become vehicles for visibility, learning, and social influence [45].

4.2 Digital Amplification

Public sentiment gains traction not only through expression but through amplification, a dynamic where engagement fuels visibility, extending the lifespan and reach of controversial content. Technology amplifies certain voices while marginalising others. In the case of social media firestorms, digital infrastructure allows user behaviours such as likes, quote tweets, and reposts to convert individual outrage into widespread discourse [46]. This study finds that netizens act as key actors in amplification, often unintentionally fuelling controversy by interacting with emotionally charged or trending content. Netizen 3 explained their process of engagement, noting how retweets and article shares shaped the trajectory of online debate:

So, I participate in discussions on controversial topics by sharing, retweeting, or liking the post, as it is usually passed down my timeline or heard from a friend and read in a news article. (Netizen 3)

Similarly, Netizen 1 described the ripple effect that occurs when a controversial post begins to gain traction online. Their observation illustrates how content originating on one platform can quickly transcend its original boundaries, spreading to Twitter, TikTok, and beyond. This cross-platform diffusion reflects the interconnectedness of social media ecosystems, where algorithms and user behaviours work in tandem to amplify narratives across multiple channels. As content migrates from one platform to another, it picks up new audiences, interpretations, and layers of commentary, increasing both its visibility and perceived significance. In Netizen 1's experience, this cascading effect turns a single post into a widespread cultural moment, often saturating timelines and shaping conversations across various digital spaces:

Usually, these issues will spill to different platforms. Like the post can start on Facebook, but then you see it trending on Twitter, and TikTok videos are made about it. It becomes everywhere all at once. (Netizen 1)

These interactions support Zhang et al's [45] assertion that social media's architecture facilitates rapid content dissemination, while Peck's [46] emphasises how networked amplification by like-minded users reinforces dominant narratives. As public engagement grows, so too does visibility, transforming isolated comments into viral controversies that shape public sentiment and pressurise CEO influencers in real time.

i) Cross-Platform Sharing

Cross-platform sharing plays a crucial role in the mobilisation of social media firestorms by allowing content to move seamlessly between digital spaces, enabling netizens to broaden discourse and extend reach. Unlike traditional media's top-down communication, today's participatory platforms encourage

users to curate, comment on, and redistribute content, each according to the affordances of the platform. This strategic movement between platforms is a core mechanism of digital amplification, allowing controversies to transcend their point of origin and gain traction across diverse audience groups [47].

Participants in this study shared how different platforms serve specific communicative purposes. For example, Netizen 3 noted that while TikTok is ideal for opinion-based videos, Twitter remains a hub for real-time dialogue. Similarly, Netizen 8 highlighted that Facebook and Twitter best reflect Malaysian public sentiment due to their conversational nature. These distinctions not only influence what content gets shared but also shape how and where firestorms escalate. CEO influencers, too, leverage these platform-specific strengths. CEO 2 explained how TikTok drives business engagement more effectively than Instagram, which now caters more to lifestyle expression. This strategic platform usage reflects broader shifts in consumer and audience behaviour [48]. For instance, Netizen 5 shared:

Oh, I would mostly comment and probably share it on my IG story. When I come across an issue involving a CEO influencer, I usually start by commenting on the original post. I also often share the post or a related story on my Instagram story. (Netizen 5)

The strategic use of platform tools, such as hashtags and post enhancements, was also highlighted by Netizen 15, who reflected on how Gen Z users leverage these features to maximise engagement and spread positive messaging across digital campaigns:

Social media, especially for Gen Z, thrives on tools like hashtags and features like Instagram's "add to post" option to boost engagement and spread positivity. For campaigns, using relevant hashtags or adding clickable links to posts makes it easier to share information widely. It's a powerful tool for good if used wisely, with features like these helping to amplify positive messages effectively. (Netizen 15)

Such practices demonstrate how amplification is not random but informed by digital literacy and user intent. Through selective cross-platform sharing, firestorms are sustained, recontextualised, and ultimately magnified, reinforcing public narratives and intensifying reputational consequences.

ii) Selective Sharing

Selective sharing plays a critical role in the mobilisation of social media firestorms by allowing netizens to control which narratives gain traction and how those narratives align with their personal beliefs and social identities. Unlike impulsive reactions, selective sharing is reflective and strategic. Users intentionally choose content that resonates with their values, emotional state, or intended audience [49]. This act is often confined to trusted circles, where the risk of backlash is lower and discourse is more meaningful. For instance, Netizen 11 exemplifies the ethical dimension of selective sharing, expressing a deliberate approach focused on promoting thoughtful dialogue:

When I join discussions about controversial topics, I hope people will take a moment to think about what's being discussed. My goal is to encourage thoughtful consideration and meaningful conversations. I choose where to give my energy - if the issue isn't beneficial to society or well-being, it doesn't matter to me. (Netizen 11)

Similarly, Netizen 7 highlighted how different actions, such as likes, retweets, or quote tweets, are used selectively based on personal relevance or perceived value:

“A 'like' is for something relatable to me, like food or cats. Retweets are similar; if something deserves a retweet, I'll do it. But for quotes, I'll add my thoughts only if I feel it's necessary. If I don't feel the need to say anything, I just read the comments and move on.” (Netizen 7)

This behaviour contributes to public sentiment formation by amplifying specific perspectives while silencing others, subtly guiding the tone and direction of online discourse [50]. Importantly, social media algorithms reward such engagement, transforming individual actions into collective movements. In this way, selective sharing becomes a mechanism for agenda-setting and social signalling, ultimately shaping how controversies escalate and whose voices dominate the narrative.

iii) Media Virality

Media virality plays a pivotal role in the mobilisation of social media firestorms by transforming individual engagement into collective amplification. Once a controversial post is shared, it can quickly gain momentum through emotional resonance, triggering reactions that cascade across platforms. As CEO 2 explained, virality often stems from deliberate framing:

Sometimes, the titles or words we use in our posts can trigger people to comment. Catchy titles or content that provokes a reaction. When you have done business on social media for a long time, you will be able to see and predict how netizens will react (CEO 2).

This aligns with public relations literature, where framing and audience priming are recognised as critical tools in shaping perception [51]. Yet not all virality is intentional. Netizen 7 illustrated how casual engagement, like quoting tweets for personal reflection, can still contribute to amplification:

I would just quote those tweets and then share my personal thoughts and two cents on it, but it's not really read by a large public, just by my followers (Netizen 7).

Such micro-engagements, though seemingly inconsequential, are sustained by algorithmic visibility, reinforcing the emotional salience of controversial content [52]. Netizen 13 further observed that negative content dominates online discourse:

Usually, the viral issues are negative, as it's hard for positive news to go viral. Positive news doesn't go viral easily because Malaysians really like drama. Really, really” (Netizen 13)

This aligns with Dafonte Gomez et al [53], who found that emotionally charged content is more likely to be shared. The repeated resurfacing of past controversies, as noted by Netizen 2, compounds reputational risks:

Netizens tend to like open their eyes and bring back the past issues to connect with the current issue and then ultimately, the negative side will be amplified (Netizen 2)

Ultimately, media virality is not merely a technical feature of social media but a dynamic process that reflects how public sentiment is shaped, re-shaped, and weaponised over time. For CEO influencers, this reality demands not just real-time engagement, but long-term narrative management strategies attuned to the emotional rhythms of digital publics.

iv) Key Opinion Leaders

Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) are instrumental in shaping and accelerating social media firestorms. As visible and trusted figures within digital communities, they amplify narratives, direct public attention, and legitimise emotional reactions. Their influence aligns with the Multi-Step Flow Theory, where information is filtered and reframed through key intermediaries before reaching wider audiences [54]. When KOLs voice opinions on controversies involving CEO influencers, they spark rapid engagement, transforming niche issues into national debates. Unlike mainstream media, KOLs build credibility through relatability and consistency, fostering perceived authenticity [55]. Netizen 1 observed:

On Twitter, there's this category of opinion leaders we refer to as 'Twitter famous'. So, when they express their views on an issue, their thousands of followers see it too and form their own opinions. It's incredible how quickly a simple tweet can garner thousands of retweets in just a matter of minutes. (Netizen 1)

This influence, however, invites scrutiny. As firestorms escalate, netizens become more discerning, aware that KOLs may engage strategically to sustain relevance or monetise engagement. Credibility now hinges on perceived sincerity. Netizen 13 reflected:

I always look through their profiles first and sort of observe their online behaviour. If we follow people that are not ethical, I think it's not really good for our credibility as well. (Netizen 13)

KOLs no longer operate in a vacuum of unquestioned authority. While they continue to function as powerful agenda-setters, framing controversies and mobilising public sentiment, their influence is increasingly contingent on audience trust. As digital publics become more reflexive, netizens now critically evaluate not only the message but also the messenger. This shift suggests a growing sophistication in online public sentiment, where influence is less about reach and more about integrity. The mobilisation of firestorms, therefore, is not only driven by emotional contagion or visibility, but by the perceived authenticity and ideological alignment of those who shape the discourse. Public relations practitioners must account for this evolving dynamic, where reputational outcomes hinge not just on what is said, but on who says it, and whether the public believes it.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study reaffirm that public sentiment in digital spaces is not just a by-product of online chatter but a potent force that catalyses, accelerates, and sustains social media firestorms. Online outrage, digital visibility, and networked participation function as interconnected mechanisms through which netizens not only express discontent but mobilise it into collective action. Far from fleeting emotions, these responses are structured and sustained, fostered by algorithmic incentives, platform design, and the

affective economies of social media. Outrage, in particular, emerges not as a reflexive outburst but as a performative act rooted in moral judgment and social alignment. When amplified by repeated exposure and platform affordances, it generates a contagious feedback loop where individual grievances become communal indignation. Visibility further intensifies this dynamic, transforming personal expression into a public spectacle. Participation, often driven by the desire for recognition or belonging, amplifies shared sentiment until it snowballs into a reputational crisis. What emerges is a digitally mediated public sentiment shaped not by deliberation but by emotion, immediacy, and virality.

For public relations practitioners, these findings disrupt conventional models of crisis communication. In an environment where the public is emotionally volatile and digitally empowered, post-crisis statements are no longer sufficient. CEO influencers must adopt a posture of constant attentiveness and curating visibility with care, engaging the public transparently, and anticipating firestorms before they erupt. Public relations must evolve from reactive defence to proactive mediation that is anchored in empathy, real-time responsiveness, and moral clarity. This shift in practice means moving beyond traditional crisis communication strategies that focus solely on damage control. Instead, PR must embrace a proactive role, guiding public sentiment through emotional intelligence, timely interventions, and maintaining a consistent moral stance, ensuring that both the brand and its audience feel heard and understood.

The implications of this study extend across several critical domains, including crisis communication, strategic public relations, and the ethical governance of digital influence. In an era where reputational outcomes are increasingly shaped by algorithmically amplified public sentiment, this research underscores the urgent need for brands and CEO influencers to adopt a more anticipatory and emotionally intelligent approach to public engagement. Rather than relying on reactive, one-size-fits-all responses, public relations practitioners must recognise that social media firestorms are not isolated incidents but are embedded in broader dynamics of visibility, emotional contagion, and networked participation. This calls for a shift from performative messaging to sustained, authentic communication practices that centre transparency, honesty, and relational accountability.

Future research should expand on these findings by examining the long-term effects of digital public sentiment on brand loyalty and consumer behaviour, particularly in different cultural contexts and industries. Additionally, further studies could explore the effectiveness of different engagement strategies during firestorms, specifically how proactive measures such as real-time communication and moral alignment influence public opinion. Lastly, future research could investigate the role of algorithmic design and social media platforms in shaping and amplifying public sentiment, offering deeper insights into how digital infrastructures contribute to the dynamics of outrage and collective action. Understanding these mechanisms will provide valuable guidance for public relations professionals aiming to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape and manage brand reputation in the age of social media.

6.0 References

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