The Social Media Engagement of Islamabad Traffic Police in Crisis Situations: A Case Study of 2024

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ABSTRACT: This research examines how the Islamabad Traffic Police (ITP) utilized Facebook in 2024 to manage traffic during crisis situations like VIP movements, protests, foreign delegations, and national events (i.e. Independence and Defense Days). The year 2024 has almost all sorts of events that can cause traffic congestion issues, the recent completed year, and Facebook posts are easily available. Through qualitative content analysis of 2,309 Facebook posts, the study identifies key communication strategies employed during disruptive events. Findings reveal that ITP's crisis communication on Facebook was largely effective, particularly through real-time updates and the use of visual content—videos in Urdu and infographics—which significantly enhanced public awareness and traffic management. Insights from interviews with the ITP social media team confirm that Facebook and TikTok are their most effective and active platforms for audience engagement. The shift from traditional to digital media has improved their ability to disseminate information and receive public feedback during emergencies. However, the study also notes areas for improvement, including the need for greater two-way communication, clearer protocols, and more localized messaging. This research highlights the critical and evolving role of social media in urban traffic crisis management and offers practical recommendations to enhance digital communication strategies.

KEYWORDS: Crisis Communication, Traffic Disruption, Traffic Police, Social Media Strategies, Qualitative Content Analysis, Islamabad

Introduction

Traffic congestion is a concern in major cities worldwide, particularly during crises caused by VIP Movements, protests, extreme weather, or public events. When roads become impassable, timely communication is essential to ensure public safety and smooth traffic flow in metropolitans, (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Social media in the past decade has become an effective tool for traffic authorities, allowing them to provide real-time updates, alternative routes, and emergency advisories. Studies show that well-managed social media engagements improve public trust and cooperation in navigating disruptions and avoiding crisis situations, (Lamberti, 2016). The posts on the Police's social media accounts can be part of how the government tries to

bring people back to the normal situation after the crisis. Once the crisis is over, the police might change how they use social media based on what they learned. (Tang & Leung, 2024)

Globally, Cities like Dhaka, Delhi, New York, Munich, Hong Kong, and many others have successfully used social media—especially Facebook—to mitigate and control traffic chaos. In Dhaka (the Capital of Bangladesh), the metropolitan police use Facebook to share live traffic updates, and heat maps for traffic congestions, particularly in peak hours and during protests, helping commuters avoid bottlenecks and get themselves a timely alternative plan. Dhaka is also facing heavy traffic congestion and this issue during the past decade has arisen as a crisis for their traffic police (Shaulin & Faeique, 2023a). Delhi Traffic Police has pioneered Facebook-based traffic management, responding directly to complaints and sharing congestion alerts (Singh, 2016). In New York, the NYPD actively communicates about road closures, accidents, and emergency situations via Facebook and X (Formerly Twitter) ensuring swift responses from the public. Similarly, Hong Kong's Transport Department utilizes social media to guide commuters through alternate routes, particularly during political demonstrations (Kuryvchak, 2024)

Islamabad, the Capital of Pakistan, faces its own set of traffic challenges, owing to its status as Pakistan's diplomatic hub as well. The Islamabad Traffic Police (ITP) frequently implements road diversions in high-security areas such as the Red Zone – which includes Parliament House, PM Office/House, President House, Supreme Court of Pakistan, all ministries, most embassies, FBR, PTV Headquarters - including Blue Area, G-5, G-6, F-5, F-6, and the entire service road along the Srinagar highway extending from G-7 to G-11. These measures, though very necessary, lead to severe congestion, often worsened by weather conditions. Imagine leaving office/work late on a rainy evening, only to find yourself stuck in an endless jam. Motorcycles navigate the green belt, frustrated drivers take wrong turns, and confusion spreads—all due to road closure for a foreign delegation's arrival.

To counter such traffic disruptions, ITP's Facebook page plays a critical role in informing the public about traffic conditions timely. This study examines ITP's 2024 Facebook page posts and activities to evaluate how effectively it communicated during crisis situations. By analyzing textual posts, images, and infographics, the study aims to determine whether ITP's engagement provided commuters with timely and actionable information, while also exploring ways to enhance future social media strategies for better traffic management.

Problem Statement

Despite the Islamabad Traffic Police's active presence on Facebook, there is limited academic research on how effectively the platform is used to communicate during crisis-driven traffic disruptions caused by VIP movements, protests, and public events. This study addresses this gap by analyzing ITP's 2024 Facebook posts to evaluate its role as a digital crisis communication tool.

Research Objective

To explore and assess the effectiveness of ITP's social media strategy particularly Facebook in mitigating the traffic crisis situation.

Research Questions

How effectively did ITP utilize its official Facebook page for crisis communication and traffic management during the year 2024?

What strategies can enhance ITP's social media communication for future crises?

Literature Review

Managing and controlling risks means prevention before the crisis, successful risk management requires creating tools and defining the most appropriate method for crisis prevention (Mojanoski, 2012) Social & Digital Media in today's technology-driven world is a main component of police efforts to achieve their primary goal of public safety. For more accuracy and efficiency, police must establish their standards and operating procedures to utilize this tool at its best and make it an opportunity in differing circumstances. While communicating on social media during a crisis there must be proper guidelines for police departments, and those guidelines must be reviewed by high-level committees after a specified duration (Akkaya et al., 2019) For Organizational-level crises, the common goal is to maintain the reputation and uphold or restore the public's trust in the police authority (contain reputational damage), (Jungblut et al., 2024). The effectiveness of social media cannot be neglected in today's world specially by law enforcement agencies and traffic police in specific as they are almost always in crisis situations on roads and they are responsible custodians of traffic vehicles and the lives of the people commuting on the roads, (Lamberti, 2016). The use of social media in police departments is very common to engage the public for awareness and day-to-day activities. But this engagement becomes more crucial and important in times of crisis – that is the time when clear messages and communication play its role, (Steele & Blau, 2023).

This argument was noticed in the literature that, predictable situations that can potentially lead to a crisis must have a clear set of guidelines well before time, and regular awareness sessions and training about such situations with people are necessary (Akkaya et al., 2019) Traffic Crisis or congestions happens when the transportation system does not have enough capacity to meet the growing demand and when the roads have fewer lanes to accommodate cars on the (Shaulin & Faeique, 2023b). The public tends to trust more on the messages they receive from police more than the unconfirmed or unauthentic sources, especially when it is a crisis situation, (Akkaya et al., 2019)

There have been many studies in the past on the use of social media by the traffic police before, during, and after the crisis situation. Facebook and X (Formerly Twitter) are considered the most effective platforms for sharing important information during emergencies and crisis situations. The way these platforms are set up influences how the police communicate with them. (Jungblut et al., 2024). The social & digital media platform offers police the opportunity to connect to millions of people, increase visibility, and cooperate with the public, this could add value to crisis management for police. The employment of the new media tools by the traffic police in Delhi has made the force more accessible to the people (Das et al., 2022)

Platforms like Facebook allow traffic authorities to provide real-time updates, alternative routes, and emergency advisories, reducing uncertainty among commuters. Studies indicate that effective social media engagement enhances public trust and compliance during crisis situations (Das et al., 2022). Today, police are aware that community engagement, public support, and awareness among internet users and classic media

channels is essential to control the distribution of incorrect information, and avoid unnecessary panic and anxiety (Akkaya et al., 2019)

There are many other studies conducted on traffic congestion and problems in cities like Dhaka, New Delhi, New York, Munich, Hong Kong, Tulungagung, Lancaster, Ohio, and many other cities across the world but there is no such study found on Islamabad Traffic Police, their usage of social media specifically Facebook and traffic congestions because of security situations.

In Pakistan, significant growth has been seen in the use of social media, influencing public perceptions and engagement across all forums in a very short period of time (Khan et al., 2022). Digital activism and social change in Pakistan, highlighting the impact of online movements (Rahman & Hussain, 2020). The impact and impression of social media on public perception of law enforcement in developing countries, noting both benefits and challenges (Moktadir et al., 2020).

Methodology

This study uses qualitative content analysis to examine a total number of 2309 published posts available on the official Facebook page (979K followers) of the Islamabad Traffic Police (ITP) during 2024. This count includes all crisis-related and routine updates throughout the year. This research mainly focuses on the crisis: VIP Movements, Political Protests and sit-ins (e.g., Red Zone Closure, D-Chowk gatherings), processions and riots, foreign delegation visits, and public events (e.g., PSL matches and National celebrations).

Content Analysis and social media analysis are the main methods by which the study has been carried out. Social media analysis of the Facebook of ITP was undertaken to analyze how the page was actually reaching out to its target audience. The number of Facebook posts uploaded by the ITP, rate of engagement, response, and comments by their followers were the main points, on the basis of which the Facebook posts analysis was made.

The study also references the Social Mediated Crisis Communication model as a guiding framework, considering how ITP's communication aligns with best practices in crisis management and information dissemination. This allowed for a nuanced evaluation of both the content and the communicative intent behind ITP's Facebook activity. The Facebook posts of ITP were categorized as, event type, media format (text, images, infographics, and videos), tone and messaging, engagement and reach (likes, shares, and comments)

Analysis and Discussion

It is not possible to include the complete findings, in-depth interviews, and data gathered during this research exercise because of the scope of this article, but the general findings that are related to the research questions and objective are mentioned below. A total of 2309 posts were published on ITP's official Facebook page in 2024. This content includes all crisis-related and routine updates throughout the year.

Social media platforms of Islamabad traffic police have been functional for a few years now, the oldest in 2014 (Facebook, Instagram, and X) and the most recent in 2023 (YouTube). The respondent from the social media team stated that Facebook and TikTok are the most active social media platforms with respect to audience engagement, outreach, and dissemination of information. The most effective mode of communication was stated to be videos followed by images, infographics, and text. These modes are used to disseminate information to people in crisis situations in the twin cities. Their complaint system is also in place.

Before being active on social media, print media in the form of newspapers was used to print advertisements and during those times no such discrete channel was in place and operational for feedback. Now through social media presence, feedback in the form of suggestions and complaints are received by the general public. In crisis situations, the social media pages of Islamabad police and Islamabad traffic police are widely visited. The respondent also stated that security divisions and red zone divisions design and communicate the route plan and send those to the Islamabad traffic police, according to which their traffic route maps are updated and uploaded on social media.

The expert from the Islamabad traffic police was adamant in claiming that no route is closed for more than 20 minutes, despite the researcher citing instances where traffic got stuck for 2-3 hours due to road blockage, brick-and-mortar constructions, and PSL matches. The route diversions also aggravate traffic issues. When the researcher asked about the availability of the written plan or SOPs for crisis situations, the respondent didn't have discreet information. The respondent also asserted that they design and implement route plans and maps based on the information received from the security divisions and city administration. Videos in Urdu language were quoted to be the most effective way to communicate in crisis situations. These videos snowball better for informational dissemination among drivers.

In addition to maps, the pictures of on-site roadblocks are also uploaded on their social media platforms. Safe City provides information not only in crisis situations but also in instances of mugging, snatching, and burglary. In order to avoid chaos and unrest their social media platforms don't upload pictures of containers; only information about road blocks and alternative routes are uploaded.

When enquired about the usefulness of platforms such as champs on the alert go #CAOTG and Islamabadians, the expert from Islamabad traffic police stated that there is a sufficient exchange of verified information about crisis communication and alternative routes between Islamabad traffic police platforms and the rest of the platforms. Media seminars, talks in universities, and social media engagement help in increasing their followers and hence communicating timely updates during crisis situations.

Graph 1

*Total ITP's Posts in 2024 by Content Type*
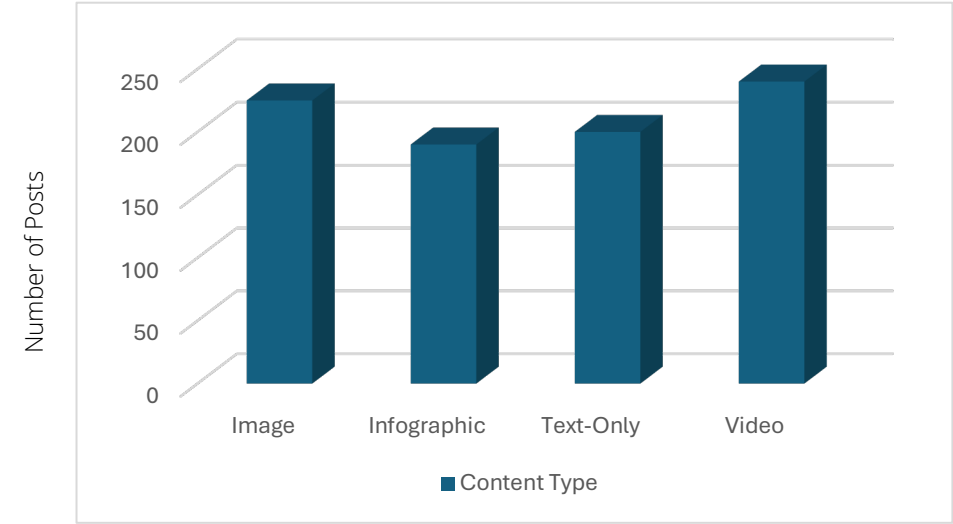
Graph 1, provides a clear overview of the types of content shared by ITP on Facebook in 2024. The dominance of video content suggests a strategic focus on leveraging this engaging format, likely for disseminating important traffic updates, safety messages, or public announcements. The substantial use of images further underscores the importance of visual communication in their online strategy. The relatively lower frequency of infographics and text-only posts might indicate a preference for more visually driven communication on the platform.

Graph 2

Average Engagement Score by Crisis Category 2024
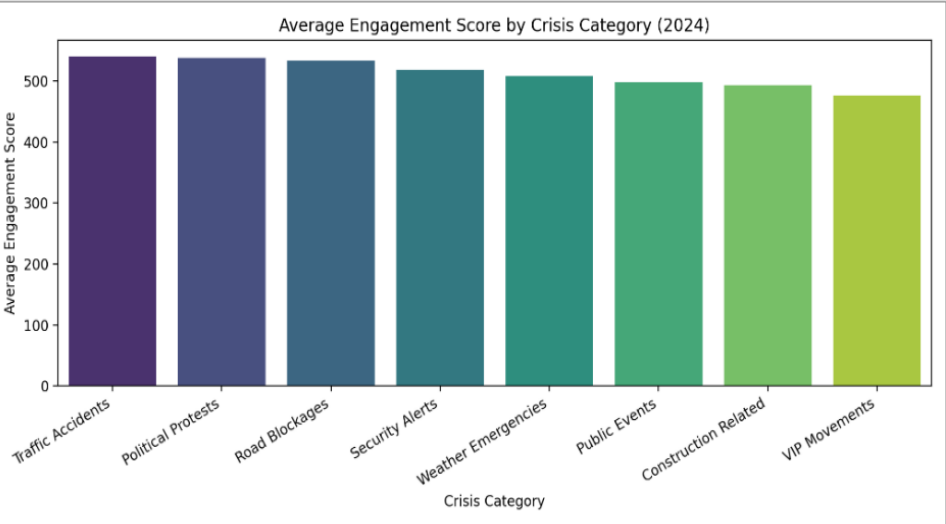
Graph 2, shows the average engagement score (likes, comments, shares) for each crisis category. Traffic accidents, political protests, and road blockages received the highest average engagement, indicating that the public is most responsive to these types of updates. Security Alerts and weather emergencies also saw a strong engagement, while VIP Movements and construction-related posts had relatively lower interaction. This suggests that posts about immediate disruptions or emergencies tend to generate more public interest and interaction compared to routine or planned events.

Graph 3

Crisis Communication Patterns by Month 2024
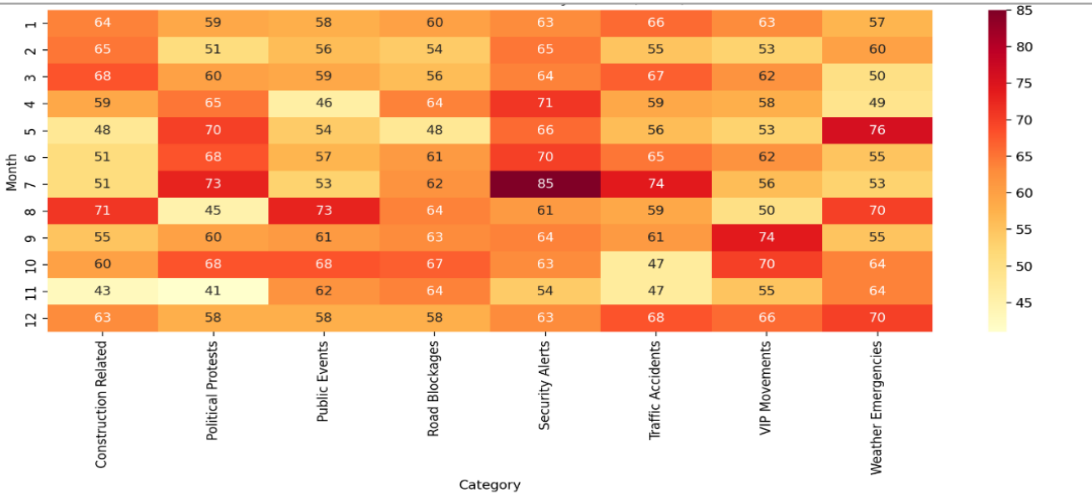
Graph 3, A heat map that visually represents the number of posts related to various crisis categories (e.g., Road Blockages, VIP Movements, Weather Emergencies, etc.) over the months of 2024. This provides insights into which types of crises were most frequently communicated about. ITP's Facebook usage in 2024 reflects a focused, informative approach to traffic communication. The data shows that July and October were the most active months, Traffic accidents and political protests had the highest "Very High" engagement, and security alerts maintained consistently high engagement throughout the year. While the department consistently updated during major city events, the posts leaned heavily on one-way communication. The lack of dialogue with the public and the absence of localized language variations potentially limited effectiveness.

Limitations

During this study, we faced many limitations that should be acknowledged. First, we only examined one social media platform, Facebook, this limits the generalizability of our findings across all social media platforms. Second, some more In-depth interviews from the perspective of Islamabad Traffic police and officials from their media department could be an asset to this study and its findings to be more accurate and precise.

Future research should consider how viewers utilize and further share the content of traffic police for further reach and engagement. A study can be conducted on the relationship between traffic police and people that is built via social media platforms and engagement.

Conclusion

The analysis of ITP's Facebook activity in 2024 demonstrates that social media is an indispensable tool for real-time crisis communication and traffic management. The department's focus on timely updates, especially through videos and images, proved effective in keeping the public informed during high-impact incidents such as accidents and political protests. However, the communication strategy relied heavily on one-way information flow, with limited interaction or engagement with the community.

To maximize the potential of social media in future crises, ITP should prioritize two-way communication, encourage public feedback, and consider localized messaging to reach diverse segments of Islamabad's population. Integrating more interactive formats-such as live Q&A sessions, polls, or community alerts-could foster greater public trust and responsiveness.

Ultimately, this study underscores the transformative role of social media in urban crisis management. By refining their digital strategies, law enforcement agencies like ITP can enhance public safety, reduce congestion, and build stronger relationships with the communities they serve.

Finally, further research is required and needed to continue the crisis management and communication efforts in traffic policing approaches and address emerging crisis situations related to traffic.

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