# Influence of Social Media Comments on Brand Reputation of Selected Telecommunication Companies in Nigeria

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**Abstract**
Social media has become a powerful space where brand reputations are formed, challenged, and redefined through interactive comments by users. This conceptual paper investigates the influence of social media comments on the brand reputation of selected Nigerian telecommunication companies: MTN, Airtel, and Glo. Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Social Influence Theory, the study undertakes a critical synthesis of secondary sources, crisis case studies, and documented online discourse to understand the dynamics at play in the management of the brand reputation of these companies. The analysis reveals that, while these telecom brands engage in various online response strategies, they often fall short of effectively aligning with theoretical best practices or engaging consumers effectively. Furthermore, influencer interventions and peer commentary on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram play significant roles in shaping reputational outcomes. The findings suggest that brand perception is increasingly constructed through digital social influence and historical trust (or distrust), rather than formal corporate messaging alone. The paper recommends dialogic engagement on social media, contextual responsiveness, and strategic digital listening as essential components of contemporary reputation management in the Nigerian telecom sector.

***Keywords:*** Social Media, Comments, Brand Reputation, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Social Influence Theory

## Introduction

With the rapid advances in technology, brand reputation management has also evolved to cater for new exigencies. This has meant that companies aiming to thrive in the current climate must understand how to build and manage their brand reputations online. Social media, in particular, has become a space where the shaping of brand reputation occurs both by companies and their customers. As Kemppainen agrees, social media platforms have become "a significant factor and tool for companies in shaping brand reputations and consumer perceptions" (2024, p. 1). There are 5.31 billion social media users around the world (as at the start of April 2025), accounting for 64.7 percent of the world's population (Datareportal, 2025). It is therefore arguable that any attempts at managing brand reputation must pay significant attention to perceptions created or reinforced on social media.

Customer satisfaction, brand perception, and corporate responsiveness all of which are crucial to brand reputation management are publicly debated across digital spaces such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram. Consumers have become more empowered in this digital age to share their opinions and brand experiences online, making the reputational landscape simultaneously democratised and volatile for brands. A single viral negative post on X or Facebook, for instance, has the devastating potential to redefine a brand's image overnight, particularly with the emergence of "certain difficulties, such as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) …a significant factor in shaping consumer perceptions and decision-making processes towards the brand, as it can be either positive or negative" (p. 1). Brand reputation management is critical for any company that seeks to gain an edge over its market competitors in any sector. As such, companies must work towards maintaining a positive reputation, which in turn builds brand loyalty and translates into increased sales as well as growth. Brand reputation plays an important role in the decision-making process of consumers.

How do social media comments affect the brand reputation of telecommunication companies in Nigeria, especially MTN, Airtel, and Globacom? What is the volume of comments posted on social media platforms about these telecom service providers? What strategies do they deploy in the management of their brand reputations online? How effective are these efforts? These are questions that require answers based on a critical examination of the relationship between social media comments and telecom firms in Nigeria. There is a dearth of research that addresses these questions in the literature on brand reputation management.

This paper therefore applies Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Social Influence Theory in investigating the conceptual relationship between comments on social media and brand reputation within the Nigerian telecommunication industry. Ultimately, it explores how social media comments shape brand narratives in the public sphere, seeking to answer the question: how do social media comments influence the brand reputation of telecommunication companies in Nigeria? The commentary from users on these platforms serves as both a reflection and a driver of brand sentiment, which influences the choices and behaviour of current and prospective customers, as well as regulatory stakeholders. Being a conceptual study, this paper does not present new empirical data but rather offers a theoretical synthesis and critical examination of emerging patterns, challenges, and strategic responses.

**Statement of the Problem**

Given how brands are susceptible to the influence of user-generated content online especially comments posted on Facebook, Instagram, and X the real impact of such comments requires careful examination. Unlike traditional media, social media facilitates two-way communication. Not only do brands advertise themselves; social media platforms also enable consumers to share opinions, experiences, and criticisms that can rapidly gain worldwide visibility and influence public perception of, and sentiment towards, a brand. In spite of the growing acknowledgement of the impact of online discourse on brand reputation, there nevertheless exists a notable conceptual gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which social media comments influence brand reputation within the telecommunication sector in Nigeria. Existing studies have largely focused on customer service responsiveness or crisis communication strategies in isolation, without adequately accounting for the dynamic and persuasive nature of consumer-generated online content in shaping the decisions of other customers, as well as the perceptions of other stakeholders.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) aids in the understanding of response roadmaps for organisations confronting reputational threats during crises. Its integration with Social Influence Theory specifically in the context of comments about brands shared on digital platforms remains underexplored in conceptual literature. Social Influence Theory holds that individuals are significantly influenced by the opinions and behaviours of others, particularly within networked communication environments like social media. This paper seeks to undertake a conceptual examination of how social media comments function as instruments of social influence, capable of enhancing or undermining the brand reputation of selected Nigerian telecommunication companies.

## Conceptual Clarifications

### Social Media

Social media refers to web-based platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content in real time. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61), "social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn have emerged as dominant tools for brand communication, customer service, and community engagement. For companies, particularly in customer-centric industries like telecommunications, social media represents both an opportunity and a challenge. It enables brands to engage directly with users, clarify misinformation, and promote products. At the same time, it exposes brands to real-time, unfiltered feedback that may be either positive or damaging to their reputation.

### Social Media Comments

Social media comments refer to user-generated responses on social media platforms. These comments serve as a digital record of public sentiment and can significantly influence other users' perceptions. As Kietzmann et al. (2011) noted, "Social media is not only a platform for broadcasting messages but a rich field of interaction and conversation that can amplify consumer voice and perception" (p. 243). In the Nigerian context, social media comments on telecommunication brands often trend due to high data costs, inconsistent service, or perceived poor customer service. Comments such as "Airtel has the worst customer care in Nigeria" or "MTN's data disappears too fast" can gain traction and go viral, shaping narratives that persist even in the absence of formal complaints. Public perception is heavily influenced by these conversations. As highlighted by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), "online word-of-mouth has a strong impact on consumer decision-making and brand image" (p. 39). Thus, a pattern of negative comments may significantly erode trust, while consistent positive engagement can bolster brand equity.

### Brand Reputation

Broadly, reputation can be understood as the collective evaluation of a brand by its stakeholders, formed over time and based on past experiences, communications by the brand, and external narratives. According to Fombrun and Van Riel (2004), "a strong reputation signals quality and builds trust, which in turn creates competitive advantage" (p. 87). In the digital era, this reputation is increasingly fragile, as it can be influenced by narratives formed outside the company's direct control. In the telecommunication sector, reputation hinges on service delivery, customer relations, corporate social responsibility, and transparency. Given the competitive nature of the Nigerian telecom industry, where users often switch providers due to dissatisfaction, brand reputation has become a critical asset for customer retention and market leadership. Reputation, traditionally considered a strictly long-term construct, now rises and falls with real-time digital sentiment. This is why Olmedo-Cifuentes and Martínez-León (2014) observe that "brand reputation is now increasingly co-created with customers through digital channels" (p. 706), emphasising the participatory nature of reputation management in social media environments.

## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design. This research is inductive in nature, with the researcher generally exploring meanings and insights in a given situation (Levitt et al., 2017). It is characterised by aims that relate to understanding some aspect of social life, and methods that generally generate words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis. For this study, a content analysis of secondary sources is undertaken, including scholarly articles, industry reports, crisis communication case studies, and documented social media interactions involving major Nigerian telecommunication companies, specifically MTN, Airtel, and Glo. Particular attention is given to instances where public comments on social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram catalysed or aided positive or negative brand reputational shifts.

Empirical conclusions arrived at by other scholars, along with comments made on social media where necessary, are synthesised in an attempt to sufficiently answer the questions posed above. Two theories – Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Social Influence Theory are the lenses through which the analysis of the secondary sources will be performed. These theories are discussed below.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

The SCCT, developed by Coombs (2007), provides a model for understanding how organisations should respond to crises based on the company's perceived responsibility for the event. It categorises crises into types (such as victim, accidental, and preventable) and recommends response strategies (such as denial, justification, or apology) based on stakeholders' attributions of blame. Since customer dissatisfaction can quickly degenerate into a reputational crisis on social media within hours, SCCT offers a lens for evaluating corporate response strategies. For instance, if users accuse a telecom company of unjust billing or poor network services and the company is slow or dismissive in its response, blame intensifies. Coombs (2007, p. 168) warned that "failure to match response strategies to stakeholder attributions of responsibility can damage organisational reputation even further." The imperative for swift and appropriate responses when comments with the potential to ignite or fuel a reputational crisis are made is highlighted under this theory.

**Social Influence Theory**

Social Influence Theory, on the other hand, explores how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals are shaped by the presence and opinions of others. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) described social influence as "the effect that words, actions, or mere presence of other people have on our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviour" (p. 592). On social media, this manifests in how user comments especially those from influencers or high-engagement accounts can sway the brand perceptions of other users, either positively or negatively. In Nigeria, where opinion leaders, entertainers, and tech influencers regularly comment on telecom services, Social Influence Theory is useful in understanding the consequences of such comments on public brand perception. Moreover, brand reputation is no longer shaped in isolation, but within a network of socially influential dialogues. As summarised by Mangold and Faulds, "the firm's reputation is no longer the exclusive result of what the company says about itself, but what others say about the company in digital forums" (2009, p. 358).

**Results and Discussion**

Being a conceptual paper, this study does not present, analyse, or discuss primary empirical data. Rather, it focuses on dovetailing theoretical reasoning based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Social Influence Theory. This is complemented with critical interpretations of documented crisis episodes, secondary analyses, and media coverage involving MTN, Airtel, and Glo. The discussion is organised in sections broadly determined by the questions the research seeks to answer.

**1. Social Media Comments and Brand Reputation**

Social media comments meaningfully affect brand reputation in Nigeria's telecom sector. To a significant degree, they serve as a tool for measuring consumer sentiment and trust in telecommunication companies. In highly visible digital ecosystems like X, Facebook, and Instagram, users regularly comment on issues ranging from billing irregularities to service disruptions. As Papacharissi (2015) contends, these comments are, in turn, algorithmically amplified, ultimately influencing the direction of public narratives regarding the telecom companies in question.

In 2015, MTN was fined over $5.2 billion by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) for failing to disconnect unregistered SIM cards. There was an outpouring of commentary on social media based on the incident. Some of the reaction was negative, using hashtags like #BoycottMTN. There were also reactions that appeared to have xenophobic undercurrents, pointing out that the company was a foreign one and should be boycotted in favour of Nigerian telecom brands—all these despite MTN's official crisis communication efforts (BBC News, 2015). This social backlash contributed to a reputational dip that even affected investor confidence and forced changes at the executive level in the company (Onuoha & Ogbu, 2016). While it cannot be confidently claimed that the online outrage alone sparked the drop in confidence and top-level changes in the company, it also cannot be discounted that the comments posted on social media played a part in the 0.5% drop in subscribers immediately after the imposition of the fine (Gilbert, 2015).

Airtel has similarly faced digital criticism. This was heightened in the wake of widespread complaints about data depletion between 2020 and 2021. Posts on X using #AirtelStealingData and #AirtelFraud surged, with daily tweet volumes reaching tens of thousands at peak periods (Premium Times, 2021). Despite prompt responses from the company, users often dismissed them as formulaic and generic, highlighting the limitations of formal apologies when consumer grievances accumulate over time. For Glo, perhaps owing to its smaller subscriber base, there has been a lower frequency of high-profile social media backlash. This does not imply the absence of negative commentary online, only that the volume is lower compared to MTN and Airtel. However, Glo's reputation suffered significantly in 2021 during a major service outage. Social media, especially X, was flooded with complaints bearing hashtags such as #GloDown (Punch, 2021). Comedy skits and memes further transformed public irritation into ridicule, thereby damaging the brand's credibility. These examples suggest that the volume and virality of social media comments about telecommunication companies act as both thermometer and thermostat—serving to measure public sentiment and shape it concurrently. Social media comments function as forms of real-time judgement and moral evaluation. They represent not only opinion but social consensus-building, where posts, likes, shares, and threads reinforce dominant narratives (Papacharissi, 2015). Ndukwe (2022) also notes that such comments often exceed the lifespan of the original crisis.

Earlier, in 2018, the telecommunication companies under study were accused of auto-subscribing users to value-added services (VAS) that consumed their airtime and data without consent (Guardian Nigeria, 2018). While regulatory fines were imposed by the NCC, it was the outcry in comment sections that drove mainstream media coverage and eventual policy reform. Hashtags like #StopStealingMyData and viral video skits depicting frustrated customers drew attention to the emotional toll of these exploitative practices. From a theoretical perspective, this challenges the notion of crisis closure as found in SCCT. It instead invites scholars to consider social media commentary as an ongoing reputational trial, rather than a one-time response to an event.

**3. Strategies for Managing Social Media Comments and Their Effectiveness**

In response to the growing influence of social media comments, MTN, Airtel, and Glo have adopted various digital reputation management strategies, including:

1. Proactive social media engagement through verified handles (e.g., MTN's @MTNNG, Airtel's @AirtelNigeria).
2. Influencer collaborations and digital PR campaigns.

3. Corporate apologies and compensation offers to affected customers.
4. Hashtag redirection, where companies attempt to drown out negative sentiment with positive brand messaging.
5. Customer service outsourcing to AI bots, as seen in MTN's Zigi chatbot and Airtel's Tina bot.

For instance, Okpara and Okechukwu (2023) report that after a major network disruption in 2023, Glo offered free data bundles as a compensatory gesture. Social media users responded positively to this placatory move. Some users even contrasted Glo's responsiveness with MTN's more corporate tone during similar issues. However, these strategies have not always succeeded as the telecom companies hoped. Airtel's use of brand ambassadors and influencers to downplay complaints has frequently been criticised as tone-deaf. In one incident, a sponsored post by a celebrity dismissing customer complaints was met with thousands of mocking responses and calls for a boycott (Vanguard, 2022).

Influencers in Nigeria's digital space often function as both opinion leaders and surrogates for brands. Their endorsements or critiques can radically shift public discourse. As established in Social Influence Theory, the persuasive power of such influencers is rooted in their perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and social attractiveness (Kelman, 1958; Uzuegbunam & Okonta, 2021). A notable example occurred in 2020 when MTN partnered with several high-profile influencers during the #EndSARS protests to distance itself from allegations that it had blocked access to X (TechCabal, 2020). In the face of influencer efforts insisting that the disruption was nationwide and across network providers (not unique to MTN), many users accused these individuals of being paid to sanitise the company's image. The backlash intensified and calls for boycotts grew.

In the same vein, Airtel's attempt to use brand ambassadors such as actors and comedians to counter social media complaints about poor network coverage in late 2022 largely failed. Critics labelled these posts as "corporate gaslighting" and claimed that influencer content ignored genuine user grievances (Vanguard, 2022). This phenomenon illustrates how inauthentic influencer messaging may backfire, especially when it appears to invalidate lived customer experience. Thus, while SCCT does not explicitly address the role of third-party advocates, Social Influence Theory helps explain how the credibility of the messenger often outweighs the message itself in the digital public sphere. SCCT suggests alignment between the level of crisis responsibility placed on the brand and the chosen response strategy (Coombs, 2007). However, in the Nigerian context, the effectiveness of crisis management strategies often depends more on public trust in the brand than on theoretical fit. A technically correct response may still fail if the brand is historically distrusted. When brands respond but are not believed, reputational damage intensifies. This is especially true in cases where evidence provided online (such as screenshots) contradicts company statements. In such instances, the public tends to side with fellow consumers rather than corporate voices, in line with the predictive power of Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958).

Another case in point is MTN's 2022 campaign titled "We Apologise", intended to address billing issues. While well-promoted, it was poorly received. Chukwuemeka and Iwuchukwu (2023) found that over 70% of X (formerly Twitter) replies were negative, as customers accused the company of deflecting blame rather than offering clear remediation. Similarly, transparency in the response may not always mollify social media users. Glo's acknowledgment of a 2021 network glitch, while open, triggered renewed calls for better compensation. As Eze and Odor (2022) argue, Nigerian consumers often equate transparency with action, not just admission of wrongdoing. Without restitution, even a sincere apology may be viewed as strategic manipulation.

The above is evidence that responsiveness is not always rewarded with improved brand perception. MTN's response to the aforementioned NCC fine was initially delayed and, when it came, was perceived as ambiguous. This set off a deluge of criticism on X and Facebook. Social media users framed the company's initial silence as arrogance, and its subsequent apology as reactive damage control (Onuoha & Ogbu, 2016). Despite eventually negotiating a reduced fine and issuing formal apologies, MTN's reputation suffered.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the nexus between social media comments and brand reputation management in Nigeria's telecom sector using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Social Influence Theory. The telecommunication companies under consideration are MTN, Airtel, and Glo. From an analysis of existing literature on the issues, several insights have emerged. First, the study has shown that social media platforms play a significant role in the creation and/or maintenance of public perception of brands, particularly during crises. The speed and reach of the internet amplify negative sentiments. This supports the theoretical premise that perceived attribution of responsibility—a core tenet of SCCT—is not merely constructed by organisational narratives but is also significantly midwifed by comments shared by users online.

Second, the analysis reveals that brand responses to crises in the Nigerian telecom sector often fall short of aligning with effective SCCT response strategies. While some firms—such as MTN during its regulatory crisis—attempted image restoration through accommodative strategies, the inconsistency, timing, and tone of these efforts diluted their effectiveness. Conversely, firms like Glo, which maintained relative silence during certain data service disruptions, inadvertently reinforced public scepticism, allowing alternative interpretations of events to dominate the social media space.

From the above, there is a conspicuous limitation in SCCT's predictive value. While the theory advises alignment between response type and crisis responsibility, it assumes the relative neutrality of many factors. In the Nigerian social media context, however, responses are interpreted within a broader history of consumer distrust, meaning that brands may be penalised not for how they respond, but for who they are perceived to be. This also challenges SCCT's assumption that stakeholder belief in the organisation's intentions can be regained through transparency alone. Instead, transparency must be embedded in dialogic, participatory platforms that go beyond corporate monologues.

Third, through the lens of Social Influence Theory, it becomes evident that peer-to-peer persuasion and digital bandwagon effects play a critical role in shaping and sustaining public attitudes towards telecom brands. Influencers, viral posts, and comment threads serve as mechanisms through which reputational perceptions are constructed and reinforced, often independent of the factual basis of a given crisis. This fact underscores the importance of not only managing official communication but also engaging meaningfully within the digital community to shape emerging narratives.

**Recommendations**

In light of the foregoing, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Firms should establish crisis response protocols tailored to specific types of crises such as victim, accidental, or preventable including approved message templates, trained spokespersons, and clear decision-making hierarchies for rapid deployment.
2. Rather than using social media solely as a broadcast tool, telecom companies may find it beneficial to adopt dialogic strategies, which include responding promptly to customer concerns, acknowledging fault when appropriate, and sustaining transparency to rebuild trust on social media.

3. MTN, Airtel, and Glo should make efforts to understand the social architecture of social media discourse. This includes identifying key influencers, sentiment drivers, and trending narratives that can be leveraged.
4. Establishing internal teams focused on continuous social media monitoring is also important. These teams can provide early warnings of emerging issues and allow the companies to provide timely responses.

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