

Strategic Relationship Management In Crisis Communication: Navigating Public Relations And Stakeholder Engagement Strategies Adopted By Malls Amidst The Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 brought unexpected social and economic disruptions in the lives of every person. The outbreak of the virus just didn't shut the people within their four walls significantly affecting their mental and physical wellbeing, but it also simultaneously shut down all the doors of business operation, resulting in tremendous economic loss to the nation.

Every organization revisited its business policies and priorities resorting to applying compassionate Stakeholder Management strategies to address their escalating tensions and switched over to adopting innovative Crisis Management strategies to stay connected with the stakeholders and ensure that their relations with them are kept intact. The research article tries to explore the various dimensions of the communication strategies employed by the malls during the crisis to ensure that a strong thread of connectivity and communication is maintained between the mall's management team and its concerned stakeholders. The researcher seeks the valuable insights of the top-most professionals of the Public Relations & Management Team of some of the leading malls of northwest India to find out their perception regarding the degree of effectiveness of the role played by the Communication Professionals during the Covid-19 period to keep the stakeholders informed and engaged.

Keywords: Covid-19, Communication, Crisis Management, Engaged, Malls, Public Relations, Stakeholders

Introduction

Covid-19 brought the entire world to a standstill and something about which no one had imagined even in their dreams. People were forced to stay within the four walls, all business operations coming to a sudden halt and the process of supply chain completely disrupted. The pandemic had not only affected the physical mobility of the masses, but it also completely shattered their mental well-being, bringing everyone into a devastating state of uncertainty and depression.

The prime responsibility of the organizations suddenly transformed into how to prepare their stakeholders to adopt a changed lifestyle and work model and above all how to keep the employees informed and engaged

with a positive thinking with the help of maintaining a consistent flow of accurate and engaging communication. The need for Public Relations (PR) was felt a lot more during the times of Covid- 19 than any other normal times before. The profession assumed great significance in various capacities either as PR Managers, Relationship Managers or Government PR Officials with the sole expectation from them centered around to ensure that the messages of the organization and the employers are delivered regularly to the stakeholders in the right manner and which are just not centered around addressing the issue of how to stay safe at home and take care of one's health but also to inform them about the changed organizational policies and operating protocols.

Changed Consumer Behavior as a major area of Stakeholder Management during Covid-19

Kantar, the world's leading data insights and consulting company provided very thought-provoking data and analytical reports in the direction of studying changed customer perception and buying behavior during the times of the pandemic. "Kantar's Covid-19 Indian Barometer" demonstrated a noticeable change in the customer attitude and buying behavior as a major development during the Covid-19 attack. The study pointed out that brands needed to stay connected with their customers exhibiting their economic as well as social responsiveness and needed to concentrate on how to make the stakeholders feel positive and encouraged, focusing more on strengthening social relations with them which was the most sought-after business responsibility.

The study revealed that 75% of people wanted to know how brands were reacting to the current pandemic and another 78% were urging brands to take care of their employees during that time. The study further pointed out that 77% expected brands to be helpful during the pandemic. The fourth phase of Kantar's Covid-19 Barometer forecasted the below development:

A New Wave of Digital Shoppers will emerge.

Expect an extended period of value-consciousness. (Pricing, Promotional & Value-added Strategies will continue even post pandemic

Growing shift towards Localism

Changed business concerns and emergence of shift towards the need for PR and Communication Strategies during Covid-19

Continuity of business, securing employee well-being and maintaining financial stability emerged as the biggest challenges for the corporate sector during the times of pandemic. The crisis witnessed the organization's sudden change in the medium and content of messages as the times demanded the messages to have an empathetic approach towards the stakeholders to motivate them and retain their trust and loyalty in the organization instead of having the routine commercial orientation. The role of Public Relations Professionals cannot be undermined when the question of creating trustworthy relations and generating a strong communication channel with the stakeholders during Covid-19 is concerned. The uncertain times demanded the PR Professionals to apply their creative mind at the optimum level and implement those innovative strategies and tactics which could go a long way in keeping the people connected, informed and engaged.

The need for building an immersive social media presence, especially the role of blogs was never felt so significant before as it was during the times of Covid-19 as every organization through its appealing digital content marketing strategies was trying its best to reach out to its stakeholders in various ways, either communicating about the virus and the ways to combat it or motivating the employees to be strong and positive or announcing the various changed decisions and policies of the organization. The unprecedented times inspired the PR Professionals to step forward and use all their skills and expertise in the direction of strengthening stakeholder relations, building effective internal communication in the form of seamless transition to remote work practices or adherence to health protocols which contributed significantly in

keeping the people connected, informed and engaged. PR professionals were observed to be effectively executing their role as reputation managers of their organization by conducting various community outreach-based CSR Activities or much needed Health Awareness Campaigns which demonstrated a different picture of the organizations characterized by their feeling of empathy and social responsibility towards the society. As Communication Specialists representing their organization, the professionals were also equally active in organizing activities like scheduling Online Sessions/Lectures, Video Conferencing or Webinars or organizing Online Campaigns or live Instagram/Facebook Sessions or creating various WhatsApp groups which played a pivotal role in keeping the stakeholders informed and their faith in the organization intact. PR Professionals emerged as the most effective bridges of communication between an organization and its concerned publics, as authentic communicators of pandemic related news and thus ensuring that people are just not informed about the various aspects of the virus and the related health measures to be taken but strong community relations are also build up and the feeling of care and concern for each other is strengthened.

Noff, A. (2020) while discussing about the PR Tips for the Companies in the Covid Era emphasized the fact that everything which the companies were doing earlier had to be revisited and analyzed from the perspective of the covid induced problems and issues. A need was felt equally for understanding the PR and Communication Strategies as every effort needed to be more compassionate and people centric. She further states that the public could observe the changed approach of the brands as most of them shifted their focus to creative ideas of Community Engagement and Storytelling like the new Social Distancing messages of reputed brands like Coca Cola's " Staying Apart is the Best Way to stay United" billboards and Nike's " Play Inside- Play for the World" video , besides Mac Donalds and Audi's changed Logos or the Social Bonding videos and messages of Asian Paints with " Har Ghar Kuch Kehta Hain".

The challenging times necessitated the need for disseminating messages which are outcome of deep compassionate thinking and strategizing and in this direction PR specialists played a pivotal role as advisors of the organization's management guiding them in adopting the right path towards handling the crisis effectively and maintaining the stakeholder's faith in the organization intact. The need of the hour was immediately revisiting the business strategies and policies and incorporating big changes in them and being foresighted about what needs to be done in the post pandemic situation to bounce back to normalcy. Innumerable instances of companies adopting innovative communication strategies to strengthen stakeholder retention and long-term relationships was observed varying from companies operating in retail sector to IT to hospitals and even hospitality industry. Scheduling Online Sessions/Lectures or Webinars on various issues catering to health, safety, new online technological platforms to be adopted to keep the work going or scheduling video conferencing or organizing online campaigns or live Instagram/Facebook sessions emerged as the new normal.

Changed business operational patterns and the communication challenges which the pandemic posed strongly demanded keeping the faith of the stakeholders, primarily employees and customers in the organization intact. Need was felt for having a well-streamlined and consistent channel of internal communication which would keep the employees not just engaged but also equally motivate them whether it may be in the direction of informing the employees about the organization's changed mode of operation from physical presence to remote virtual platforms and transitioning to digital platforms for meetings with the help of digital technologies like Zoom, MS Team, Hangouts, WhatsApp Groups. PR Professionals were entrusted with the most difficult responsibility of building authenticity, maintaining consumer-brand trust and creating genuine relationships. As rightly pointed out by Gulyani, A.A.(2020) that the most sought-after expectation from PR Professionals during the pandemic times of prevailing business instability was to deliver impactful communication and to suggest organizations useful ideas to sustain their brand communication strategies and to ensure that the business of their clients remain unaffected in the market. Thomas, V.M. (2020) expresses that the PR Professionals were expected to communicate timely, factual and trustworthy information with a great thrust on transparency and clarity to keep the employees and customers inspired.

Changed Communication Strategies adopted by Malls amidst Covid Pandemic

“Launching of shopping malls in 2020 was hit badly with only five properties beginning operations so far against a pre COVID-19 estimate of 54, which were likely to be unveiled across the country this year, a global property consultant said on Monday” (Source: Business Standard, PTI, Kolkatta, (2020), “Covid-19 puts the brakes on shopping mall launches in the country”)

As an unexpected tragic aftermath of the outbreak of Covid 19, every organization had to face the consequences in the form of immediate imposition of lockdown severely affecting their demand and supply chain and jolting their revenue structure. Malls of India were no exception and they too had to face the brunt of it. The management officials of the malls had to revisit and redefine their style of business operations in order to stay connected with their stakeholders and also prevent getting extinct from the market due to sudden financial crunch. As an immediate consequence of the pandemic, many malls had to convert themselves into either a commercial complex or an office or some had to face the worst consequences of it and unfortunately transform them into residential areas. Malls changed their operational style to a manner where they would be least affected by the consequences of social distancing or else they had to change their shopping premises into places of commerce. With the sudden exponential growth of online shopping influenced by changed consumer buying behavior, a disturbing factor for the malls was not just the continuation of transparent and consistent flow of information amongst the stakeholders, primarily old employees but also how to survive in the evolving business trend of online shopping and drastic change in the consumer mindset and their buying preferences. Malls had to renovate and rethink various engaging strategies in the direction of Relationship Management and Relationship Marketing. According to Jha, R. (2020), malls started adopting innovative ways to stay in the market as well as utilize their spaces as they had to face the double brunt of growing popularity of online shopping as well as the attack of Covid-19 pandemic. A change was witnessed in their nature of business operations with a transition from traditional offline retail shopping to newer strategies of online engagement and networking and transitioning into newer business areas where they would not be very much affected by the growth of digital commerce and the requirements of social distancing.

As a result of closed malls which once used to be buzzing with activity and huge footfalls and served as one of the most profitable business hub areas, the local governments were also confronted with the great pressure centered on how to handle the unused and empty malls as the pandemic had completely shut down all their avenues of revenue earning. Malls had to badly struggle on some of the major fronts like acute business crunch, the landlord's renegotiation and a sudden shift towards e-commerce and changed consumer buying patterns. In such changed scenario and falling revenue statistics, digital communication in the form of various social media platforms emerged as one of the strongest medium to ensure that a consistent channel of communication is maintained with the customers and the employees and they are regularly informed about the changed work patterns of the malls and how they are strategizing to bounce back to normalcy when things become normal and the shutters go up once again in the unlock period.

With the coming back of golden days in the form of unlock phase when the malls reopened after a long while, their style of operations had undergone sea change based on major shifts in the liking and disliking and preferences of the customers and their new shopping tastes. According to DATAQUEST. (2020), Engaging content writing and online communication assumed center stage as the prime focus of the malls shifted from the traditional practice of solely communicating about their commercial interests and products but to various passionate ways of inculcating a feeling of positivity, motivation and a strong sense of belongingness with the customers, to how to make the messages more informative and yet very attention grabbing with the usage of videos, infographics, articles, digital storytelling styles in order to make them more intimate and engaging. In the times of New Normal, the role of strategically planned PR and Communication Activities became the need of the hour as the need was felt to strengthen the bridges of communication

between an organization and its primary stakeholders, to boost up and retain the trust of the stakeholders towards the organization and above all to ensure that strong stakeholder relations give tangible outcome in the form of gradually increasing footfalls back in the malls.

In the final phase of the Covid pandemic characterized by the unlock period, it was decided by the government to reopen the malls and the theatres. The decision instilled a new wave of hope and happiness for the buyers as well as the mall and theatre owners and film viewers and enthused a new ray of relief for the film industry fraternity members. However, the flow of cash was still very little as the operational costs surpassed everything whereas the source of revenue primarily through the sale of tickets was still observed to be very nominal. However, the malls gradually started recovering as the number of footfalls were less but per person spending was still good and with the opening of multiplexes the footfalls in malls started gradually picking up as commented by Rajneesh Mahajan, Director, Shopping Centres Association of India (SCAI) and CEO, Inorbit Malls.

Literature Review

Significant research has been done in the area of studying the meaning and the various aspects of stakeholder management and its growing significance. Johanna Kujala¹, Sybille Sachs², Heta Leinonen¹, Anna Heikkinen¹, and Daniel Laude made an exhaustive Literature Review of 90 articles in their paper to explore the relevance of stakeholder engagement in a typical business organization. The authors express that it is highly important to understand and explain the relation between organizations and stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, local communities and citizens, and the various outcomes of these relations (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015; Business Roundtable, 2019; Freeman et al., 2017; Greenwood, 2007; Kujala & Sachs, 2019; J. R. Mitchell et al., 2022; Noland & Phillips, 2010; Sachs & Kujala, 2021b).

Various studies have reflected the connection between smooth organizational operation and stakeholder inclusiveness and stakeholder engagement strategies. PR Officials being a significant part of management function responsible for creating bridges of mutual understanding and information channels between an organization and its concerned publics play a noteworthy role in the direction of building strong stakeholder connections. Gill (2014) states how stakeholder relations have changed in the present years where it is no longer important for an organization to be accountable to the stakeholders and not just looking after the stakeholders. Business has progressed to be accountable to a range of stakeholders, beyond those who have a financial stake in the organization. Expectations have evolved for business around providing value for multiple stakeholders, many of whom do not benefit financially and directly from the organization's profits (KPMG 2013; ACCSR 2014). Organizations benefit in various ways by following the principles of stakeholder engagement as it keeps each one of them involved and encouraged. Consistent and strategic communication with the stakeholders play a major role in strengthening ties with them, ensuring that stakeholder engagement is taken care of in practical terms. PR Managers being strategic communication managers leave no stone unturned in this direction. According to Doorley and Garcia (2011), employee engagement essentially endeavors to align employee behavior and performance with the reputational interests of the organization and is primarily achieved through open and strategic organizational communication.

The present times with the growing impact of digital media platforms and communication becoming more transparent, immediate and interactive, every stakeholder opinion becomes an important concern for an organization and a big challenge too. Aho (2015) explains that in today's times of multiplication of communication channels, stakeholder engagement has become a very difficult task. The author describes the role and functions of PR Professionals while handling three types of stakeholders, described by him as faith-holders, hateholders and fakeholders.

A very significant study done in this direction is of Marschlich, S. & Ingenholf, D. (2021) which states that MNCs are able to manage their stakeholder relationships to the best extent possible by adopting stakeholder

engagement policies as a major of their corporate diplomacy and Public Relations professionals execute a significant role in this direction through their stakeholder interactions and engagement approaches which just doesn't address the need of stakeholder engagement but also creates social capital. The author states that PR Managers are able to integrate and involve the stakeholders in the organization's decision-making by implementing the principle of stakeholder engagement policy.

Another interesting aspect related to the significance of healthy stakeholder relations in an organization has been cited by Kochhar (2018) by the name of stakeholder capital as he states that MNCs depend on mutual relationships with a wide range of stakeholders as these relationships facilitate the creation of stakeholder capital, a specific form of social capital that emerges from the "level of mutual recognition, understanding and trust established by the firm with its stakeholders" (Dorobantu, Henisz, & Nartey, 2012) as cited by Marschlich, S. & Ingenhoff, D. (2021). However, the authors also discuss about a major fact that although PR by using its two-way communication approach contributes in creating social capital and stakeholder engagement, but at the same time there are less studies on the process of engagement and the role of PR in that process. (Ihlen, 2005) & (Johnston et al., 2018) as cited in the paper of Marschlich, S. & Ingenhoff, D. (2021)

Malls being a major area of retail operation also addresses the needs of its stakeholders through various managerial and communication practices and strategies. Aeon Mall Integrated Report in Stakeholder Engagement, 2021, discusses about the various typical stakeholders of a mall and their major concerns and initiatives taken by the mall authorities to address them ensuring that ultimately stakeholder satisfaction and stakeholder engagement is taken care of.

Another significant study which emphasizes on the need to address the needs and concerns of stakeholders and describes the various strategies and initiatives being taken by a mall in this direction is the 2021 ESG Summary of Walmart, one of the leading multinational retail corporation stores of the world. The report while discussing the need for having a well streamlined stakeholder engagement strategy in a mall organization, points out towards the significance of creating value in a mall governance practice by interacting regularly with stakeholders and taking their perspectives and feedback in a consistent manner which would further help in improving the quality of products and services of the mall. The report explains the day-to-day engagement strategies used by the malls and the various innovative virtual initiatives taken by them during the Covid Pandemic times to address their opinions and feedback.

Research Gap

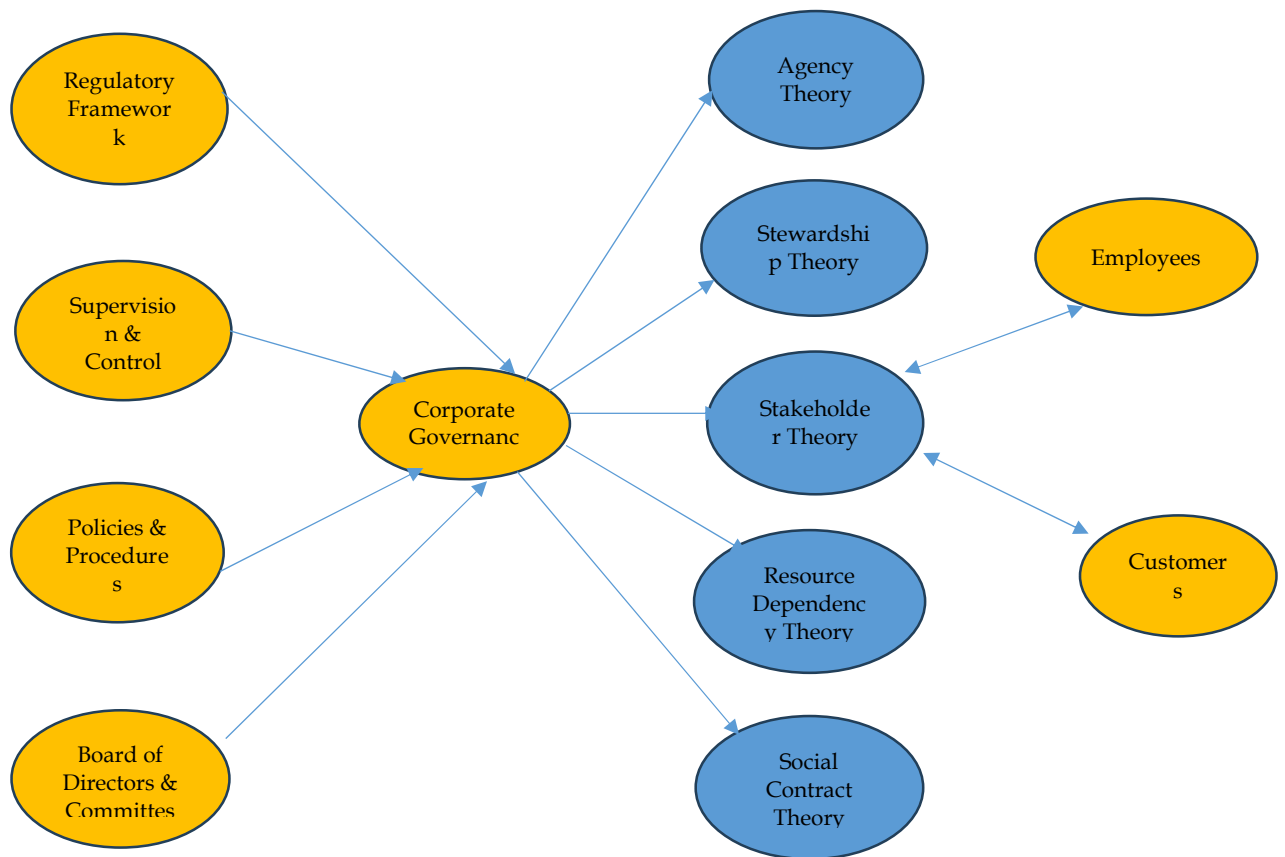
Secondary data analysis of the existing literature related to the study revealed the Research Gap and the significance of the research in the enhancement of knowledge related to the various aspects of Crisis Management and Relationship strengthening strategies resorted to by the leading malls of India to stay connected with their respective stakeholders, namely, retailers, employees and customers at large. Based on literature review it was observed that there has been very few research done in the area of changed work dynamics and strategies adopted by the malls for their survival and existence as well as for maintaining strong stakeholder relations during the intense crisis situation. Malls being a prime commercial hub of retail operations also had to face the brutal brunt of the pandemic and managed to handle the alarming consequences of the outbreak of the virus and thus adopted all possible innovative measures to overcome the resultant challenges it inflicted on the stakeholders, namely, retailers, mall employees and the customers.

Theoretical Framework

The study focusses on the various innovative Public Relations approaches used by the Mall Management Team to impart meaningful and engaging messages to their stakeholders so that they can handle the crisis with a more stakeholder centric approach and at the same time strengthen the stakeholder loyalty and trust towards the organization. Every organization creates a differentiating mark in the market as well as in the eyes of its stakeholders due to its noteworthy transparent, honest and ethical Corporate Governance Strategy and following a specific theory of Corporate Governance (CG). Out of all the theories, Stakeholder Theory

assumes its own significance as the theory is based on the principle that corporate managers should take into consideration the interests and well-being of every stakeholder of the organization in every decision of theirs and in their style of corporate governance as an organization can flourish and function successfully only on account of adhering to a stakeholder inclusive and stakeholder engagement approach. The research also tries to uncover the various practice-oriented communication and PR Strategies employed by the malls of Jaipur, India during the uncertain period of Covid induced Lockdown to maintain the channel of communication between their internal and external stakeholders and the mall management team intact.

Figure 1- Interrelatedness between Corporate Governance- Corporate Governance Theory & Stakeholder (Employee) Relations



Model: Interrelatedness between Corporate Governance- Corporate Governance Theory & Stakeholder (Employee) Relations
(Source: Author)

Research Design

Objectives of Study:

To explore the contribution of consistent authentic communication and relationship building measures in the direction of Stakeholder Satisfaction and Stakeholder Motivation during the period of Covid-19 crisis.

To explore the changed business policies and operational strategies adopted by the malls during the Pandemic period.

To develop an understanding about the various strategies employed by the Public Relations/social media/marketing team professionals during the Covid period to strengthen Stakeholder Engagement.

To seek the expert opinion of experienced professionals of the PR/social media/marketing/management team of the few selected leading Malls of India regarding the effectiveness of various innovative PR and Communication Strategies employed by them during the Covid period to strengthen Stakeholder trust in the Mall's Management strategies and for Stakeholder engagement and retention.

Research Methodology

To study the various important aspects related to the topic and to unveil the grassroot realities and thus develop an informed opinion in the area of study, the researcher employs both Primary as well as Secondary Research Method. Secondary Research entailed making an in-depth study of the various existing sources of information on different sites and articles and developing an understanding about the similar studies done in the area.

The secondary data unveiled significant information related to the crucial role played by Public Relations Professionals/Retail Managers/Marketing & Social Media Team during the difficult times of Covid-19 to ensure that the stakeholders of the organization, specifically employees and the customers are informed and communicated from time to time about the business developments of their organization and changed business policies and strategies and to explore the effectiveness of the strategies in strengthening the mutual trust and relations between the organization and its stakeholders.

As a part of Primary Research Methodology, the study employed Qualitative Research Method. The researcher seeks the expert opinion of some of the very senior and experienced Public Relations (PR) Professionals/Retail Managers/Marketing & Social Media Team of some of the leading and most popular malls of India with reference to northwest India and explores the various Communication, Relationship Management and Digital Media Strategies adopted by them during the uncertain period to ensure that the employees, retailers and the customers of the mall are apprised on a regular basis about the new decisions and work patterns of the mall management and are kept informed and motivated, thus boosting up their morale and reducing the mixed feelings of depression and job uncertainty looming large in their minds.

The study employs the Inductive Method of Analyzing Interviews. The interviewees were asked seven major questions which comprised major areas to explore and analyze the different offline and online communication strategies and relationship building measures adopted by the malls during the pandemic period to stay connected with their stakeholders.

Based on the open-ended questions answered by the interviewees, seven thematic areas of analysis were created based on which the thematic analysis of qualitative data was undertaken.

Sample Size

The study uses Purposive Sampling Method as the researcher selects those respondents of the malls who are holding responsible positions and have been at the helm of affairs of crisis management during the pandemic period. To develop an understanding on whether the various innovative PR and Communication Strategies adopted by the Malls during the Covid 19 Lockdown period helped in keeping the mall's management team connected with their stakeholders and in creating strong ties with them, interviews were conducted of the professionals of the PR and Management Team, Marketing & Social Media team of some of the topmost

mall of northwest India. The selected respondents held positions like General Manager (GM), Mall Management, PR & Social Media Team Manager and Deputy General Manager (DGM), Operations, Retail Relationship Executive of the mall.

According to Sharma, R. (2020), holiday.com & Taheem, M. (2018), fabhotels.com based on the size, number of footfalls, number of events happening in the mall and number of retail brands available under the umbrella of the mall, 3 biggest and leading malls of Jaipur, Rajasthan were selected and likewise according to Tripadvisor.in based on the traveler favorites, 3 leading and established malls of Mumbai were also selected. A Perception Study of the PR professionals, Social Media and Management Team of the top-most 6 leading malls of the region was conducted through telephonic interviews to explore the ground realities related to the challenges faced by the malls during the Covid period and to explore and analyze how significant was the role played by the PR and Communication Team in keeping the stakeholders motivated and happy thus contributing significantly in their engagement and helping the malls to overcome the acute crisis.

Findings & Discussion

Malls and Retail Outlets were the sectors worst affected by the pandemic as their revenue model solely based on footfalls and offline transactions came to a sudden standstill causing tremendous worries and uncertainty in the minds of the stakeholders. Every business entity was badly affected by the prevailing Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Unambiguous (VUCA) environment. Malls have always been the most preferred weekend hangout place for family members for all kinds of social outings and celebrations. The diverse brand retail outlets, FMCG products, tempting food joints, fun and gaming zones and multiplex theatres under one roof offering great shopping delight to all the customers along with numerous buying options have always attracted the visitors. They have been big business entities with a huge number of related stakeholder's dependent on its smooth functioning from employees to retailers to customers and other respective ones. The critical times just not created health issues but also posed serious challenges related to stakeholder management and engagement.

The interviews of the leading professionals revealed some of the very valuable insights regarding the strategies adopted by the malls in the very prevalent critical times to ensure that a strong channel of consistent communication is maintained between the Mall Owners/Management Team and its stakeholders as it being the sole earning resource for many people had to face an unexpected closure bringing down all economic activities to a sudden halt casting great uncertainties and depression in the minds of the many.

Findings & Discussion

The responses of the PR/marketing/social media Team of the selected malls were analyzed based on certain major thematic areas which explored the effectiveness and the outcome of the role played by the team during the Covid Period in the direction of Stakeholder Engagement and Motivation.

Following are the areas of Finding and Discussion:

Major challenges faced by the Malls regarding Stakeholder Engagement during Covid 19

The responses of the experts were that the sudden onslaught of Covid-19 brought some major unprecedented challenges in front of the mall management team and the key authorities. The major challenging areas noticed were:

Table 1- Challenges faced by the Malls during Lockdown

Thematic Area	Findings & Discussion	Interpretation
Major challenges faced by the malls in Stakeholder Engagement during Covid 19	Common challenges encountered by the malls due to the pandemic and the sudden imposition of lockdown were: How to keep	The responses of all the experts revealed that the prime area of concern regarding the new management strategy of the malls was Stakeholder Communication and Stakeholder Engagement as the

	<p>stakeholders motivated and engaged</p> <p>What should be the measurement focus of the mall?</p> <p>What are our engagement surveys showing us about our current process?</p> <p>How do we organize to-dos and follow-up actions?</p> <p>What issues/areas of improvement do we tackle first</p>	<p>pandemic unveiled these as the major challenges in front of them demanding immediate resolution. The experts expressed that the last point was very significant as it was firstly very important to identify the issues and secondly to find out the strategies for improvement, specially how to switch over to changed pattern of operations and new management policies.</p> <p>A major challenge in front of the mall management team was how to retain the stakeholders and relate to the customers in a strong manner. The interviewee of one mall expressed that a major challenge for them was how to keep the morale of the internal stakeholders intact, including all cadres of employees from top to the level of security, plumber, and housekeeping staff. The authorities tried all possible ways to ensure that the retailers of the mall as well as the employees were consistently communicated through different online platforms and were kept motivated .</p>
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Prime Concerns of the Stakeholders of the Mall during the Lockdown Time.

The sudden outbreak of Covid and its tragic aftermath gave rise to several concerns in front of employers and employees as well as the stakeholders at large.

Table 2- Prime Concerns of Malls during the Lockdown

Thematic Area	Findings & Discussion	Interpretation
Prime Concerns of the Mall during the Lockdown	<p>The response of one expert working as the Social Media Manager of the mall provided a very valuable insight as it focused on some of the major trends witnessed by their mall's management team during the crisis period regarding the sudden changes in the consumer preferences and consumer buying behavior. A noticeable trend was the increase in the number of viewers of OTT Platforms and a sudden shift from the offline to the online buying preferences which gave a tremendous jolt to the successful functioning of the malls as they being hardcore based on footfalls which is directly proportionate to the financial growth of the malls. The respondents expressed that</p>	<p>The responses clearly point out towards the sudden shift in the style of business operations of most of the organizations as online purchase became the new normal. Another noticeable trend was the traditional theatre screening of films taking a backseat and tremendous increase in the</p>

	<p>due to lockdown and a dip in the footfalls, the malls were the worst affected in terms of revenue. The respondent's responses clearly indicated that the changed consumer behavior made it very necessary for the mall authorities to analyze consumer attitudes and changed consumer preferences to frame new retail strategies. Some of the noticeable trends pointed out by the respondents were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shifting from offline to online mode of work Rental issues by tenants Shifting preferences of the Customers towards online shopping modes Loss in business revenue Collapsing of Multiplexes and the shifting of the viewers to OTT Platforms like Netflix <p>The other experts also expressed that employee safety and stakeholder retention, primarily retailers and having a personal touch regarding all stakeholder communication was a major area of concern and expectation of the stakeholders.</p>	<p>popularity of OTT Platforms showcasing drastic change in viewer's taste. It can be interpreted that the developments greatly impacted the revenue model of the malls bringing tremendous financial loss and uncertainty</p>
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Most affected areas of Malls in terms of Business Impact due to Lockdown

Table 3- Major Affected Areas of Malls due to the impact of Lockdown

Thematic Area	Findings & Discussion	Interpretation
Most affected areas of malls due to the impact of Lockdown	<p>The response of one expert provided in-depth grassroot realities regarding some of the worst affected areas related to the functioning of the malls because of Covid induced lockdown. The responses were extremely beneficial and insightful as they revealed the mall's changed operational style and the adoption of innovative communication strategies. The team opined that the mall witnessed 77 per cent DE growth while high street retail showed a decline of 61 per cent in business in the first half of June, as compared to the same period last year. The areas that were most affected and revived very late were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food Cinema Categories like Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) and Restaurants (dip of 70 per cent), followed by Apparel and Clothing (69 per 	<p>The findings of the study indicate that retention of customers and their faith and loyalty towards the malls proved out to be the biggest issue of concern for the mall authorities as people's buying choices and priorities underwent drastic changes due to pay cuts or layoffs in many organizations as a cost cutting measure. Hence adopting new networking and</p>

	<p>cent decline) and Jewelry, Watches and other Personal Accessories (65 per cent decrease)</p> <p>Malls are known to have highest footfalls specifically for the multiplexes and the eating joints. Cinema and family entertainment contribute 10 per cent of the revenues for the malls. The outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown leading to the sudden shutting down of the malls affected these areas to the highest extent. The retailers, restaurant and multiplex owners had to bear great revenue loss and the situation greatly worsened because of no incoming revenues and still the retailers having to bear the rental costs.</p> <p>The response of other experts summarized broadly the three major troubling areas encountered practically by the malls regarding their existence and stakeholder loyalty and these were retaining the stakeholders, converting the customers to new changed modes of buying choices and boosting the morale of the internal team members and lastly, to ensure that a personal touch is maintained with the staff members and retailers through various communication platforms, majorly Whatsapp and social media pages and making them enlightened about the new ways of survival.</p>	<p>compassionate strategies to empathize with the internal and external stakeholders assumed utmost priority.</p>
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Role of Public Relations/Networking Strategies in the direction of Stakeholder Engagement

Table 4- Role of Public Relations/Networking Strategies in Stakeholder Engagement during Covid Lockdown

Thematic Areas	Findings & Discussion	Interpretation
Role of Public Relations/Networking Strategies in the direction of Stakeholder Engagement	<p>The objective of the study was also to explore the effectiveness of Public Relations function and how much fruitful were PR Professionals in their primary task of dissemination of timely and consistent information during the times of lockdown and its resultant economic uncertainty and communication vacuum. A major finding of the interview was that all the experts strongly agreed that an effective Public Relations and Communication Strategy through</p>	<p>The study highlighted that in times of distress and uncertainty prevailing due to the pandemic and the lockdown, people were more concerned about their health and well-being. Organizations</p>

	<p>various innovative and authentic communication channels played a major impactful role in disseminating compassionate and health related messages among the internal and external stakeholders of the mall during the lockdown period and proved to be immensely fruitful in keeping them engaged, connected, and informed especially the employees, retailers, and customers.</p>	<p>likewise had to change their priority from commercial interests to reaching out to their stakeholders with a very emotional and compassionate appeal as per the changed circumstances and consumer behavior. In such times, Public Relations professionals were like saviors of handling stakeholder relations and engagement with their heart touching PR and Communication strategies which kept the belief and loyalty of the stakeholders towards the organization intact.</p>
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Prominent PR Strategies adopted by the Malls to stay connected with the Stakeholders

Table 5- Major PR Strategies adopted by the Malls to stay connected with the Stakeholders

Thematic Area	Finding & Discussion	Interpretation
Prominent PR Strategies adopted by the Malls to stay connected with the Stakeholders	<p>The responses were very significant as it pointed towards the fact that the pandemic totally crippled the functioning of the malls during the lockdown period and all its business operations leading to no other option other than making use of social media platforms and verbal communication to stay connected with the employees, especially the guards who were still on duty and to keep them motivated and feel positive. According to one of the experts, some of the prominent PR Strategies resorted to by the mall PR and social media Team during the testing period were:</p> <p>Regular positive posting of the facts on the Mall's social media handles</p> <p>Organizing online competitions and games to keep audience</p>	<p>The in depth and varied responses of the interviewees clearly stated the fact that PR became more important during the pandemic as every brand was rethinking of new ways to reach out to its audiences and PR Professionals left no stone unturned in the direction of ensuring that stakeholders of the organization are kept at ease and all possible measures taken to ensure consistent flow of messages and crisis communication.</p>

	<p>engaged</p> <p>Homemade remedies suggestions on Instagram</p> <p>Stories regarding mindfulness and how to keep mental health in good state</p> <p>Management conducting regular Yoga Sessions for security staff members who were working on offline mode in the mall</p> <p>Planning and executing Physical Activity Sessions like games, musical sessions etc for employees working from home to keep them engaged and feel motivated</p> <p>Application of Best Leadership Practices</p> <p>Disseminating information about Strategically Planned Tasks and Programs and Initiatives</p> <p>Creating a strong virtual presence of the mall on various virtual networks.</p> <p>The other expert pointed out that a worth appreciating decision taken by the authorities of their malls which paved the way for strengthening the image of the mall multi folds in the eyes of its stakeholders was the waiving of the rentals of the retailers. The digital and social media platforms primarily used by the malls like Facebook and Whatsapp proved out to be the most effective in terms of sharing of information and videos. The respondent expressed that personal calling to all the employees and providing accommodation to the staff members in the nearby vicinity areas during the tough period of lockdown were some of the most appreciated PR Strategies adopted by the mall's management team to build strong employee relations.</p> <p>One of the experts described that the social media team of the mall was very active on the Instagram Page and one of the best strategies employed by them was the posting of some of the very informative and positive videos on the page which described in</p>	
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	<p>detail the various precautionary measures being undertaken by the mall's management team after its reopening at the end of 2020 with new safety guidelines and a list of Do's and Don't's. The page also showcases a very positive video named, "Main Jaipur Hoon, Main World Trade Park Hoon" motivating the people that the dark days would sooner or later fade away and one day we would be victorious on the deadly virus. The PR and Social Team have been posting very relevant videos on the Instagram page where the Director of the mall talks with the media team as a part of the interview explaining in detail about the three stages of planning done by the mall related to the precautionary measures being adopted by them and they are Engineering, Administrative and Educational Planning. The video shows the media professionals appreciating the fact that the Covid related precautionary measures are being followed by all other malls in the entire nation. The Director says that the mall is reopening with the mission of "Covid Safe World Trade Park" where the shoppers would feel safer than their home environment while shopping in the mall. Such Communication Strategies played a very effective role in giving a clear message to the consumers that World Trade Park is the safest place to shop in Jaipur in the new normal phase.</p> <p>The retail relationship executive of one of the leading malls of Mumbai discussed how digital media platforms, primarily, Facebook and Instagram were majorly used for conducting various networking and relationship building activities like contests with the customers to keep them motivated and interested in the malls. Regular communication was done with the employees too on digital platforms to stay connected with them and to have excellent two-way communication. As a part of retailer relationship</p>	
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	<p>strengthening exercise, the mall waived off the rental of their retailers.</p> <p>One respondent expressed that the mall in collaboration with NGOs and Mumbai Municipal Corporation organized free vaccination drive and testing centers at various places for the employees for one month as a remarkable employee relations activity which was highly appreciated by the beneficiaries.</p>	
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Most Effective PR Strategy for Stakeholder Engagement

Table 6- Most Effective PR Strategy in the direction of Stakeholder Engagement

Thematic Area	Finding & Discussion	Interpretation
Most Effective PR Strategy for Stakeholder Engagement	<p>In the opinion of all the interviewees, the most effective strategies were the various engagement activities conducted by the mall authorities on a regular basis for the staff members working on online and offline mode and executing various tasks and activities to reflect a strong virtual presence and identity even during the lockdown period along with some praiseworthy employee oriented compassionate gestures like no reduction in the salary of the employees.</p> <p>Two of the experts expressed that the personal telephonic calls by the PR and Management Team to the stakeholders proved out to be the most effective and convincing PR Strategy at the moment and it provided a sigh of relief to the concerned stakeholders contributing significantly in keeping their faith and trust in the management strategies of the malls intact. Many training</p>	<p>The analysis of qualitative data explicitly demonstrates that the skills of Communication Professionals during the time of Covid 19 was the need of the hour as PR Professionals have always been remembered for navigating any type of issue or crisis beforehand and executing the best cost-effective measures for damage control and relationship strengthening. Pandemic period made the organizations realize the need for having an effective PR & Communication and social media Team for successful crisis management</p>

	<p>sessions were organized to disseminate knowledge about the techniques of adjustment to the new normal work practice models. All the interviewees expressed that Zoom platform was the most widely used PR Communication medium for holding online meetings and interviews and conducting training sessions for the landlords and stakeholders.</p> <p>Three respondents expressed that regular Online Communication with the employees and the customers through digital platforms proved to be the strongest channel of communication with the employees and customers and was extremely fruitful in keeping them feel positive and motivated.</p>	
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Latest PR Strategies employed by the malls in the Post Covid Unlock Period

Table 7- PR Strategies adopted in the Post Covid Unlock Period

Thematic Area	Findings & Discussion	Interpretation
PR Strategies employed by the malls in the Post Covid Unlock Period	<p>The initial Lockdown Phase of 2020 was followed by the New Normal Unlock Phase declared by the government with new working guidelines and norms of gradual opening of shopping malls. The research also tried to find out the perception of PR and social media Team of the Mall regarding the same. The responses given by the experts were extremely helpful in getting relevant information related to how the malls were returning to normalcy and what were the various communication and relationship building measures being adopted by them to bounce back and revive the relations with its customers and employees. The following were some of them:</p> <p>Regular updates on social media to attract the audiences and keep them engaged, specifically the optimum usage of Facebook and</p>	<p>The responses indicate that the unlock period called for more intense PR and communication activities amongst the masses to spread the word about the preparedness of the malls for reopening with all their safety measures and protocols. Engaging Content Creation has always been a primary task of PR Professionals and the need for it was felt a lot more in the unlock period. Communication Professionals played a pivotal role as bridges of communication between the malls and its stakeholders by their regular sharing of engaging videos and contents on diverse social media platforms which just not kept them informed about the new decisions of the mall management but also furthermore strengthened their trust and belief in the brand reputation of the mall.</p>

	<p>Instagram Pages of the malls by the brands to showcase their line of products, offers and discounts on purchase of products on Diwali.</p> <p>Strong Content creation on various platforms to spread positivity</p> <p>Posting of videos on the social media pages showcasing the preparedness of the malls with all their sanitization exercises as well as SOPs and guidelines issued to make the malls gradually return to normalcy following all precautionary measures.</p> <p>Providing free and subsidized promotions to brands to help them boost their sales</p> <p>Leveraging on rentals to help them stand back</p>	
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Conclusion

The research by making an exhaustive study of the efficacy of the role played by PR/Communications and Management Team of the malls during the Covid-19 times revealed that alarming crisis situations like Covid-19 always demand the expert services of the seasoned and efficient Communication Professionals to disseminate accurate, timely and consistent messages to the concerned stakeholders which prove to be a boon in sustaining the strong relations between the organization and its concerned stakeholders keeping their faith and belief too unaltered. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 greatly shattered the lives of people both physically and mentally, plunging them into an uncalled world of depression and uncertainties. The situation immediately demanded the need for Emotional Intelligence and PR Professionals emerged as saviors in this direction in the form of communication specialists and relationship managers helping the organizations to bounce back with resilience and much greater confidence. PR Managers played a pivotal role and left no stone unturned in ensuring that there is no communication gap between the organization and its public which could shatter the faith and trust of the stakeholders in the organization.

The study amply demonstrates that like other organizations, malls too were severely affected by the negative repercussions of the pandemic on account of the shutting down of all retail outlets, food joints and theatres leading to zero footfalls due to the sudden imposition of lockdown. However consistent and positive communication through various mediums and platforms kept the employees and the customers regularly informed about the latest decisions and message strategies of the malls and thus be supportive and positive towards them. As rightly said by Gingras, M. that during such alarming crisis, communication with retail teams and the employees are the most prior concern and it's very important for retailers to consistently communicate with their internal teams to keep them calm, focused, and optimistic about the future despite of the prevailing uncertainty. The perception study of the professionals of the PR and Social Media team of the malls revealed the various internal as well as external communication strategies adopted by them from time to time which casted wonders in ensuring that the employees and the customers are just not only kept updated about the changed decisions and new policies of the mall but are also kept motivated and engaged during such times of uncertainty and mental depression. Every brand started rethinking and revisiting its

brand communication strategy, making them more emotionally laden showing tremendous concern for the physical and mental well-being of the constituents. The study amply demonstrates that the pandemic period was like a litmus test for PR and Communication Managers to exhibit their skills of crisis management and how to keep the stakeholders engaged by their innovative messages and activities. PR personnels justified their role as analysts and advisors of management by serving as ideal bridges of communication between the organization and its stakeholders making each side aware of the likes and dislikes, needs and demands of the other, thus, ensuring that creative ideas are thought of in the direction of persuasive and impactful communication to make the stakeholders feel positive, satisfied and engaged.

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