

Guilt by association on social media: What can organisations do?

 By [Tonya Khoury](#)

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Jim Morrison said, "Whoever controls the media, controls the mind." Social media has certainly proved his point (even though there was not so much as a single cellphone in sight during a Doors concert).



Source © ra2studio [123rf](#) A brand can be guilty by association on social media

This month I decided to do a little research; a sentiment comparison between the big auditing firms in South Africa, namely Deloitte, KPMG, PwC, BDO, Accenture, and Ernst & Young.

The study analysed the social media comments and news articles from 1 to 30 April 2023 to determine the public's sentiment towards each firm.

How a company is perceived

The sheer volume of content is astonishing.

Would you be surprised to know that KPMG, by way of example, have had over 1,100 items written about them in less than 30 days? Do you wonder how they manage all this publicity seeing that most of this data is mined from social media?

As expected, some of it isn't very kind and some of it is very damaging in PR terms, but none of it should be ignored.

There is a well-known adage in PR that one negative comment takes 20 positive comments to bring the company's reputation back on an equal footing.

That's a tough call when you're dealing with over 1,000 posts, of which a whopping 70% are negative (as one of the organisations in the study revealed).



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Net sentiment

At Acumen, our technology pulls up this data instantly and allows us to distinguish between what is damaging and what is just noise. Our rapid listening service identifies negative media quickly so that PR can handle any crisis with rapid efficiency.

The statistics include a great benchmark which is referred to as "net sentiment", and it is here that we differentiate between the good, the bad and the ugly media messaging and fathom out how the company is perceived.

We found that while BDO and Accenture have a positive sentiment exceeding 80%, and PwC is only marginally under the "balanced reputation" mark by -4.92%, others in the market have reputations that are sinking to -83%.

One has to ask why are so many auditing firms sitting with a poor PR reputation?



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The "planted" drugs in the boot definitely belong to you

As politics and social issues become more prevalent and heated, one would expect prominent organisations and individuals to avoid, among other, scandals and guilt by association.

But whether you regard, as academia does, that the concept of guilt by association is a logical fallacy or not, the remaining half of the world's population that spend more than two hours per day on social media have concluded that an individual's (or organisation's) character, beliefs and behaviour can be conferred by the company they keep or serve.

This assumption is inherently flawed, but the person staring at the blue screen has just become a 10 grader and the "planted" drugs in the boot definitely belong to you.

So when the name KPMG pops up in a word cloud next to the name Thabo Bester, the drugs have just become a corpse and the complexity of human relationships gets reduced to a single label: The guilty get no sleep.

Try as we may to support the claim that the fallacy of guilt by association is merely political propaganda and media sensationalism, it is difficult when the Twitter feed is trending with #KPMGWeddingPlanners marrying off KPMG to the Guptas in a ceremony that will last, literally, 'till death do us part'.

So instead of turning a blind eye, dig deeper. Highlight where the problems lie, and with a sprinkle of media alchemy, work on an impactful strategy. Don't just assume it's okay.

ABOUT TONYA KHOURY

Tonya Khoury is an experienced Managing Director with a demonstrated history of working in the marketing and advertising industry.
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