

The Erisco Foods vs. Chioma Okoli Crisis: Examining Corporate Reputation Management, Consumer Activism and Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age.

Oare D. Addeh

University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA.

Esther A. Konan

University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA.

Abstract: This case study explores the Erisco Foods Limited crisis involving consumer Chioma Okoli, whose critical Facebook review of Nagiko Tomato Mix led to accusations of defamation, legal action, and a public outcry. The incident highlights the complex dynamics of social media-fueled consumer activism and corporate reputation management in Nigeria's evolving digital landscape. By analyzing the roles of social media, stakeholder influence, and the legal framework, this study examines the implications for corporate accountability, freedom of expression, and crisis communication strategies in the digital age. The case emphasizes the need for nuanced approaches to reputation management and consumer engagement.

Keywords — consumer activism, corporate reputation, crisis communication, digital rights, social mediacommas

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INTRODUCTION

The digital era has transformed consumer activism and corporate reputation management, with social media enabling individuals to publicly praise or criticize brands. In Nigeria, the case between Erisco Foods Limited and consumer Chioma Okoli illustrates the tension between freedom of expression, corporate accountability, and legal recourse. Founded over 40 years ago, Erisco Foods, under Eric Umeofia, produces tomato paste, seasonings, and beverages and exports them to Ghana, Benin, and Togo (Erisco Food Limited, n.d.; GreenPressNGR, 2024). On September 19, 2023, Chioma Okoli posted a Facebook review to her 18,000 followers, criticizing Erisco's Nagiko Tomato Mix for being "pure sugar" (Princewill, 2024). The post drew varied responses and prompted Erisco to accuse her of defamation.

Okoli was arrested a week later and detained overnight under poor conditions. Though released on bail, she faces charges under the Cybercrime Prohibition Act, including violating Section 24(1)(B) and Section 27(1)(B), which could lead to up to seven years in prison (Keane, 2024). The case sparked widespread online backlash and boycott calls, highlighting the growing influence of social media, the risks of punitive corporate responses, and the challenges in balancing expression rights with legal boundaries. Hence, this study explores two guiding questions: What role did social media play in amplifying the crisis, shaping public opinion, and mobilizing support for Chioma Okoli? Moreover, what are the broader

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implications of the Erisco Foods Limited crisis for corporate reputation management, consumer activism, and digital-age communication in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media now plays a dual role in crises—as both a source of information and a communication channel (Ross et al., 2018). This is evident in the Erisco Foods case: Chioma Okoli’s Facebook post criticizing the Nagiko Tomato Mix sparked public engagement. At the same time, Erisco used the same platform to issue a defensive response. Social media’s open nature allows stakeholders to quickly disseminate opinions, limiting organizational control and increasing reputational vulnerability (Rohn et al., 2016).

Risk communication emphasizes that organizations should avoid making assumptions about the intent of critical posts. In Erisco’s case, interpreting Okoli’s review as sabotage escalated tensions. Additionally, adopting a formal or legalistic tone can appear dismissive, while retaliating against critics—such as pursuing legal actions risks further reputational damage. A better approach involves empathetic, transparent dialogue that acknowledges public concerns.

This study draws on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Crisis News Diffusion theory. SCCT (Coombs, 2007), grounded in Attribution Theory, emphasizes how perceived responsibility affects reputational outcomes. It offers strategies organizations can use to communicate effectively and minimize damage during crises.

Crisis News Diffusion theory helps explain how Okoli’s post quickly spread and attracted support. Social media accelerated the amplification of perceived risks, particularly due to public distrust and Erisco’s harsh response. According to Seeger et al. (2002), audiences seek information to process crises, and in this case, Okoli’s narrative shaped public discourse (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). These theories provide insight into how social media escalated the crisis and how Erisco’s communication strategies influenced public perception.

PROCEDURES

This case study employed primary and secondary data sources to analyze the crisis communication strategies of Erisco Foods Limited and the public response to the incident. Initially, the study retrieved and analyzed Chioma Okoli’s original Facebook post from September 17, 2023, where she criticized the quality of Erisco’s Nagiko Tomato Mix product. Additionally, the study accessed and examined the complaint filed by Erisco Foods Limited with the Inspector General of Police, alleging defamation and sabotage by Chioma Okoli. Screenshots of these posts were sourced from the X influencer @General_Oluchi, who actively covered the crisis. Furthermore, the study obtained and analyzed the press release of the Nigeria Police Force regarding Chioma Okoli’s arrest and charges, retrieved from the official X page of the Nigerian Police Force @PoliceNG. In response to the press release, the study reviewed the press release issued by Chioma Okoli’s lead counsel, @InibeheEffiong, obtained from the counsel’s official X account to understand Okoli’s perspective and legal response to the crisis.

Moreover, the study reviewed interviews with Erisco Foods Limited owner Eric Umeofia Channels Television to grasp the company’s perspective on the crisis. As well as Chioma Okoli’s interview with Arise Television. Finally, the researcher searched for and analyzed tweets and other social media posts from the general public, using keywords such as “Erisco” and “Erisco vs Chioma” to gauge the public’s reaction and support for Chioma Okoli.

The study used qualitative content analysis of the social media posts, Erisco Foods’ complaint, the police statement, the press release from Chioma Okoli’s counsel, and media interviews to identify key themes, crisis communication strategies, and stakeholder perspectives. By utilizing this data collection and analysis approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Erisco Foods Limited vs Chioma Okoli crisis, the role of social media in shaping the narrative, and the implications for corporate reputation management and consumer activism in Nigeria.

RESULTS

The crisis could have been avoided, as some will argue Chioma Okoli’s comment, which triggered the crisis, represents a legitimate consumer concern about product quality that the company should have addressed constructively.

CORPORATE RESPONSE

Erisco Foods’ legal pursuit of Chioma Okoli aligns with a denial-based response strategy under Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), wherein the company cast itself as a victim of sabotage by accusing Okoli of leading a “criminal syndicate.” This confrontational stance, rather than addressing product concerns, deepened the crisis and eroded public trust. Founder Eric Umeofia, in a media interview, positioned Erisco as a patriotic brand that was unfairly targeted, linking the backlash to broader economic issues like the preference for imported goods. While Erisco’s longstanding market presence may have initially offered reputational protection, the aggressive response ultimately undermined it. By painting Okoli as an antagonist, the company fueled public sympathy in her favour—highlighting SCCT’s warning that defensive postures can backfire in crisis management.

CHIOMA OKOLI’S ORDEAL WITH THE NIGERIA POLICE

Erisco Foods' decision to pursue legal action against Chioma Okoli aligns with a denial-based response strategy outlined in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). By accusing Okoli of leading a "criminal syndicate" to sabotage the company, Erisco adopted a victim posture that deflected attention from product concerns. This combative approach deepened the crisis and eroded consumer trust. In a televised interview, company founder Eric Umeofia framed Erisco as a patriotic Nigerian enterprise facing unfair criticism. He emphasized Erisco's contributions to the local economy and linked the backlash to Nigeria's import-dependent market. Despite the company's strong reputation, its aggressive response strategy—rather than fostering transparency—exacerbated stakeholder skepticism and fueled public sympathy for Okoli.

Okoli's televised interview on Arise TV further intensified public sentiment. She recounted being arrested at church, detained overnight in degrading conditions, and pressured to issue an apology under duress. Her emotional account, including the impact on her children, humanized the crisis and amplified outrage online. These events spotlight concerns over the abuse of legal processes and the erosion of civil liberties, particularly under Nigeria's Cybercrime Prohibition Act. The Nigerian Police Force's response also raised alarm. A public statement accused Okoli of "jumping bail" and attempting to manipulate proceedings through crowdfunding, prompting accusations of institutional bias in favor of Erisco. This perceived lack of impartiality deepened distrust in corporate and state actors, further mobilizing public support for Okoli and heightening the reputational fallout.

CHIOMA OKOLI'S ORDEAL WITH THE NIGERIA POLICE

Social media played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and rallying support for Chioma Okoli during the Erisco Foods crisis. Online discourse revealed widespread condemnation of what many perceived as the company's arrogance and misuse of power—particularly directed at CEO Eric Umeofia, who was criticized for attempting to silence a consumer voice. Commenters also highlighted a perceived media imbalance, noting that while Umeofia received significant coverage, Okoli lacked similar access to tell her side of the story. Outrage extended to the authorities, with users condemning the use of Nigeria's Cybercrime Act against Okoli as an overreach. These sentiments fueled calls to boycott Erisco products and questioned the legitimacy of the company's legal actions, which many viewed as disproportionate. Collectively, these reactions illustrate social media's capacity to amplify public sentiment, influence discourse, and mobilize collective action. As Crisis News Diffusion Theory explains, the viral spread of Okoli's story across platforms led not only to national backlash but also to international media attention from outlets like CNN, the New York Post, and Daily Mail Online—underscoring social media's power to extend the impact of a crisis beyond borders and shape global narratives (Veil & Ojeda, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The Erisco Foods crisis underscores the fragility of corporate reputation in the digital age, where a single consumer's social media post can trigger widespread backlash and reputational fallout. The company's decision to pursue legal action under the Cybercrime Prohibition Act intensified public criticism. It raised broader concerns about balancing consumer rights and freedom of expression in Nigeria. This case demonstrates the risks of defensive, punitive responses and the importance of transparent, empathetic communication strategies that engage stakeholders constructively. It also highlights the growing influence of consumer activism and the power of social media in amplifying crises. Companies must recognize the legitimacy of consumer feedback, however critical and respond in ways that build trust rather than erode it. The incident illustrates an urgent need for legal and regulatory frameworks for the Nigerian business landscape that protect corporate interests and individual rights. Moving forward, organizations must prioritize proactive crisis planning, responsive digital engagement, and policies that support free expression and responsible brand management.

Author Biography

Oare D. Addeh, M.A. in Communication, University of Southern Mississippi. Email: oaredanielleaddeh@gmail.com

Esther K. Konan, MBA, University of Southern Mississippi. Email: konanestherlilah@gmail.com

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