# Were Higher Education Institutions Communication Strategies Well Suited for the COVID-19 Pandemic?

David Santandreu Calonge[1], Pablo Medina Aguerrebere[1], Patrik Hultberg[2] & Melissa Connor[3]

[1] Department of Communication and Media, Canadian University Dubai, United Arab Emirates

[2] Department of Economics and Business, Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA

[3] Faculty of the Professions, The University of Adelaide, Australia

Correspondence: David Santandreu Calonge, Department of Communication and Media, Canadian University Dubai, United Arab Emirates. E-mail: dsantandreu@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

The immediacy of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the sheer importance of internal and external communication with stakeholders. Universities had to rapidly grasp an unfolding and fast-changing crisis, gauge their level of preparedness, review decision and implementation processes, devise strategies, and adapt communication approaches. This exploratory study conducts a literature review in order to identify relevant studies that address how higher education institutions communicated to their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The review of the literature revealed that although many higher education institutions had disaster recovery plans in place, few were well-equipped for a disruption of global proportions. Using a grounded theory approach, five important themes emerged from the relevant studies.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis communication, Cynefin framework, universities

## 1. Introduction

The professional management of corporate communication, particularly during a major crisis, is a challenge for higher education. The immediacy of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic created turmoil and uncertainty across higher education institutions, which in turn impacted their business model. Universities Australia indicated, for instance, that AUD16 billion in revenue and approximately 21,000 jobs would be lost by 2023 across Australia's universities, due to the impact of COVID-19 (Karp, 2020). In the United Kingdom, it has been estimated that 231,895 students would "no longer enroll in UK higher education in 2020–21," with a resulting decline in tuition fee and teaching grant income estimated to be £2.47 billion and a possible loss of 30,280 jobs (Halterbeck, Conlon, Williams, & Miller, 2020, p. 15). Across the world, higher education institutions were forced to freeze hiring of non-essential academic and professional staff, terminate short-term/adjuncts contracts, close unprofitable departments, review course offerings, and cut unnecessary expenses. The immediate and reactive response to COVID-19 illustrates how the lack of university contingency planning and crisis preparedness is a systemic issue (Wigginton, Cunningham, Katz, Lidstrom, Moler, Wirtz, & Zuber, 2020).

The pandemic highlighted the challenges communications and marketing staff encounter when dealing with internal (academic/professional/administrative, students) and external (industry, community, government, parents) stakeholders during complex, unexpected and sudden health crisis (Seale, McLaws, Van, Crimmins, & MacIntyre, 2011; Beaton, Stergachis, Thompson, Osaki, Johnson, Charvat, Marsden-Haug, & Beaton, 2007). Although some research has explored crisis communication during a pandemic (Sanders, Nguyen, Bouckenooghe, Rafferty, & Schwarz, 2020; Freimuth, Hilyard, Barge, & Sokler, 2008; Reynolds & Quinn, 2008), there have been few investigations into what Coombs (2015) identified as the two main strategies for crisis communication: (1) managing information and (2) managing meaning in the midst of an actual pandemic in a university context. The current study focuses on "managing meaning", which Coombs described as "efforts to influence how people perceive the crisis and/or the organization involved in the crisis" (para.4), during the COVID-19 crisis. Through a literature review design (Bearman, Smith, Carbone, Slade, Baik, Hughes-Warrington, & Neumann, 2012), we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how higher education institutions can effectively communicate during pressing crises. The goal of the study is thus to help

higher education decision-makers better communicate during crises that unfold suddenly and rapidly. To achieve this goal, we conduct an extensive literature review in order to identify relevant studies that would allow us to explore the main research question: How did higher education institutions communicate with their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? To organize our findings, we apply the Cynefin framework, a conceptual framework often used in communication qualitative research, to categorize different contexts facing leaders during crisis communication episodes. Using an extensive literature review, various inclusion criteria, and a grounded theory approach, the study revealed five important themes that are used to offer recommendations for crisis communication.

The study proceeds as follows: section two provides a background to inquiry, section three lays out the methodology and conceptual framework, and sections four and five present, analyze and discuss the findings. The final section concludes and provides recommendations for practice.

## 2. Background

Institutions of higher education play an essential role in developing democratic societies by promoting critical analysis, public forums, and knowledge promotion, both within the institution and the wider community in which they are located (Ramirez & Hyslop-Margiso, 2015). Globalization, as well as recent innovations in the knowledge-based economy, have changed these institutions as they face an increase in global competitiveness, the emergence of new education systems, and closer relationships with companies (Mok, 2016; Hall, 2015). These changes, and many others, have forced higher education to reassess the definition of public good as employability skills and knowledge advancement become essential values for justifying the social role played by universities (Williams, 2016). Developing these values have allowed tertiary institutions to improve their public engagement with different stakeholders such as students, governments, and media companies (Watermeyer, 2015; Marginson, 2016). However, as argued by Hayter and Cahoy (2016), many universities are no longer playing the role they should play, such as fostering learning, promoting, developing and sharing research, having a deeper social impact, and improving society as a whole. These trends help explain why some universities and colleges have adopted corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Watson, 2015), but they may also explain why many higher education institutions have been poorly equipped to respond to social and economic crisis that have affected many universities around the world. For instance, in Spain most public universities have been found to be inadequately prepared to adjust to crisis situations and to deal with an environment where resources are dwindling (Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menéndez, 2016).

Higher education institutions' struggle to respond to both long-term trends and urgent crises, highlight the utmost importance of effective leadership. Being able to manage change and crises, requires a combination of leadership and management competencies (Black, 2015). However, in many universities, leadership development is ineffective because leadership development programs tend to focus on individuals already in positions of authority; few programs are designed to cultivate a broader number of individuals to support shared leadership (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Today, all universities face changes related to social structures, student demographics, internal processes, and mergers. Since 1990, many universities have confronted changes concerning society's structure, such as expansion, diversification, privatization and internationalization (Benasconi & Celis, 2017). With respect to students' profile, universities face unprecedented challenges because they must integrate mature and non-traditional students, as well as students coming from different countries and cultural backgrounds (Hu, 2018). Concerning internal processes, universities need to find new synergies between teaching and research, integrate new instructional methods, orient all activities to the public good and reinforce the conduct of basic research with long-term benefits (McCowan, 2017). And finally, as to mergers, many private and public universities have carried out mergers processes, which has influenced the performance of both students and professors (Pinheiro, 2015), as well as costs optimization and internal processes (Hentschke, Parthenon-EY, Young, Jacobs, Jacobs, & Ladd, 2017).

In addition, universities and colleges face crises that impacted on their own organizational reputation (Zhen & Bian, 2015). In the case of health crises, universities are forced to craft emergency plans (Pokrywka, 2016) in order to efficiently deal with internal and external stakeholders (Seale, McLaws, Van, Crimmins, & MacIntyre, 2011; Beaton et al., 2007). In particular, since the end of 2019, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced tertiary institutions around the world to make drastic changes, which may have affected both their business models and their financial sustainability. This initial reactive response to COVID-19 has revealed that the lack of university contingency planning and crisis preparedness is a prevalent issue. In order to avoid crises, higher education institutions must be aware of the main social values existing in society, how they impact their internal functioning (Stein & De Oliveira, 2016) and reinforce their corporate identity (Elken, Stensaker, & Dedze, 2018). With this knowledge in mind, universities can formulate new strategies in response to public

opinion events, and these responses can reflect the nature of the incident and data provided by real-time monitoring (Wang, 2020). When facing a crisis, tertiary institutions should be objective and dialectical (Liang & Jiang, 2017) and implement a professional management of corporate communication (Thelen & Robinson, 2019).

In general, the professional management of corporate communication involves three important steps: (1) identify and quantify the main factors that determine when a crisis communication strategy is effective and when it is not (Coombs, 2015); (2) only manage professional sources of content because the judgment of organizational reputation is not only dependent on the crisis-response strategy, but also on stakeholders' perceptions about the sources used (Van zoonen & Van der Meer, 2016); and (3) credibility depends on how efficient an organization is in implementing a positive dialogue with its main (staff, students) and secondary (media, government, community) stakeholders (Cheng, 2018).

Any health crisis would challenge tertiary institutions' ability to communicate with stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, posed an extraordinary challenge due to both the immediacy and the scale of the crisis (Wu, 2020). The COVID-19 emergency thus emphasized the importance of creating clear communication structures that enable organizations to "speak with one voice" and react quickly at the first sign of outbreak (Balog-Way & McComas, 2020). To achieve this, institutions can use social media given that these platforms are an important element in health crisis-related communication (Yu, Li, Yu, He, & Zhou, 2020). Social media offers an opportunity for health professionals (Public Health academics, campus clinic doctors and nurses, etc.), as integral members of a university crisis management team, to apply risk communication principles in order to avoid misinformation and thus improve people's care (Malecki, Keating, & Safdar, 2020). Tertiary institutions can also use these platforms to communicate the reasons for campus shutdowns, providing reassurance and practical advice in order to avoid chaos, rumors and panic (Depoux, Martin, Karafillakis, Preet, Wilder-Smith, & Larson, 2020). Citizens can engage on these platforms, especially when governments and public authorities explain their decisions in a clear way (Cheng, 2018).

Social media is, however, not a homogenous phenomenon with a single coherent role in crisis management (Eriksson & Olson, 2016) and many organizations do not use these platforms effectively and/or to their full potential (Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016). nevertheless, universities should consider integrating social media as a main platform to communicate during every crisis. The use of impactful and personal student stories communicated through Instagram by the University of Oregon (U.S.) communication team is an example of such good practice (Warner, 2020). Another example is the Lyon College (U.S.) "Stay Safe Scots" Instagram campaign to encourage students to wear masks (McKenzie, 2020).

Previous research has indicated that using social media is effective in diminishing the negative effect of a brand crisis and often helps win public sympathy (Wang, 2016; Civelek, Çemberci, & Eralp, 2016). For example, although *Facebook* users are aware of the fact that by complaining publicly, they can cause serious (brand) damage (Stříteský, Stránská, & Drábik, 2015), they normally react positively when companies use information-giving and accommodative strategies (Ye & Ki, 2017). *Twitter* is another example of a source of real-time information that organizations can use to quickly and impactfully influence key stakeholders (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt, & James, 2015). It is important to highlight, however, that an ongoing, consistent, accurate and transparent relationship with the media helps mitigate the risks that misinformation and rumors may cause. In the case of COVID-19, K. Vish Viswanath, director of the Applied Risk Communication for the 21st Century program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, argued that communication professionals were "singularly unprepared to handle this [social media] aspect" due to an overwhelming and "saturated information environment" (Igoe, 2020, para.3). Moreover, a Canadian study of 2.5 million tweets related to COVID-19 that were posted between March 26 and April 6, 2020 indicated that "misinformation about COVID-19 was circulated more on Twitter compared to traditional media" and that social media users were more likely to be convinced by disinformation about COVID-19 and to ignore public health advice (Bridgman, Merkley, Loewen, Owen, Ruths, Teichmann, & Zhilin, 2020).

## 3. Methodology

In order to explore how higher education institutions communicated with their internal and external stakeholders during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study conducted an extensive literature review of peer-reviewed articles published in English that addressed tertiary institutions' communication strategies. The literature review identified 253 references, which included both quantitative and qualitative studies. Using various inclusion criteria (see below), a total of nine articles were selected. These nine articles were then subjected to thematic analysis using a grounded theory approach, open coding and axial coding.

*3.1 Conceptual Framework*

The Cynefin Framework is a conceptual framework that leaders can use in decision-making characterized by conditions of complexity (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The framework has been used by researchers in a range of disciplines to "support decision-making and strategy development in dynamic and challenging situations" (McLeod & Childs, 2013). The approach is clearly relevant to this research, as it explores communication strategies adopted by tertiary institutions during an unpredictable, rapidly-shifting and *supercomplex* (Barnett, 2000) environment as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cynefin framework offers four relevant decision-making contexts or domains: Obvious, Complicated, Complex, and Chaotic. The *obvious* domain applies when the issue faced is clear and evident, has been dealt with before and processes are in place to solve it effortlessly. The line of action is to sense the situation/problem, categorize it and respond according to existing rules, almost automatically. This was definitely not the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. The *complicated* domain requires expert analysis of the situation/problem, assessment of the potential risks, before a course of action is determined. The strategy here is to sense the problem, analyze all its known facets (possibly predict its unknowns) and respond. The next domain, labelled as *complex*, relates to problems that are equivocal, undetermined, ambiguous, that have lots of unascertained parts. They put individuals or teams in a quandary. The approach here is to probe, through trial-and-error or experiment, before responding. When the context is seemingly out-of-control, or *chaotic*, but the issue needs to quickly be contained, the recommended approach is to immediately act by attempting to stop the hemorrhage, sense if the solution has any positive effect, reflect on its efficiency, in an attempt to turn the chaotic into the complex.

When faced with the sudden and pressing health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, most seasoned higher education institutions with experience of dealing with past risks and crises had resilience planning and communication scenarios in place. These plans ranged from tackling the *obvious*, to navigating the *complicated* and even, for the most prepared, the *complex*. However, dealing with the *chaotic* first few weeks of the pandemic was an unfamiliar and stressful experience for the vast majority of tertiary institutions. The unprecedented challenge that the COVID-19 crisis presented was the volume, the speed, the immediacy, and the extent of conflicting information that higher education decision-makers had to digest and analyze in order to prepare an adequate response.

*3.2 Research Question*

The research question for the study was: How did higher education institutions communicate with their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic?

*3.3 Search Strategy*

The study was conducted in the form of a literature review. Searches were carried using the following most commonly used databases: Scopus, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, MERLOT, Sage and Google Scholar. The search and selection were conducted during July-August 2020 (July 21, 2020–August 10, 2020). In order to ensure that no studies were missed, the search was performed by three independent researchers. Search topics included "crisis communication during COVID-19," "University communication, pandemics," "COVID-19 communication," "crisis communication strategies, universities," "university communication plan, health crisis, COVID-19," "higher education and COVID-19, universities and COVID-19, public relations and COVID-19, crisis and COVID-19, brand and COVID-19, social media and COVID-19."

*3.4 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria*

The initial search focused on quantitative studies, but also included studies that combined both qualitative and quantitative methods, as long as the qualitative results were described, justified and explained clearly. The search was limited to studies in English published between November 2019 and April 2020, as the authors of this article wanted to gauge tertiary institutions' initial communication responses. Full texts of all studies that met the inclusion criteria were independently read and assessed by three authors to confirm eligibility. Following this thorough assessment, an article published in 2017 was deemed relevant and included, as it specifically focused on the use of internet, communication with students and campus crisis management mechanisms. In total 253 articles were initially identified. Duplicates were removed using EndNote. Articles were then excluded for the following five reasons: full-text unavailability, op-eds, text in language other than English, text not specifically on higher education institutions' crisis communication strategies during COVID-19, and context not being in higher education. A flow chart of identified and selected articles can be found in Figure 1.
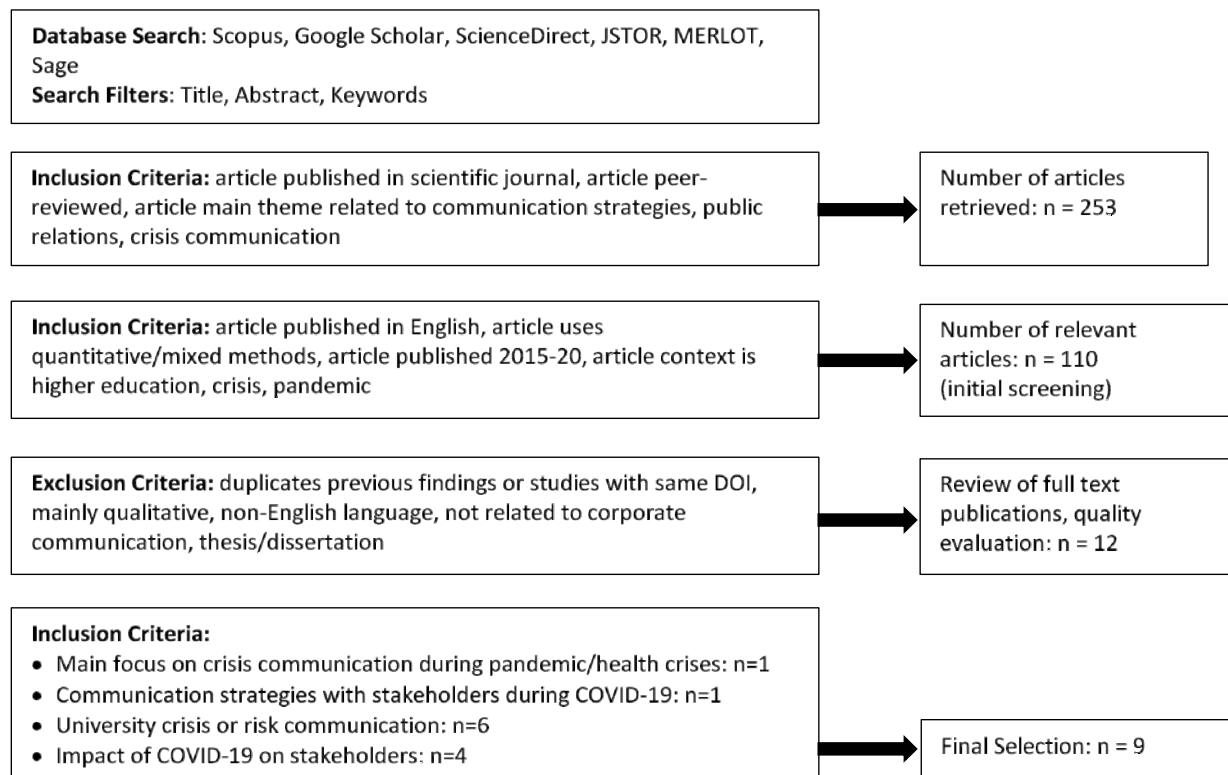
| Database Search: Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, MERLOT, Sage |
| --- |
| Search Filters: Title, Abstract, Keywords |

| Inclusion Criteria: article published in scientific journal, article peer-reviewed, article main theme related to communication strategies, public relations, crisis communication | → | Number of articles retrieved: n = 253 |

| Inclusion Criteria: article published in English, article uses quantitative/mixed methods, article published 2015-20, article context is higher education, crisis, pandemic | → | Number of relevant articles: n = 110 (initial screening) |

| Exclusion Criteria: duplicates previous findings or studies with same DOI, mainly qualitative, non-English language, not related to corporate communication, thesis/dissertation | → | Review of full text publications, quality evaluation: n = 12 |

**Inclusion Criteria:**
- Main focus on crisis communication during pandemic/health crises: n=1
- Communication strategies with stakeholders during COVID-19: n=1
- University crisis or risk communication: n=6
- Impact of COVID-19 on stakeholders: n=4

→ Final Selection: n = 9

Figure 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

*3.5 Screening and Data Extraction*

The study used a grounded theory approach, open coding, and axial coding. For each article, three authors independently assigned open codes to the article text to identify emergent themes. The thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was based on the grounded theory approach advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2014). Mutual agreement on the classification was sought through discussion and constant comparison. Examples of codes assigned included *risk communication*, *vulnerability of international students*, *emotional reaction to crisis*, *truthfulness*, *empathy* and *transparency* (Table 1). The second stage of the analysis involved the iterative identification of the relationships between the codes (axial coding). Codes were therefore synthesized, merged and categorized according to five overarching themes: (1) Communicating with University Stakeholders via social media is more important than ever before; (2) Communicating complex issues *often* to diverse audiences is more challenging than ever before; (3) Ensuring time-critical information accuracy is more vital than ever before; (4) Students' involvement in university crisis communication strategies is more imperative than ever before; (5) Empathy, positive messaging, trustworthiness and consistency are more pivotal than ever before.

*3.6 Assessment of Quality, Reliability and Confidence*

To assess the quality of and confidence in the findings, the authors used the Confidence in Evidence from Reviews of Qualitative research (GRADE-CERQual) approach advocated by Lewin et al. (2018). The four components: (1) methodological limitations, (2) coherence, (3) adequacy of data, and (4) relevance, were applied to each of the five themes to assess whether they were a reasonable representation of the phenomenon (Table 2).

**4. Results**

In total, nine articles were included, published between 2017 and 2020. Articles and themes are summarized chronologically in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes emerging from selected articles

| Author (s) | Date | Title of article | Source | Codes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chesser, Amy, Amy Drassen Ham, & Nikki Keene Woods. | 2020 | Assessment of COVID-19 Knowledge Among University Students: Implications for Future Risk Communication Strategies | *Health Education & Behavior* | * Risk communication * Public health presence on social media * Access of information during health crises * High-frequency communication touch points * Online misinformation, * Students' perceptions about Covid-19 |
| Firang, David. | 2020 | The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international students in Canada | *International Social Work* | * Vulnerability of international students *communicate with students * Emotional reaction to crisis |
| Wang, Tao. | 2020 | The COVID-19 Crisis and Cross-Cultural Experience of China's International Students: A Possible Generation of Glocalized Citizens | *ECNU Review of Education* | * International students * Experience * Perceptions * Emotional reactions |
| Knight, Melinda. | 2020 | Pandemic Communication: A New Challenge for Higher Education | *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* | * Crisis communication * Frequent updates * Failure to act * Truthfulness, empathy, transparency with stakeholders * Trust in crisis communication |
| Brammer, Steve, & Timothy Clark. | 2020 | COVID-19 and Management Education: Reflections on Challenges, Opportunities, and Potential Futures | *British Journal of Management* | * Pedagogical change * University governance/leadership * Clarity and timeliness of communication with stakeholders * Higher tempo of communication * Reassurance messages * Communication with students more complex * Student's emotions *Universities' business models * International students |
| Sanders, Karin, Phong T. Nguyen, Dave Bouckenooghe, Alannah Rafferty, & Gavin Schwarz. | 2020 | Unraveling the What and How of Organizational Communication to Employees During COVID-19 Pandemic: Adopting an Attributional Lens | *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* | * Communication challenges * Time-critical information * Multiple channels * Encouragement to follow hygiene rules and to maintain social distancing * Convey huge amount of information /overload * Manage multiple medium * Need for clear messages (highly distinctive, consistent, and consensual) *engagement, and well-being, (mental) health and productivity * Psychological reactions to crisis |
| Wang, Chuanyi, Zhe Cheng, Xiao-Guang Yue, & Michael McAleer. | 2020 | Risk Management of COVID-19 by Universities in China | *Journal of Risk and Financial Management* | *Role of university in crisis communication/response * Communication channels * Positive communication * Use of alumni networks, * Online psychological assistance * Health videos * Social media * Use of students to communicate information, communication with employees * Students' engagement on social media |
| Thelen, Patrick D., & Katy L. Robinson. | 2019 | Crisis Communication in Institutions of Higher Education: Richard Spencer at the University of Florida | *Communication Quarterly* | * Stakeholder expectations and engagement * Use of social media * Messaging strategies, Impact on public * Emotional reactions to crisis |
| Liang, L. I. U., & Maoting JIANG. | 2017 | Crisis Management of Group Events in Chinese Universities Under the Background of Internet: A Literature Review | *Higher Education of Social Science* | * Communication channels * Social media * Crisis warning system * Monitoring and collection information * Open feedback channels * Organizational crisis mechanism * Crisis early warning mechanism * Crisis communication mechanism * Crisis training mechanism * Crisis recovery evaluation mechanism * Online relationships between universities and students |

The GRADE-CERQual assessment for each of the five themes (below) is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. CERQual summary of qualitative findings

| Theme 1 | 8 | Chesser et al.; Wang, Knight, Brammer & Clark, Sanders et al., Wang et al., Thelen & Robinson, Liang & Jiang | High confidence: Minor concerns regarding methodological limitations and adequacy of data. No or very minor concerns regarding coherence and relevance. |
|---------|---|---|---|
| Theme 2 | 8 | Chesser et al., Firang, Wang, Knight, Brammer & Clark, Sanders et al., Thelen & Robinson, Liang & Jiang | Moderate confidence: Minor concerns regarding the methodological limitations. No or very minor concerns regarding coherence and relevance. |
| Theme 3 | 6 | Chesser et al., Knight, Brammer & Clark, Sanders et al., Thelen & Robinson, Liang and Jiang | High confidence: Minor concerns regarding methodological limitations and adequacy of data. No or very minor concerns regarding coherence and relevance. |
| Theme 4 | 6 | Chesser et al. , Knight, Brammer & Clark, Sanders et al., Wang et al., Liang & Jiang | Moderate confidence: Minor concerns regarding methodological limitations and coherence. Moderate concerns regarding adequacy and minor concerns regarding relevance. |
| Theme 5 | 9 | Chesser et al., Firang, Wang, Knight, Brammer & Clark, Sanders et al., Wang et al., Thelen & Robinson, Liang and Jiang | High confidence: Minor concerns regarding methodological limitations. Very minor concerns about coherence and adequacy of data. Minor concerns regarding relevance. |

## 5. Discussion

The ultimate goal of the study was to help higher education decision-makers better communicate during crises that unfold suddenly and rapidly. Our approach was to conduct an extensive literature review in order to identify relevant studies which explored the question of how higher education institutions communicated with their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? Using a grounded theory approach, the study identified five

important themes: (1) Communicating with University Stakeholders via social media is more important than ever before; (2) Communicating complex issues *often* to diverse audiences is more challenging than ever before; (3) Ensuring time-critical information accuracy is more vital than ever before; (4) Students' involvement in university crisis communication strategies is more imperative than ever before; (5) Empathy, positive messaging, trustworthiness and consistency are more pivotal than ever before. These five themes are discussed in the following sections and recommendations for practice are offered.

### 5.1 Communicating with University Stakeholders via Social Media Is More Important than Ever Before

As revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are sourcing their news and updates from social media, and this is particularly true for young people between the ages of 18 and 25. Additionally, many international students (with various levels of language ability) use social media as a primary source of information (facts, updates, and instructions) and connection to the campus community. With students turning to social media for health information, it is imperative that universities use those platforms effectively, regularly, and candidly to communicate time-critical and correct messaging (Brammer & Clarck, 2020) to overcome the potential for communication overload (Sanders et al., 2020; Vraga & Jacobsen, 2020) and misinformation during a health crisis.

We recommend that higher education leaders use social media in a time of crisis to clarify potential conflicting information or unexpected changes in on/off campus guidelines, instruct and inform all their stakeholders, both internal and external. Thus, social media communication should guide towards safe action, simple and clear guidelines (e.g., social distancing, wearing a mask, washing hands) (Sanders et al., 2020; Wang, 2020). In addition, institutions should communicate changes to stakeholders with empathy, in other words using real human emotions in well-thought, well-crafted messages, that demonstrate genuine understanding of how the complex situation impacts on students' lives, as well as the efforts that the institution engage in to help resolve it. Higher education institutions that manage to communicate accurate and complex information regularly, clearly, and with transparency, will increase trust amongst their stakeholders.

### 5.2 Communicating Complex Issues Often to Diverse Audiences Is More Challenging than Ever Before

Although communication with external constituencies, such as students, families, community members is important, as well as complex and multi-faceted, we recommend that institutions devote a similar level of care to evidence-based internal communication. As institutions shifted their activities online, academic and administrative staff had to cope with new ways of working and collaborating, which generated high levels of uncertainty, frustration, and anxiety that added to the stress already induced by the health crisis. These feelings and barriers must be managed in order for universities to meet their educational and social goals. Institutions should ensure that staff members feel safe, are regularly and accurately informed of the situation, feel engaged,

and listened to. Keeping safe and open lines of communication (multiple channels and touch points) and acknowledging contributions or constructive feedback is paramount (Chesser et al., 2020; Liang & Jiang, 2017) in order to avoid what Palttala and Vos (2012) refer to as "a vacuum of communication." We also recommend that institutions consistently reinforce their core values and purpose when communicating with their internal stakeholders.

### 5.3 Ensuring Time-Critical Information Accuracy Is More Vital than Ever Before

Trust and transparency are never more crucial than during a crisis. However, communication strategies at many higher education institutions failed on two accounts: (1) communication with internal and external stakeholders often left the impression that the institution prioritized student recruitment and financial goals over the health and well-being of students and staff (Knight, 2020; Brammer & Clark, 2020; Sanders et al., 2020) and (2) many institutions struggled to reconcile two competing public goals, namely delivering a high-quality education to their students and keeping their students healthy and safe. In these cases, we recommend that institutions re-build trust, manage complex meaning, and ensure a better approach for the future. According to De la Garza (2020), "the unprecedented level of real-time information at our fingertips can both give us the tools we need to make smart decisions, but also make us more anxious about what's to come" (De la Garza, 2020, para.2). One possible adjustment is to build an emergency management structure (including mechanisms for crisis early warning, crisis training, and crisis recovery evaluation) that expands the number of constituencies (e.g., students and staff) included in the decision-making process (Liang & Jiang, 2017). This will help ensure that universities have seasoned, tested and sustainable processes (and personnel) in place to deal with future emergency crises effortlessly (the *obvious* domain of the Cynefin framework).

### 5.4 Students' Involvement in University Crisis Communication Strategies Is More Imperative than Ever Before

Communication strategies at universities can and should include student involvement in various ways. Many university communication strategies relied on top-down communication and did not make extensive use of the student body to help communicate messages concerning correct health messaging (Wang, 2020) and changes to campus policies. This is a missed opportunity as students (may speak several languages and) are often able to use social media in innovative ways that can assist in delivering timely, digestable and targeted messages. During crisis management, it is imperative that universities are able to *empathically* communicate with trust and with recognition of the strong emotions that may arise from the crisis in their student body (Thelen & Robinson, 2020). Failure by higher education institutions to do so could result in negative social media posts, backlashes, distrust and student disengagement. In fact, unless the institution manages to effectively communicate complex information to their varied constituencies in a timely way, it is likely that their social media strategy will fail due to negative posts by students, parents and staff. We therefore recommend that, in the future, higher education institutions include all student groups (including postgraduates, alumni and freshmen) in their communication strategy.

### 5.5 Empathy, Positive Messaging, Trustworthiness and Consistency Are More Pivotal than Ever Before

Sharing positive student and staff stories online has helped higher education institutions create confidence, rapport, trustworthiness and resilience (Knight, 2020). However, in many places, the crisis affected certain groups disproportionally and many unfair and inequitable practices were revealed. We agree with Firang (2020) that institutions should take advantage of these painful lessons in order to build and implement academic policies and practices that enhance inclusive experiences among minorities and vulnerable groups. We also recommend that tertiary institutions clearly communicate the pillars upon which all decisions are/will be made, such as ensuring safety or keeping students on track towards graduation. By focusing on the main issues that guide decision-making transparently, an institution will be able to communicate with consistency and clarity, which in turn will build faith and confidence in the leadership team.

### 5.6 Limitations of the Review

The main weakness of this study was the paucity of articles directly related to the main research question. Moreover, the authors did not have access to official and updated institutional communication plans. In spite of its limitations, the study adds to our understanding of how tertiary institutions initially communicated with their stakeholders during the pandemic.

## 6. Conclusions

The goal of the present study was to examine how universities communicated during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess whether their crisis communications strategies were well-suited to a health crisis that unfolded rapidly. That is, were higher education communication strategies well suited for the COVID-19 pandemic? The

study adds to the growing body of research that indicates the importance of probing and sensemaking (Keller et al., 2012) before appropriately responding during complex and volatile situations.

A surprising finding was that COVID-19 university crisis communication was, for the first few months, almost exclusively done via social media platforms in an Act-Sense-Respond mode, advocated by the Cynefin Framework during chaotic situations. In terms of the substance and effectiveness of the crisis strategies, we were able to identify five common themes from previous research. Given that most communication took place over social media in the early stages of the pandemic, we found that (1) communicating with University Stakeholders via social media is more important than ever before; (2) communicating complex issues *often* to diverse audiences is more challenging than ever before; (3) ensuring time-critical information accuracy is more vital than ever before; (4) student involvement in university crisis communication strategies is more imperative than ever before; and (5) empathy, positive messaging, trustworthiness and consistency are more pivotal than ever before.

To these five themes we also want to add that the after-effects and post-crisis communication should be considered carefully, as advocated by Heath (2006) and Jeanne Achille, president and CEO of The Devon Group, a public relations firm in New Jersey, when she stated that "assessing communications afterward" was as pivotal as "planning before disaster strikes" (Parsi, 2016, para.40). We therefore recommend that tertiary institutions carefully and strategically plan for when the health and operational impacts of COVID-19 dissipate. All higher education institutions have suffered financial and enrollment challenges during the health crisis, but those institutions that are able to quickly return to "normal" operations will be able to attract students (local and international), staff, as well as strengthen their brand identity. In addition, institutions should carefully collate and share knowledge gained during the crisis; especially successes and failures related to technology, infrastructures, procedures, and communication. Lessons learned that can enhance face-to-face teaching and learning practices, as well as research practices, should be integrated and applied. To conclude, our research helps researchers and practitioners better understand how higher education organizations should manage crises from a communication perspective. We recommend that higher education institutions consider the five themes that emerged from our study in order to turn future "chaotic" crises into merely complex events.

Traditionally, higher education communication has not always been managed adequately or effectively. However, since the year 2000, global competition, the development of private universities and new students' attitudes have forced tertiary institutions to revisit their corporate communication strategies, including those related to crisis communication. In order to facilitate these discussions, we propose three practical recommendations and three research avenues. First, based on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience, as discussed in the five themes presented above, universities should consider establishing corporate communication units and risk-management teams. Depending on the size of the institution, these units can either be for the entire institution or specific for particular divisions/schools/departments. In addition, it is crucial in times of crises that institutions define a communication plan that strategically allows the institution to both centrally manage information (through for instance a COVID-19/*Pandemic X* microsite) and manage "meaning" (perceptions of the crisis response) to avoid sending conflicting information or duplication of messages. Third, tertiary institutions must establish specific and assessable crisis performance indicators. An example of such quality indicators is the crisis communication scorecard developed by Palttala and Vos (2012) which focuses on the three crisis phases (a) preparation, (b) warning and (c) response) and the three stakeholder groups (a) those directly and indirectly affected, (b) news media (local, national, international) and (c) response network (level, line of authority). Without such indicators, institutions will not be able to assess, adjust, reflect and learn from their experiences. It is also imperative that scenario-planning, involving university internal stakeholders, health professionals, students and ideally professional communication firms, be part of any crisis communication plan. Early identification of trigger-points will help manage crises, whether future health outbreaks or other delicate situations, in a more efficient way. In short, institutions must move from being "reactive" to being "proactive" in their crisis management and communication strategies. In the language of the Cynefin framework, institutions should use management and communications tools to move a crisis from the chaotic domain to being merely complex or complicated. We further recommend that tertiary institutions use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to build future resiliency against crises. By carefully assessing policies, implementing agile strategies, as well as communicating—what the next steps are—transparently, institutions can be better equipped to deal with future crises. In the language of the Cynefin framework, institutions should plan and prepare so that events that would initially be classified or considered as "chaotic," will instead fall in the "complex" or even "complicated" domains.

In support of the corporate communications strategies, as well as crisis management, we encourage further research focused on strategic issues facing tertiary institutions. In particular, research related to the following

three areas is needed: (1) how communication strategies influence the online reputation of higher education institutions, (2) how stakeholder engagement through social media platforms can be better managed, and (3) how to effectively implement internal processes for brand building in collaboration with stakeholders.

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