Crisis Communication Strategies in Higher Education Institutions amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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A B S T R A C T

Communicating in times of crisis is a challenging endeavor for higher education institutions. This study aimed to identify the crisis communication strategies employed in higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face communication was limited. To draw relevant information from selected literature sources, systematic literature review was employed. Significant data from selected literature resources were extracted, coded, and synthesized. The themes that emerged from the review are using social media for information sharing, being empathetic when communicating, and utilizing credible sources of information. The application of crisis communication strategies benefited higher education institutions by helping them disseminate information and build a supportive environment amidst challenging times. Crisis communication strategies that were advantageous during the pandemic should be further analyzed to see if they can be added to the institutions' crisis management plans and be implemented in other crises situations.

Keywords: crisis communication strategies, higher education institutions, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented challenge to various sectors worldwide. The social and economic repercussions of this pandemic brought an unpredictable strain on normal operations. According to Strielkowski and Wang (2020, as cited in McNamara, 2021), the pandemic profoundly affected academia and higher education.

To maintain the health and safety of people worldwide, lockdowns, physical distancing, and limitations in face-to-face communication were imposed. The restriction in in-person conversations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic affected higher education institutions and emphasized the need for crisis communication. Crisis communication focuses on gathering, processing, and sharing essential pieces of information to address a crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, as cited in Spradley, 2017). It encompasses several communicative processes and practices that help promote safety and stability in organizations affected by crises (Spradley, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted challenges in higher education when communicating with internal stakeholders, such as administrators, faculty, staff, and students, as well as external stakeholders, such as industry partners, local government, and parents (Calonge et al, 2021). To deal with the crisis, higher education institutions had to revisit their crisis management plans, enforce policies on crisis communication, and employ communication strategies to ensure successful information exchange with various stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of creating clear communication structures that enable organizations to unify their voice and act promptly at the first indication of an outbreak (Way et al., 2020).

Given the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions, it is important to study the crisis communication strategies that were implemented. This would provide a clearer understanding of various ways to communicate in times of crisis through the lived experiences of people in the higher education sector. This study can serve as a reference or guide for leaders in organizations as they review and improve their crisis communication plans. This study can also provide stakeholders opportunities to adapt crisis communication strategies that they can implement in future crises.

Review of Related Literature

Crisis communication refers to the dissemination of information by an organization to address any situation that affects its stakeholders. In higher education, effective crisis communication reduces uncertainty and contributes to a quick recovery. The succeeding section presents concepts and studies relevant to crisis communication.

According to Coombs (as cited in Calonge et al., 2021), crisis communication refers to the strategic use of words to manage meaning during a crisis. Crisis communication has two general elements. The first element is managing information, which encompasses the collection and dissemination of crisis

information. The second element is managing meaning, which refers to influencing how people perceive the organization in times of crisis (Coombs, as cited in Gephart et al., 2018).

The Cynefin Framework is a conceptual framework that can guide leaders to assess situations, identify challenges, and to make decisions during complicated or difficult times (Snowden & Boone, as cited in Calonge et al., 2021). This framework offers four relevant decision-making contexts or domains, which are obvious, complicated, complex, and chaotic. The obvious domain applies to situations where the issue is clear and has been previously managed effortlessly. The complicated domain necessitates critical analysis of a problem or issue and identification of risks before a course of action is implemented. The complex domain relates to problems that are ambiguous. The chaotic domain relates to contexts that are out-of-control and issues that must be immediately resolved. Understanding these domains provides leaders a better understanding of ways to make strategic decisions to address complex situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This framework is relevant to crisis communication for it explores communication strategies adapted by tertiary institutions during an unpredictable and highly complex environment brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from the abovementioned concepts, there are also relevant studies that present how communication took place in higher education institutions. Hussain and Rawjee (2014) in their study regarding crisis communication in higher education institutions in South Africa discovered that while most institutions include crisis communication in their strategic plans, some still do not see it as a priority. It was also revealed that during a crisis, confusion and miscommunication arise; hence, immediate communication and use of social media were recommended.

In their study regarding the school administrator's crisis management in the COVID-19 context, Akbaba Altun and Bulut (2023) found out that communication was identified as one of the most important elements of crisis management. Making channels open for the stakeholders and maintaining an effective network of communication were deemed important.

Liu et al. (2021) found out that higher education institutions in the United States of America have employed methods that are consistent with the best practices in crisis communication. The study revealed that external partnerships with governments and other institutions were important sources of information.

Northam (2017) in her study regarding crisis communication in higher education discovered that text messaging and institutional emails may become outdated as students increasingly favor social media platforms. She also found out that crisis communication is still developing in the digital age and that administrators must be consistent and proactive when communicating in data-driven environments (Northam, 2017).

These concepts and studies show that there is a lot more to unravel and lean about the crisis communication strategies in higher education.

Problem Statement

Communication between higher education institutions and their stakeholders was hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this, higher education institutions implemented crisis communication strategies. This study aims to identify and discuss the crisis communication strategies employed in higher education institutions through a systematic literature review.

Methodology

Systematic literature review was used in this study to identify the crisis communication strategies employed in higher education institutions. Identification, selection, and evaluation of empirical data from significant literature sources are part of systematic literature reviews that aim to answer a research question (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). The review process for this study involved the selection of journals and application of inclusion and exclusion criteria in the selection of researches. The databases used in this study were Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, Sage, and ScienceDirect. The search terms or keywords used for this review included the following terms: crisis communication during COVID-19, higher education and COVID-19, public relations and COVID-19, university crisis communication, crisis communication and COVID-19, university communication during a pandemic, communication in higher education during a crisis, and university communication strategies during COVID-19.

The inclusion criteria included were as follows: peer-reviewed or refereed journal articles that were published between 2019 and the first quarter of 2023, articles with an abstract and full paper written in English, and articles that indicated communication strategies employed in higher education institutions to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. The exclusion criteria were as follows: studies not written in English and studies that did not provide findings from the data. The selected articles were subjected to thematic analysis to identify emergent themes.

Results and Discussion

The discussions that follow present three themes that emerged from the interviews focused on the crisis communication strategies in higher education institutions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Using social media for information sharing

Disseminating information to various stakeholders becomes more challenging in times of rapidly spreading large-scale outbreaks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people used social media as a platform for receiving news and updates and this is particularly true for people aged between 18 to 25

(Calonge et. al., 2021). Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram were some of the social media platforms used. Among these platforms, Facebook was mostly used for posting announcements, communicating, sharing information, and collaborating with peers (Mulenga & Marban, 2020; Balushi et al., 2022).

Using social media as a vehicle for communication was found to be advantageous for higher education institutions. Social media enabled institutions to connect with students, teachers, and colleagues and to post relevant information that can be quickly accessed by stakeholders in social media platforms (Sengupta & Vaish, 2023). Additionally, the accessible and ubiquitous nature of social media made information sharing more efficient. The widespread use of social media among university students and educators also brought beneficial impacts on the shift from traditional face-to-face classes to an online learning environment (Balushi et al., 2022).

Moreover, using social media for disseminating information was found to be strategic because of convenience. Social media does not need any form of technical requirements, such as servers or technical maintenance, in contrast to traditional learning management systems (Balushi, 2022). This social media feature that showcases stability, accuracy, and flexibility is known as "operational stability" (Sam et al., 2021).

Overall, higher education institutions used social media for information sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic because it is widely-used, accessible, quick, flexible, and easy to use and maintain. Using social media for sharing information is an advantageous strategy because of the aforesaid qualities, which are crucial in crisis communication.

Being empathetic when communicating

In times of crisis, communicating with empathy is essential (Knight, 2020). Empathy is a multidimensional construct that has cognitive and affective components. Cognitive empathy refers to mentally adopting the perspective of others to understand their thoughts and emotions, while affective empathy refers to an emotional reaction that involves experiencing the emotions of others (Schoofs et al., 2019).

O'shea et al. (2022) found out in their study that emotional reassurance was present in communication across higher education institutions in Canada, China, and the United States of America. For instance, stakeholders sign off emails with positive messages such as "we are here for you" and "we are strong." The emotional appeals in communication aimed to reduce anxiety, express positive reactions towards the community's response, and express concern over the adverse effects of the pandemic (O'shea et al., 2022).

In line with this, Clements and Robinson (2021) stated that displaying support and concern when communicating with students, instructors, and administrators regardless of instructional modality helps create a stronger community of care in the university. The empathetic way of communicating with stakeholders by assuring them that social support is available has a positive effect on learning and well-being (Faulkner et al., as cited in Clements & Robinson).

The aforesaid statements imply that showing empathy as a communication strategy is beneficial to higher education stakeholders for it has various positive effects, such as reducing anxiety and creating a stronger community of care. Given the difficulties faced by the stakeholders during the COVID-19 epidemic, empathic communication has assumed even greater importance.

Utilizing credible sources of information

Reliable information is important in times of crisis, especially health-related crises, when people face high levels of uncertainty, risk, and vulnerability (Olaimat et al., 2020). With many uncertainties, misinformation becomes rampant (Baker et al., 2021). To avoid this, leaders of organizations must utilize credible sources of information. Utilizing credible sources of information allows organizations to have consistent crisis messages and benchmark the effectiveness of their crisis response (Liu et al., 2021).

In their study, Olaimat et al. (2020) discovered that majority of students at universities in Jordan had good knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, scientific websites and articles were used more commonly by medical and postgraduate students. The information from the government, news reports, and the characterization of the disease by the World Health Organization likely influenced the university students' knowledge (Olaimat et al., 2020).

Similarly, Baker et al. (2021) discovered in their study that majority of the university students in Palestine had a moderate level of COVID-19- related knowledge, which means that they were aware of the most common symptoms of COVID-19. The results of this study revealed that the students were knowledgeable about the most common symptoms of COVID-19. The participating students were mostly aware of the measures of the Palestinian government and the recommendations of the World Health Organization (Baker et al., 2021).

The aforesaid studies imply that university students put premium on information from credible sources during the COVID-19 pandemic. The same is true for university leaders. In the study of O'shea et al. (2022), some communications in higher education alluded to misinformation. Specifically, a chief medical officer advised university stakeholders to ignore rumors about the virus circulating on social media and instead pay attention to advice from public health authorities (O'shea et al., 2022).

These studies highlight the value that university stakeholders, such as leaders and students, put on utilizing credible sources of information during the COVID-19 pandemic where uncertainty exists. Utilizing credible sources of information as a strategy in crisis communication prevents the prevalence and detrimental impacts of misinformation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Communicating to stakeholders in times of crisis is vital. Higher education administrators employed various crisis communication strategies, such as using social media for information sharing, being empathetic when communicating, and utilizing credible sources of information. The crisis communication strategies of higher education administrators benefit the stakeholders by keeping them well-informed and help institutions advance their goals amidst challenging times.

Future studies could consider more participants or institutions as part of their study to have a broader perspective on the crisis communication strategies of higher education administrators. Future studies could also focus on the crisis communication strategies of higher education administrators along the different phases of a crisis which are the pre-crisis phase, the crisis phase, and the post-crisis phase. Additionally, further studies could focus on the crisis communication strategies of administrators in basic or secondary education. Studies on the crisis communication strategies of leaders, managers, and administrators in other sectors or organizations is also recommended.

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