Communicating during a Pandemic: A South African University's Use of Social Media during the COVID-19 Crisis

Pamela Michelow, Gina Fainman and Gabi Nudelman

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in late 2019 resulted in many universities across the world switching to emergency remote teaching in order to complete the academic year. This article examines what senior management at one South African university felt was important to communicate to their student body regarding the COVID-19 crisis and emergency remote teaching, and the modalities utilised for this communication. The type of crisis responses enacted by this university are also investigated. Relevant communication events by the university's senior management to their student body during the pivot were examined utilising a bottom-up (thematic analysis) and top-down (situational crisis communication theory) approach. Important themes that emerged included the need to empower and mobilise students, acknowledging unequal access to the devices and data required for online learning, and looking after student's mental health. Crisis response strategies involved justification of the pivot to emergency remote teaching, praising staff for their efforts, expressions of sympathy for students, and provision of data and devices for students in need. The article concludes with recommendations on an approach to communicate with students in the event of a crisis.

Key words: emergency remote teaching, COVID-19, thematic analysis, situational crisis communication theory, social media research

Résumé

La pandémie de COVID-19 qui a émergé à la fin de l'année 2019 a conduit de nombreuses universités à travers le monde à passer à l'enseignement à distance d'urgence afin de terminer l'année académique. Cet article examine ce que la haute direction d'une université sud-africaine a jugé important de communiquer à son corps étudiant concernant la crise COVID-19 et l'enseignement à distance d'urgence, ainsi que les modalités utilisées pour cette communication. Les types de réponses à la crise mises en place par cette université sont également étudiés. Les événements pertinents en matière de communication entre la direction de l'université et ses étudiants pendant le pivot ont été examinés à l'aide d'une approche ascendante (analyse thématique) et descendante (théorie de la communication de crise situationnelle). Parmi les thèmes importants qui ont émergé, citons la nécessité de responsabiliser et de mobiliser les étudiants, la reconnaissance de l'inégalité d'accès aux appareils et aux données nécessaires à l'apprentissage en ligne et la nécessité de veiller à la santé mentale des étudiants. Les stratégies de réponse à la crise ont consisté à justifier le passage à l'enseignement à distance d'urgence, à féliciter le personnel pour ses efforts, à exprimer sa sympathie à l'égard des étudiants et à fournir des données et des appareils aux étudiants dans le besoin. L'article se termine par des recommandations sur une approche de la communication avec les étudiants en cas de crise.

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Introduction

In late 2019, a novel virally-mediated disease emerged in China that quickly spread across the world. The disease, termed COVID-19, was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. Throughout the world, governments introduced various measures to combat the spread of the virus such as lockdown, curfew and quarantine (Pollard, Morran and Nestor-Kalinoski, 2020). This had a disruptive effect on teaching and learning. Many higher education institutions decided to cease face-to-face tuition and replaced it with online learning (so called emergency remote teaching (ERT)) in order to continue with the academic year (Mohmmed, Khidhir, Nazeer and Vijayan, 2020). In ERT, the main emphasis is on moving online to provide prompt and temporary access to teaching and learning in emergency situations rather than concentrating on producing a "robust educational ecosystem"(Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond, 2020). ERT should be distinguished from typical digital or distance teaching and learning that is designed to be conducted in an online environment and has a

previously planned curriculum (Shim and Lee, 2020).

In an exceedingly short space of time, academic staff had to reconfigure teaching materials to fit an on-line environment, resulting in an additional work burden. Students may not have had access to devices or data where they were now residing,or found themselves in environments not conducive to studying (e.g., crowded conditions), and may have struggled to focus on the online material. Technical support staff were overwhelmed while administrators had to acquire online teaching platforms, ensure that these were compatible with existing IT infrastructure and communicate the process to stakeholders (Mohmmed et al., 2020). In addition, some students, staff and administrators became ill with COVID-19 or other conditions that were harder to access treatment for during the pandemic, further complicating the situation. The pivot to ERT within the setting of COVID-19 was thus challenging for many university stakeholders who needed to be regularly updated to apprise them of the rapidly unfolding situation, as well as to uphold the university's reputation as a provider of higher education. Analysing the nature of this communication is valuableas it provides an indication of what one university (University A) situated in South Africa prioritised during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as what was not communicated.

University A comprises students and staff from diverse backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status, rural or urban origin, ethnicity and religion. In 2020, there were approximately 40 000 enrolled students, 52% undergraduate and 48% postgraduate, with 9% being international students. Thisstudy's findings could assist other universities to formulate an approach to communication should future predicaments arise.

A crisis with respect to an organisation can be defined as an event that has a negative impact on it and its stakeholders. There are three aspects to a crisis, namely, it cannot be predicted, it has the ability to interrupt organisational processes and a crisis can jeopardise the organisation and its stakeholders (Schwarz, Binetti, Broll and Mitschele-Thiel, 2016; Heath, 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its disruptive effect on many aspects of traditional university activities can thus be construed as a crisis. Crisis managers need to develop crisis response plans that both explain the circumstances and provide measures to deal with the situation. Communication is vital during a crisis and evolving communication

with relevant parties will increase understanding of the crisis and reassure stakeholders that the organisation is managing it (Schwarz et al., 2016; Van Rensburg, Conradie and Dondolo, 2017).

The next section presents relevant background information, followed by the research questions and the methodology employed to conduct the study. The findings are then deliberated on and an approach to communicating with students in the event of a crisis while maintaining a university's reputation is recommended.

Conceptual Background

Social Media

A bottom-up (thematic analysis (TA)) and top-down (Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)) approach was utilised to provide a holistic, nuanced and valid description and analysis of University A's crisis communication. This section presents relevant background information with respect to social media, TA and the SCCT in order to situate the study.

There is no universally accepted definition of 'social media'. McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017) define it as "web-based services that allow individuals, communities and organizations to collaborate, interact and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible". In this article, the term 'social media' encompasses emails, news blogs on websites and various platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. For billions of people around the world, including students in higher education, social media has assumed an astonishing significance in their daily lives. Mobile devices such as smartphones, laptops and tablets provide the ability to instantly access, communicate and share material (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017). Many social media platforms can be used for communication purposes including email, blogs posted on various digital sites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Renren, Snapchat, Weibo, etc., each with its own advantages and shortcomings.

Social media is pervasive in many students' lives (Vorderer, Kromer and Schneider, 2016). The literature suggests that, like their global counterparts, South African students are avid and enthusiastic users of social media (Shava and Chinyamurindi, 2018; Ogbonnaya and Mji,

2014). As of August 2020, there were 24 100 000 Facebook users in the country, with the age group 18-34 being the most active. More than eight million South Africans utilised LinkedIn and over five million used Instagram in August 2020 with the most active users again aged 18-34 (Van Rensburg, 2020). In 2018, more than eight million South Africans used Twitter (Kahla, 2019). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and the ongoing University A news blog were used for the purposes of this study as these are main modalities in which senior management communicates with its student body.

Social media can also be used for research purposes, to make sense of the world and can offer alternative research pathways (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017). In the past few decades, the number of academic publications using social media has expanded considerably (Snelson, 2016). Such research can be qualitative, quantitative or mixed method. By utilising social media platforms, researchers have access to a huge volume of varied data. The vast majority of this data is not generated for research but is produced by people and organisations in the real world for real world activities. This content may be different from and perhaps more authentic than that generated in contrived situations such as interviews and questionnaires (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, concerns have been raised about the accuracy, reliability and quality of data gleaned from social media. Data linkages and supplementation with existing data sets can be used to improve the'veracity' of data in social media. Several ethical issues pertaining to social media research have been raised such as anonymity (Swirsky, Hoop and Labott., 2014).

Social media is taking on a more powerful role in crisis communication. Its attributes such as immediate communication, established usage in many peoples' lives and easy access via smart phones, laptops and tablets ensure that social media is becoming an important instrument in crises (Maal and Wilson-North, 2019; Eriksson, 2018; Eriksson and Olsson, 2016). There are several ways in which social media can be used in a crisis, including two-way exchange of messages that enables crisis responders to collect information to establish what is happening on the ground, informing and updating victims, determining people's attitudes and behaviours during the crisis, advocating for and co-ordinating volunteers, requesting donations and helping to rebuild confidence in an organisation after the crisis.

Alexander (2014) found that people in a crisis or emergency situation reported feeling more supported when social media was widely used. There are, however, negative consequences of the use of social media in crises such as propagation of rumours and false information. Another disadvantage is that the communities who require the most help in a crisis may not have access to the required technology for reasons such as poverty and disability. Technical capabilities such as electricity, batteries and Wi-Fi may be unavailable in a crisis. In addition, the huge amount of information that can be disseminated makes it difficult for users to determine what is relevant to their needs (Alexander, 2014).

University A used social media to quickly disseminate information at the beginning of South Africa's COVID-19 pandemic to inform students how teaching and learning would take place, as well as assure them that the good standing of the university would not be diminished. It is therefore valuable to examine the types of messages that were sent out, as well as the communication platforms used.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) can be used in qualitative research to help answer a diverse range of research questions. It has been used in many different disciplines but according to Xu and Zammit (2020), few studies have employed TA in the field of education. Thematic analysis is a way of identifying, examining and describing patterns or themes within the data. It involves systematising a data set into significant groupings or concepts and is an iterative, "complex process ... which goes back and forth between bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (Kawulich, 2016). Thematic analysis can be predominantly inductive or deductive and researchers need to decide beforehand which is most appropriate in a particular situation. The data determines the themes in an inductive approach while in a deductive one, the data is clustered in predetermined themes that may have been derived from previous or similar studies. As noted by Braun and Clark (2006), it is unusual for TA to be completely inductive as researchers will know something of the topic beforehand. There are several advantages to using this approach, including that it is suitable for teamwork, can be employed with large data sets, interpretation is underpinned by the resultant data, and it can

be engaged to both develop theoretical models and assist in dealing with real-world challenges. A disadvantage is that it may fail to identify more nuanced content (Kawulich, 2016; Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). In this study, TA was used to determine what senior management of University A felt was important to communicate to students during the move to ERT. Its application is discussed in the section on methodology.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

According to Fiske (2011, p. 55), communication can be described as either the "transmission of message" or "production and exchange of meaning". An appropriate communication strategy is essential to protect an organisation and its stakeholders during a crisis. Theoretical frameworks in crisis communication are useful to explain why crises occur and what action should be taken. While different theoretical frameworks can be utilised, what is important in crisis communication is to deal with the requirements of affected populations in order to save lives and minimise harm (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). Coombs (2015) asserts that crisis communication is an applied discipline as it seeks to resolve actual predicaments. The actions and words that an organisation employs during and after a crisis have important consequences for its reputation. An organisation's (including a university) reputation includes how it is recognised and valued by its various stakeholders as well as the public. Reputation is thus a notable asset and a positive reputation is associated with improved financial health and staff recruitment and enhanced influence (Coombs, 2006; Bacci and Bertaccini, 2020).

The study employed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to determine what type of communication responses University A produced and transmitted to the student body during the COVID-19 crisis. This theoretical framework that was developed by W. Timothy Coombs in 2006 is based on Attribution Theory that posits that humans seek to allocate causes to events and behaviours. The SCCT proposes that organisations should develop and implement crisis strategies that harmonise with the crisis type and this is based on the responsibility ascribed to the organisation for the particular crisis (Coombs, 2006; Van Rensburg et al., 2017; Fussell-Sisco, 2012). It comprises three central principles, namely, determine the type of crisis; develop a crisis response strategy; and match the crisis situation to the response plan. In order to

determine the crisis type, one has to decide if (1) the organisation is a victim of the crisis, and (2) if its actions unintentionally led to the crisis, or (3) it deliberately placed people at risk, acted improperly or broke a law or regulation. Stakeholders will apportion varying amounts of blame depending on the crisis type. The SCCT distinguishes crisis response plans from what it terms 'instructing information' whereby stakeholders should be informed about what happened, how to shield themselves from hurt and what actions the organisation is taking to ameliorate the situation (Coombs, 2006). Once such information has been provided, a rational and suitable crisis response is required to assist in safeguarding the organisation and its stakeholders. The response strategies can be grouped into 'deny', 'diminish' and 'deal' depending on the crisis type (Table 1). Within these broad groups, more specific responses are presented.

An advantage of the SCCT is that it can be applied in wide-ranging crisis situations and can be utilised as a resource to improve decision making to protect an organisation's reputation. However, it may not take into account financial and legal considerations that will impact a crisis response (Coombs, 2015). The SCCT framework has been utilised in diverse studies. One of itslimitations is that little information is available on how people actually perceive these diverse response strategies. Meta-analyses have shown that matching a communication reaction to the type of crisis is useful but the effect was found to be too weak to re-establish reputation (Ma and Zhan, 2016; Guerber, Anand, Ellstrand and Walker, 2020). However, these studies were undertaken in the corporate sector and the findings may or may not be applicable to higher education institutions. Coombs (2016) cautions that institutions "should not expect miraculous, larger, immediate effects from employing reputation repair strategies". It is likely that people will respond to the crisis itself as well as the crisis response strategy (Ham and Kim, 2019). In addition, there is a dearth of studies on the use of the SCCT in higher education. Van Rensburg et al. (2017) examined management communication and responses to university crises as perceived by university staff. The article concluded that the 'diminish' response strategy was most often employed. In the current study, the SCCT was utilised to determine what response strategy was used by University A's senior management during the implementation of ERT and if this was commensurate with the crisis type.

Table 1: Crisis type and suggested response (Adapted from Coombs, 2006).

Crisis Type	Suggested response	Response strategy
Victim	Deny	Attack Deny Scapegoat
Accident	Diminish	Excuse Justify
Intentional/ preventable	Deal	Ingratiation Concern Compassion Regret Apology

Research Questions

This articles examines how senior management of a South African university (University A) communicated the ERT pivot to students as the COVID-19 pandemic loomed and a national lockdown was effected. An investigation of the nature of this crisis communication, consisting of emails, a news blog and several social media platforms, and how it was disseminated to students is useful in order to understand how one university attempted to protect both itself as an organisation as well as one of its most important stakeholders, namely, students. The findings will be useful in formulating communication strategies in future crises within a higher education milieu.

The study's research questions were:

- What did senior management of University A want their student body to know about the COVID-19 crisis and ERT, and how was this communicated?
- To what extent did the crisis response strategy enacted by University A correspond with that proposed by the SCCT?
- Based on the findings, what recommendations can be made for communicating with students in the event of a crisis?

Methodology

Data Collection

In collecting digital and social media data, researchers can search particular time frames, specified terms, stipulated users and predetermined locations (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this study, the timeframes were two weeks prior and four weeks following the switch to ERT as it was assumed that the most pertinent communication events would be around this time. Communication events containing specified terms were deemed most appropriateto answer the research questions. Terms such as 'COVID-19/Coronavirus', 'lockdown', 'remote/on-line teaching and learning', 'digital platforms', and 'data and devices' were manually searched for and included as study material. The stipulated users were senior management of University A. In the context of the study, senior management compromises the vice-chancellor, deans of various faculties, and representatives from campus development and planning, marketing, alumni and the convocation. Senior management employ emails, a news blog, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube to communicate with students. The Facebook page, LinkedIn profile, Instagram page and YouTube accounts of University A are all public. The one YouTube video was transcribed by hand. To search for communication events on Twitter, Twitter's advanced search was used with the Twitter handle @University A. Gmail's advanced search tool was utilised to collect senior management emails, specifying the email addresses of senior management and dates. The news blog was directly accessed via University A's website. Communication with staff and other stakeholders was not included, nor was communication by individual faculties with their students as this was beyond the scope of the study. Student and other stakeholder responses to the communication events were neither looked for on social media nor elicited. All the documents are in the public domain; thus, ethical permission was not sought to undertake this study. A total of 55 communication events were documented during the six-week period and collated into a data set (Table 2).

Table 2: Number and type of communication events during the six-week study period

Date	Senior management emails	University A news blog	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Instagram	LinkedIn*	Total
Week -2	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1
Week -1	6	7	14	5	1	0		35
Pivot to emergency on-line teaching								
Week +1	2	0	2	1	0	0	4	5
Week +2	1	0	0	0	0	0		1
Week +3	0	1	2	4	0	0		7
Week +4	1	0	1	0	0	0		6
Total	10	8	20	10	1	0	6	55

*LinkedIn does not state the actual date, only the number of months previously.

Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clark's (2006) six-stage approach was used to perform TA. Three researchers (PM, GF, GN) undertook this part of the study. The section entitled "researcher contributions" sets out the exact nature of their contribution. The stages were:

- Familiarising oneself with the data: PM, GF and GN carefully read the emails, news blog and social media posts separately and several times in order to fully immerse themselves in the various communication events produced by University A's senior management as well as to scrutinise the data in its entirety (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Castleberry and Nolen, 2018).
- Creating initial codes: Coding involves researchers distinguishing meaningful likenesses and differences within the data in order to condense it into smaller and more manageable segments. PM, GF and GN worked independently to code the data to generate preliminary themes. Some of the codes changed or were better defined as the data was read and re-read.
- Determining themes: The codes were then coalesced or divided into overarching themes depending on what fitted well together and connected best with the research questions (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018; Peel, 2020).
- Reviewing themes: PM, GF and GN compared and revised the themes in a discussion forum in order to create themes that encompassed distinct ideas. Table 3 provides an example of a theme that emerged at this stage.
- Naming themes: Working together, PM, GF and GN refined, defined and named the themes in order to convey their meaning in a succinct manner. A fluent account of the data began to emerge. Four themes were agreed upon and named (Figure 1). These are discussed in more detail in the section on the findings and discussion.
- Writing up findings: During this last stage of TA, the researchers identified associations and connections between the themes in order to tell a comprehensive story of what the data meant in conjunction with appropriate information from the literature.

Table 3: Example of an initial code and theme map

Example of text	Initial codes pertaining to one area	Review of codes and themes generated
"We will emerge from this crisis stronger and more resilient than ever…Let us use this time to find each other and work together towards a common goal for our students, staff and our common humanity" (Email and news blog)	War talk	Empowering students
"Our students will have to exercise their own agency and will have to make an extraordinary effort to adapt to remote online learning" (Email and news blog)	Take responsibility for own learning	
"Visit the 'Helping you learn online' site" (Email)	Accessing online materials	
"As you will be working on electronic platforms, it's easy for work to get lost, corrupted or deleted. …Always back up your progress" (Facebook)	Practical tips: online learning	
"Structure your day even with online learning. Keep a calendar close by and watch your time so you can keep to a schedule that helps you deliver on academic timelines" (Twitter and Facebook)	Practical tips: studying remotely	
"We have secured a limited number of devices suitable for educational purposes that will be made available to students in need" (News blog)	Devices and data	Coders felt that this was better placed in the theme "Overcoming IT inequality"

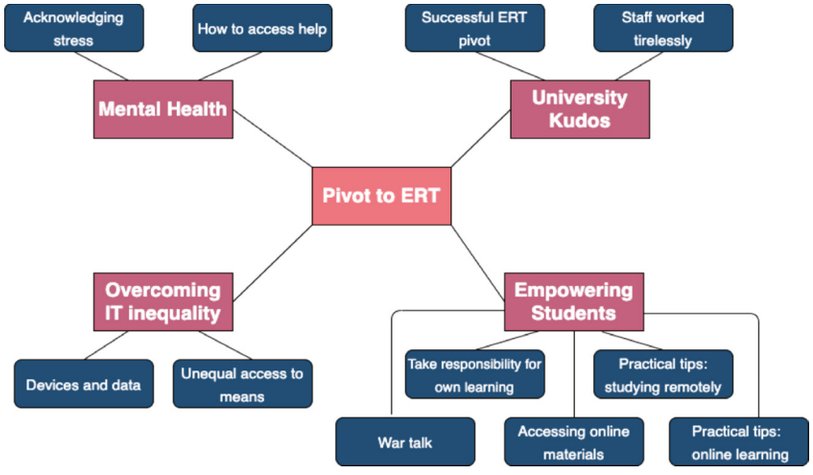

Figure 1: Thematic web of contents

The SCCT

Two researchers (PM, GF) undertook this part of the study. They familiarised themselves with the SCCT by immersing themselves in the literature. Independently, they determined the crisis type, that is, if University A was a victim of the crisis or the cause of the crisis, either accidentally or intentionally. They then determined what the response strategy was and whether its matched the crisis type. PM and GF then compared their respective positions in a discussion forum. These results are discussed in the findings and discussion section.

Validity

In order to enhance this study's validity, several (instead of one) social media sites were utilised as triangulation using different sources endorses the results (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In addition, three researchers undertook TA independently and two individually analysed the results within the SCCT. The results were then discussed. This study is auditable as the documents that were used in data collection and analysis have been retained (Peel, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

Communication in times of crisis can empower people by encouraging preparation, improving understanding of the dangers and fostering co-operation (Tull, Dabney and Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). This requires that important and meaningful information is rapidly communicated to key stakeholders without compromising confidence in the institution (Al-Youbi, Al-Hayani, Bardesi, Basheri, Lytras and Aljohani, 2020). The abrupt pivot to online or remote education that occurred in many higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic is not a new phenomenon and has occurred previously, for example, following the Christchurch earthquakes, the New Orleans floods and during the student protests in South Africa that started in 2015 (Czerniewicz, 2020). It is thus possible to rapidly adapt teaching and learning practices to enable academic activities to continue online in many instances as long as this is well communicated to participants. What senior management of University A considered important to communicate to one of their key stakeholders, namely students, during the pivot to online teaching and learning was determined by content analysis while the quest to maintain trust in the institution was explored using the SCCT. The section concludes with a potential approach to communicating with students in the event of future crises in higher education.

Main Themes

Inductive TA was used, in the main, to answer the first research question. Elaboration of the themes provides an understanding of what University A believed it needed to communicate to its student body (Figure 1). Together with some pertinent literature, a more encompassing account of the switch to ERT emerges.

Theme 1: Empowering Students.

In the two weeks prior to the pivot to ERT, there were several communication events that were initially coded as 'war talk' where the pandemic was likened to a war. Examples include, "We are living through an unprecedented era which has tremendous implications for humanity and for us as the University A community", and "We have no choice but to stand strong in order to overcome this common enemy". The communication further states that University A has opted to switch

to ERT in order to rescue the 2020 academic year. Students are then urged to contribute to the 'war effort' by taking responsibility for their own learning and making an "extraordinary effort to adapt to remote online learning". This is followed by the phrase, "We acknowledge the importance of the University to provide support". What is notable is that this initial information is provided in the form of several very lengthy emails, news blogs and a YouTube video. It would be interesting to determine if students actually read these long communications or watched the video. There is one short LinkedIn post stating that "Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems". In the few days around the pivot, there are some Facebook and Twitter posts informing students how to access online teaching materials as well as practical tips to improve remote and online studying. There are very few communication events by senior management after that to reiterate or emphasise the ways that students can be empowered.

Several studies have been conducted on how students and teaching staff perceived the shift to ERT, but, to the best of our knowledge, none examined how universities promote the notion of ERT (Affouneh, Salha and Khlaif, 2020; He, Yang, Xu, Ping, Wei, Sun, Li, Zhu and Zhang, 2021; Mohmmed et al., 2020). Czerniewicz (2020) states that one needs to be cognisant of the meanings that are made to explain why face-to-face pedagogy is being replaced by a virtual one to ensure that 'online learning' does not become a politicised term, for example, associated with power. According to Atabekova (2020), during the COVID-19 pandemic, communication with students needs to be "systematised and targeted" and young people need to be included in decisions that alter their lives and encouragedto exercise leadership in rebuilding efforts.

Theme 2: University Kudos

On the day that ERT started, there were several communication events stating that the first day had been very successful. However, no information was provided on how 'success' was defined. There were also posts on the news blog and an email to inform students that a "tremendous effort has been expended by academics and professional and administrative staff in recent weeks, who have tirelessly prepared online material, who have learnt to switch between pedagogies, and

who now have a better understanding of our learning management system". A sudden change to online pedagogy can be beneficial in terms of better use of virtual learning platforms, upgrading of university IT infrastructure, and staff and students exploring alternative teaching and learning options. An institution's impetus to implement digital learning may even be enhanced by the shift to ERT (Tull et al,2020). However, ERT can be associated with significant challenges such as a lack of appropriate IT infrastructure, making such a switch non-viable, staff and students struggling with the use of on-line platforms, additional work for staff as they adapt curricula to suitable online formats, a lack of electricity in some homes, precluding the use of online teaching and learning, students failing to engage with the online content and cybersecurity issues (Oyedotun, 2020). While University A claimed to have done well on the day of the pivot, there was no further communication to confirm or refute this in the following four weeks.

Theme 3: Overcoming IT Inequality

A few days before the shift to ERT, an email and University A's news blog stated: "We are aware that the playing field is uneven and that whilst many in society and our community enjoy greater levels of privilege, the consequences of the pandemic have illuminated and amplified the existing inequalities in our society". A few paragraphs later it is noted that, "Multiple surveys across the university have revealed that 10-15% of students do not have access to appropriate computing devices, adequate access to data or conducive learning environments. To this end, we are putting in place the following measures to ensure the majority of students are able to learn remotely". The measures are then expanded on. This was also discussed on the YouTube video. There are several Facebook posts and two on Twitterat the time of the pivot advising students how to apply for devices and data. This was deemed to be an important aspect of ERT as it was placed on most of University A's social media sites.

When another South African university went online during #FeesMustFall several years previously, one of main stressors for students and staff was the lack of devices and data (Czerniewicz, 2020). A study undertaken of social work educators and students during COVID-19 at a rural-based university in South Africa revealed their

frustration at the lack of access to appropriate technology and training in the use thereof (Tanga, Ndhlovu and Tanga, 2020). This is not limited to South Africa, but has been described in other many other countries around the globe, including well-resourced ones, and is very important to address early in the pivot to ERT (Andrew, Cattan, Dias,Farquharson, Kraftman, Krutinova, Phimster and Sevilla, 2020). There was a single sentence on email and the news blog that data and devices would not be offered to students who are not South African, ostensibly due to lack of resources although foreign students generate income for universities (Cantwell, 2015). South Africa has experienced and continues to experience xenophobic violence (Tella, 2016) that could possibly be exacerbated by such a proviso. Czerniewicz, Trotter and Haupt (2019) observe that "technology is never neutral", requiring educators to delve into the connection between the IT domain and online education to ensure that all actors are able to partake in novel technologies, thus avoiding injustice and inequality.

Theme 4: Mental Health

There are several communication events on all sites (except Instagram and LinkedIn) acknowledging that this is a stressful time for students as evidenced by "We are acutely aware of the anxiety and uncertainty that this mode of learning presents". These posts become more numerous in the latter few weeks when several communication events reiterate that this is a stressful time and how and where to seek help. An example, is this Facebook post "REACH OUT- As the days continue it is normal to feel worried and anxious, or sad and depressed. Acknowledge the feelings. Write them down to make sense of them if you need to...BUT: Reach out for help if needed". This is followed by a telephone number and email address when students can access help. Several studies show that ERT caused stress, anxiety and depression among students (Fawaz and Samaha, 2020; Cao, Fang, Hou, Han, Xu, Dong and Zheng, 2020; Grutsenko, Skugarevsky, Konstantinov, Khamenka,Marinova, Reznik, and Isralowitz, 2020) andmental health is certainly an issue that requires resources in times such as this. University A did emphasise this in its communication events.

What is noteworthy is that ways to combat COVID-19, such as social distancing, handwashing and the use of hand sanitisers, and isolation

and quarantine, were hardly mentioned on any sites. There were several suggestions to "keep well and keep safe" but how to actually do this was almost absent. Also lacking was reiteration of government regulations on what was and wasn't permitted during the various levels of 'lockdown' that students may have found useful. Atabekova (2020) probed numerous universities' official site information and higher education data from international organisations in 2020 regarding the pandemic. She determined that information such as protection against COVID-19, hotlines, contact persons' names, messages from senior management and leadership and educational issues (learning resources, how to utilise digital devices, examinations and assessments, graduations, admissions) and campus processes (such as residences, food, medical facilities) were consistently communicated. Issues such as mental health services, broad psychological recommendations, online social and cultural events, and financial help (such as delaying tuition payment, emergency funds and bursaries) were addressed more erratically.

There were some differences in communication events by University A's senior management on the various digital and social media sites. The "call to arms" was declared in a lengthy email, news blog and a YouTube video. Thus, if students did not read these, the mobilisation message would not have been received. No COVID-19 communication events were posted on Instagram and very few on LinkedIn despite evidence on the popularity of these platforms among South African youth (Van Rensburg, 2020). In general, the communication started by explaining the need to move to ERT and advice on how this should be effected. It then shifted to posts about mental health and how to access help. This was conspicuous on Facebook.

Findings Utilising Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The previous section highlighted the four main themes that emerged from TA. This section explores how University A conveyed the shift to ERT to its student body using an SCCT framework. Initially, organisations need to provide what Coombs (2006) calls "instructing information" which is what stakeholders (in this case, students) need to know when a crisis strikes. This includes informing stakeholders what happened. University A's communication events state that there is a COVID-19 pandemic but do not provide information about the

actual disease or government lockdown regulations in the six weeks under study. As part of instructing information, stakeholders are advised what to do to protect themselves from hurt. There are several communication posts about how to promote students' mental health; however, University A provided very little information on ways to protect oneself from COVID-19 or what to do should one be infected with the virus. Another part of instructing information is what the organisation is doing to correct the issue (Coombs, 2006, 2015). University A tackles this by explaining that the academic year is continuing and provides devices, data and study tips to students.

After instructing information has been delivered, response strategies need to be instituted to minimise organisational reputational damage. It is important to acknowledge that protection of stakeholders supersedes the university's reputation (Snoeijers, Poels and Nicolay, 2014). For organisations like universities, reputation is very important in order to obtain funding, and attract and retain students. University A can be considered a victim of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing national lockdown. However, it had to act appropriately to protect its reputation and keep its stakeholders safe. According to the SCCT, the response strategy for a victim would be to 'deny'. University A chose the 'deal' response in order to complete the academic year while keeping students safe and limiting reputational damage. Students were safeguarded against acquiring COVID-19 at university by ERT while the strategy to limit University A's reputational damage was a 'deal' one. Table 4 illustrates the SCTT's broad and specific responses and what University A chose to adopt. A study at another South African university determined that the justification response strategy was mainly used with other response strategies hardly utilised (Van Rensburg et al., 2017). The current study found that University A employed several response strategies, including justification to inform students that ERT was one of the measures adopted to reduce the time lost in the academic year and maintain the university reputation. Presumably this was added as, despite research to the contrary, online learning is deemed to be of inferior quality (Hodges et al., 2020). Other response strategies included ingratiation to inform students how tirelessly staff had been working to ensure successful ERT, concern for students' health (especially psychological), compassion by providing devices and data to those in need and sympathy for the situation that students found themselves in. Thus, to answer research question two, the crisis response strategy enacted by University A did not fully correspond with the SCCT in that very little instructional information was provided and although the institution was a victim of COVID-19, it adopted a 'diminish' and 'deal', rather than a 'deny' strategy. Further research is required on the long-term effects of this crisis response in terms of student enrolment, university rankings and other indicators (Coombs, 2016).

Table 4: SCCT response strategies enacted by University A (Adapted from Coombs, 2006, 2015)

Crisis Type	Suggested response	Response strategy	Supporting quotes
Victim (University A was considered a victim of COVID-19 in this study)	Deny	Attack: Challenge and oppose person/s asserting that there is a crisis	This response was not utilised
		Deny: Declare that there is no crisis	This response was not utilised
		Scapegoat: Assign blame for the crisis to person/s or events outside the organisation	"We are living through an unprecedented era" (Facebook and news blog)
Accident	Diminish	Excuse: Minimise organisational accountability for the crisis	This response was not utilised
		Justify: Play down the harm arising from the crisis	"University A has instituted an emergency remote teaching and learning programme as one measure to help minimise the time lost in the academic project" (Email, news blog and Facebook)

Intentional/ preventable	Deal	Ingratiation: Stakeholders are praised and reminded of prior organisational success	"We are cognizant of the tremendous effort that has been expended by academics and professional and administrative staff who have tirelessly prepared online material" (Facebook, news blog and YouTube)
		Concern: Organisation articulates anxiety for stakeholders	"We remain concerned about your well-being and want to remind you of a number of services available" (Email and news blog)
		Compassion: Money or products are extended to stakeholders	"University A has provided measures for students to apply for a loan device to ensure that students have access to academic resources" (Facebook post) "University A students get 30GB of data if registered on these networks. This service is at no cost to students" (LinkedIn, Facebook, Email and news blog).
		Regret: Organisation sympathises that crisis occurs	"HANG IN THERE- There are so many countries in the world in lockdown and impacted by the virus. We are all in this together" (Facebook)
		Apology: Organisation acknowledges complete responsibility and requests forgiveness	This response was not utilised

An Approach to Communicating with Students in Crises

Every educational institution, programme and course will have unique challenges and requirements in the event of a crisis. Universities have distinctive attributes including cultural ones that need to be taken into account when implementing change. In addition, context is important and the innovation needs to be relevant in a particular context (Bamber, 2009). However, there are overarching or principle concerns in this regard, namely, ensuring student well-being, providing reasonable, fair and non-discriminatory teaching and learning, and maintaining the organisation's reputation (Nordmann, Horlin, Hutchison, Murray, Robson, Seery, and MacKay, 2020; Snoeijers et al., 2014).

In response to research question three, several aspects should be considered in formulating an approach to communicate with students in the event of a crisis. Based onthe current study's findings and the pertinent literature, several strategies to approach student communication in times of crisis are suggested (Table 5).

Table 5: An approach to communication during university crises

Principle concerns	Objectives	Strategies
Student well-being	Keep students safe and protect them from physical and psychological harm	• Relevant and factual information needs to be provided in order for students to effectively navigate the crisis while ensuring that they are not overwhelmed by extraneous facts. • Hotlines, contact persons' names, and how to access physical and mental care. • Information on online social and cultural activities could be added. • Use communication modalities that are known to be popular with students. • Involve students meaningfully and early in the crisis and continue to actively engage with them as research shows that they can be "effective agents of change for themselves and their communities" (Abbott, Askelson, Scherer and Afifi, 2020). • Keep the academic programme going as far as possible. According to UNESCO, everyone has the right to education and the priority should be safeguarding educational continuity (UNESCO, 2020).

Access to education	Access to reasonable and equitable teaching and learning	• Ensure that students have the means to continue their academic pursuits such as helping students in need with accommodation, food, financial services, and advice on how to learn remotely. • Equitable access to devices and data to enable digital learning. • Employ asynchronous learning as far as possible unless interaction is crucial. Flexibility could assist students in finding a quieter time to engage with online study, enable study to be undertaken when a power supply is available and reduce competition for devices and data that may exist in a particular location (Nordmann et al., 2020).
Uphold university's reputation	Decide what communication response strategy to adopt	• Vice-chancellors and institutional Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) need to communicate with stakeholders as research indicates a positive association between active CEO communication and stakeholders viewing an organisation in a good light post-crisis (Snoeijers et al., 2014). • If using an SCCT framework, universities should consider whether they are victims of a crisis, their actions unintentionally led to the crisis or if their actions deliberately caused the crisis. • Universities must then carefully deliberate what response strategy to adopt as this will impact on their reputation. More than one response strategy could be used. • Some fictional examples of how a university could employ the SCCT include: – In an outbreak of diarrhoeal disease in a residence, a university could decide that it is a victim and use a 'deny' response e.g. scapegoat ("Students attended an off-campus party where they acquired the disease"). – When serious fraud is perpetrated by a staff member, the university could accept this as an intentional act and adopt a 'deal' strategy including ingratiation (e.g. "This University has a good record of fiscal governance"), state that they regret the incident and apologise.

Limitations of the Study

One of the advantages of social media usage is reciprocal communication and giving a voice to those who might not otherwise be heard (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017). An important limitation of this study is that only one-way communication was investigated, namely, how senior management communicated events during the pivot to ERT. A broader story would have emerged if students and other stakeholder responses and opinions were also considered. Stakeholder responses, including how communication was enacted by students, should be included in similar future studies. Inclusion of other educational institutions would also have enriched the research.

Conclusion

Using a bottom-up (TA) and top-down (SCCT) approach ensured that the study was informed by both data and a theoretical framework. Fruitful communication strategies adopted by University A include that there were only 55 communication events and students were thus not overwhelmed by social media posts;and that social inequality was acknowledged and access was provided to devices and data, with this well communicated to students. University A acknowledged that it was a stressful time for students, provided details on where to seek counselling, and offered advice on studying remotely. What could have been improved includes provision of information on how to protect oneself from physical (not just psychological) harm, recapping government lockdown regulations; mobilising students to manage the crisis using short social media messages rather than lengthy communication events;and being more forthcoming about how successful or unsuccessful the crisis response strategy was in the weeks following ERT and the ways in which University A responded to this. Furthermore, under-utilisation of popular student social media sites such as LinkedIn and Instagram was noted and foreign students were not eligible for devices and data. What management felt was important to communicate to students regarding ERT could be gleaned predominantly by TA and why they felt this was important to communicate with students while upholding University A's reputation was mainly understood by using the SCCT. Thus, this hybrid approach enriched the description and analysis, allowing for a more complete understanding of one university's approach to student communication in a crisis. These findings may prove useful to other institutions in formulating their student crisis communication responses.

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