COVID-19 and International Students: Implications for Crisis Communication Strategies in Higher Education

Dian N. Puspasari, *Department of Communication University of Louisiana Lafayette* Lafayette, LA, United States
dian.puspasari1@louisiana.edu

Ignatius Cahyanto, *Department of Management University of Louisiana Lafayette* Lafayette, LA, United States
ignatius.cahyanto@louisiana.edu

William B. Gallagher, Lafayette, LA, United States Bill3Fl@gmail.com

Ulani Yunus, *Marketing Communication Program, Communication Department Faculty of Economics and Communication Bina Nusantara University* Jakarta, Indonesia *Research Interest GroupCross- Cultural Communication* Banten, Indonesia uyunus@binus.edu

Bhernadetta P. Wahyuningtyas, *Marketing Communication Program, Communication Department Faculty of Economics and Communication Bina Nusantara University* Jakarta, Indonesia *Research Interest Group Cross- Cultural Communication* Banten, Indonesia bhernadetta@binus.ac.id

Mario Nugroho Willyarto, *Language Center Industrial Engineering Department Faculty of Humanities Bina Nusantara University* Jakarta, Indonesia *Research Interest Group Cross- Cultural Communication* Banten, Indonesia mario.nugroho@binus.ac.id

Tri Adi Sumbogo, *Marketing Communication Program Communication Department Faculty of Economics & Communication Bina Nusantara University* Jakarta, Indonesia *Research InterestGroup Cross-Cultural Communication* Banten, Indonesia tri.sumbogo@binus.ac.id

Fransisca H. Rusgowanto, *Department of Accounting Faculty of Economics and Communication Bina Nusantara University* Jakarta, Indonesia *Research Interest Group Cross-Cultural Communication* Banten, Indonesia fransisca.hanita@binus.ac.id

Abstract—This study examined universities' COVID-19 communication to international students and the students' perceptions of the communication utilizing Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Data was based on content analysis of communication by four Louisiana universities from January 1 to July 31, 2020. International students' perception of communication was gathered through a series of focus groups with international students. The results indicated that, in general, the communication strategies employed by the universities are consistent with SCCT. While there was a sense of chaos in the early communication, the international students were generally satisfied with the communication. Further, the findings underscored the need for higher education communication professionals to communicate regularly and in a compassionate tone to maintain their credibility among international students.

Keywords— international students, SCCT, COVID-19, crisis communication

I. INTRODUCTION

With the prolonged impacts of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), universities are facing unprecedented crises.In theUnitedStates,universitiescloseddowntheircampusesin March of 2020 and shifted their mode of teaching to remote delivery by April. Similar situations also occurred in other parts of the world, including Indonesia. The sudden transition provided a unique context to examine how universities communicated COVID-19 and the action they took as it relates to their international students.

International students are often overlooked in university communication studies despite their significant numbers [1]. In the United States, the total number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges in 2019 was 1,095,299, making up 5.5%oftheoverallU.S.studentbody [2].Thetop four states to host international students in the U.S. in 2019 were California (161,693 students), New York (124, 277), Texas (81,893), and Massachusetts (71,098). Unlike resident students, international students are a vulnerable group, largely due to a lack of support systems available to them during crises[3].

Additionally, their cultural background may hinder them in seeking assistance during a crisis. International students are also vulnerable as resources available to residents may not be accessible for them due to their legal status as a nonimmigrant (e.g., financial assistance). Nonetheless, there is a growing interest in boosting international students, largely due to financial reasons. Tuition rates for international students are significantly higher than in-state tuition, which creates a financial boon for universities. The U.S. Department of Commerce reported that international students contributed $44.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2018 [4].

Scholars have argued for greater research on the public's interpretation of crisis [5]. Research has begun to address this need by investigating consumers' interpretations of crises (e.g., [6]) and how the public perceives crisis responses (e.g., [7]). There are, however, insufficient studies from the perspective of higher education on issues affecting international students [8]. With this in mind, this study aims to examine the strategies that universities used to communicate COVID-19 information to international students and the international students' perspectives on the communication done by the universities. Suchunderstanding is not only pivotal to ensure the safety of students, but it could also foster a positive reputation for a university, which may lead to an increased number of international students. Specifically, there are two intertwined questions for this study.

1. How do universities communicate COVID-19 to internationalstudents?
2. What are international students' perceptions of their university's COVID-19communication?

II. LITERATUREREVIEW

A. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

This study employed Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) [9] as a theoretical framework. Reference
[10] defined a crisis as a substantial threat to an organization's operations or reputation that can lead to negative consequences if not appropriately managed. The principal concern of a crisis should always be public safety. Letting the public know how they can protect themselves is the primary communication step that organizations should take when facing a crisis [9]. Once public safety has been safeguarded, the organization then must address issues regarding its reputation and financial solvency by utilizing crisis response strategies focused on the issue of responsibility [9].

SCCT provides researchers a framework to assess the level of reputational threat created by a crisis. The threat is shaped by three factors: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation [9]. Research has found that as the level of responsibility ascribed to an organization for causing or contributing to a crisis increases, the level of threat posed to the organization's reputation increases accordingly [5]. SCCT identifies three crisis clusters (victim, accidental, and intentional) based on the level of responsibility attributed to an organization by the public [5]. In the victim cluster, the organization is not viewed as the source of the crisis. Rather, it is perceived as a victim (e.g., natural disaster, rumor, workplace violence, product tampering). In the accidental cluster, the organization has been ostensibly linked to the origin of the crisis; however, the situation is generally perceived by stakeholders as being unintentional (i.e., challenges, technical-error accidents, technical-error product harm). In the intentional cluster, the organization is seen as having deliberately placed the public at risk, caused harm, or took inappropriate actions or violated a regulation (i.e., human error accidents, human-error product harm, organization misdeed) [9]. Crisis history refers to whether an organization has experienced a similar crisis in the past [11]. Prior reactional reputation reflects how an organization has or is perceived to have handled the public in other similar situations [9].

SCCT holds that the situation will guide the choice of proper responses. Reference [12], whose work influenced SCCT, contended that the messages communicated during

crises have three purposes: instructing information, adjusting information, and managing reputation. Instructing information is a critical step for organizations in which guidance is provided to the public on what they can do to protect themselves from threats [13]. Instructing and adjusting information are considered vital responses that are compulsory for all crises. As crises move into the lessening stage, reputation management becomes critical [12]. COVID-19 naturally falls into the victim cluster, in which the organization is viewed as a victim by the public. While the public may understand that higher education institutions did not cause COVID-19, they nonetheless are likely to hold them responsible for their responses and actions.

III. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with two primary data collections. For the first research question regarding the analysis of communication content, four major universities in Louisiana, U.S., were chosen for the sample based on the number of international students. From these universities, only communication messages relevant to international students in the respective universities were selected. The sample of communication was downloaded from each university's designated COVID-19 resource page from January 1 to July 30, 2020. Since SCCT posits that the first organization response should focus on protecting the public [9], we utilized the constructs of instructing information and adjusting

information [14][15].Instructional information is focused on providing data that will physically protect international students. Adjusting information is concerned with providing data that will help students cope psychologically with a crisis situation [9]. Two items were used to measure the instructing information, and four-items were used to measure adjusting information that were adapted from[8].

For the second research question, to examine the international students' responses to the university communication, six virtual focus groups were conducted with international students in a university in Louisiana and internationalstudentsinauniversityinIndonesia.Intotal,20 international students participated in the focus groups. Students were from several countries of origin, including Indonesia,Malaysia,Bangladesh,andNigeria.Thirtypercent of the participants were graduate students, and 70% were undergraduate students. Females encompassed 53% of the sample, while male students encompassed 47% of participants. On average, focus groups ran about 1.5 hours. Thematic analysis was used to examine the focus groupdata. In both analyses, inter-coder reliability was employed to ensure the consistency of the coding and the subsequent emergingthemes.

IV. RESULTS

The universities in this study sent out a total of 382 communication messages from January 1 to July 30, of which 179 were selected due to relevancy to international students (Table 1). The standard procedures utilized by the universities included utilizing their listservs and activating theirdarkpageson theirwebsitestocentralizeallCOVID-19 resources and communication. Additionally, for specific issues related to international students such as housing, immigration, and available resources, communiques were sent directly to international students and posted on the webpage of the respective university's office that handles international students (i.e., Office of GlobalAffairs).

The first COVID communication by the universities in this study was sent out in late January and included vital information that the respective university wasmonitoring the COVID-19 cases. By late February, the messaging started to shift to preparing students for limited services due to the increased confirmed cases in Louisiana. The peak of communication was in March when 62% of messages were disseminated. These largely dealt with activating COVID-19 resource pages on respective university websites. In early March,alluniversitiesmovedtheirclassestoremotedelivery and shut down on-campus operations. The content of communication in March focused heavily on preparing students for the changes. This included information that centered on schedule changes, what services would still be offered, and encouraging students to reach out to faculty members. The main goal of communication in this stage was to ensure that students were able to complete their semester despite the adversity. The university offices that tend to international students began sending tailored communication messages to international students in addition to the university-wide communication. This focus on ensuring that students successfully completed their semester course work continued in April.

TABLE 1. NUMBEROFCOMMUNICATIONBYUNIVERSITIES ANDMONTHS

Month	University of Louisiana Lafayette	Louisiana State University	University of New Orleans	Tulane University	Total
January	2	1	1	0	4 (2.23)
February	0	1	1	3	5 (2.79)
March	57	21	12	21	111 (62.01)
April	6	4	2	9	21 (11.73)
May	2	1	3	5	11 (6.15)
June	9	3	2	2	16 (8.94)
July	2	1	3	5	11 (6.15)
Total	78	32	24	45	179

As shown in Table 2, more than half of the communication messages used by the four Louisiana universities involved instructing information strategies (89.9%). Thus, a majority of communication messages were concernedwithinformingstudentsaboutactionstheyneeded to take to safeguard their health and protect themselves from COVID-19 (62.5%), such as instructing students to stay at home if

they felt sick, social distance measures, hand- washing, and mask-wearing instructions. In some cases, the universityalsoinformedstudentswheretheycouldgettested for COVID-19. The second item, "include campus operation information," was prevalent in 76.3% of the total messages. These messages contained information on what campus services were still being offered and whether certainservices andofficeswereopen,hadreducedhours,orwereclosed.

TABLE 2. MESSAGINGSTRATEGIES:INSTRUCTINGAND ADJUSTINGINFORMATION

Messaging Strategies	% from total communication (n=179)
Instructing information or adjusting information	89.9
Instructing information	
• Tell students what to do to protect themselves physically fromCOVID-19.	62.5
• Include campus operationcontinuity information	76.3
Adjusting information	
• Explain who, what, where, whenabout COVID-19 to help (international) students cope with the impacts.	31.2
• Explains what is being done to preventor reduce Campusspread	37.4
• Showcompassion	36.3
• Express regret over COVID-19impacts	7.2

* One message can contain several strategies; therefore, the accumulated percentage is not 100.

The second strategy, adjusting information, was utilized by the universities in 37.4% of the communications. These messages informed students as to what actions had been taken to prevent or reduce the spread of COVID-19 on campus. These actions included increasing the frequency of cleaning and sanitizing campus buildings, ensuring restrooms were replete with hand soap, placing signage on chairs to enforce social distancing, as well as informing students about where they could obtain free masks. 31.2% of the messages contained information explaining the who, what, where, and when about COVID-19. These messages provided students with information with respect to coping with COVID-19. Messages included contact information of responsible parties that students could contact should they have concerns about their academic performance or other aspects of their life (e.g., counseling, immigration). 36.3% of the messages showed compassion, as indicated by the use of words that expressed personal concern for students. These messages underscored that the safety of the students was paramount and included information about procedures that the universities took to ensure student safety. Students were advised to pay attention to the updated news alerts. A small number of messages contained regret that the situation createdadistractiontostudentsintheiracademicpursuits.

Plotting the message strategies with the timeline, March was the peak for communications related to frequencies of instruction information. In March, all Louisiana universities shifted their mode of operations to remote learning and closed down on-campus activities due to the increased number of COVID-19 cases in Louisiana. Therefore, during this month, the focus of communication was to inform students about COVID-19 risks, how to protect themselves from COVID-19, and centered on information to help students navigate the changes. Later in subsequent months, when universities formed teams and created COVID-19 response plans, the strategies shifted to adjustinginformation by reassuring students that the universities were prepared for the long run. Communicating the steps taken by the universities to endure the COVID-19 pandemic for a long period of time were prevalent in messages from May to July. These strategies were employed to retain the reputation of the universities and to help students feel that the universities were prepared for the changes brought by COVID-19, and informing students as to what actions were taken to ensure studentsafety.

The second research question focused on the perceptions of the international students as to communication from their university. The result of the focus groups indicated that, in general,participantstudentsatthebeginningofthepandemic sensed confusion within university leadership. The students had the impression that not everyone at their university knew what they were doing. One participant who was a resident assistant said, *"in the beginning, it was a mess as no one knew what's going on and in my job, I had to interact with all residents and they texted me how's the dorm going to be, what the school was going to do about housing … eventually down the road UL did pretty good. I know that the university people had meetings in a day to figure out the best way to keep students informed."* One common theme that emerged was that, despite the closure of dorms, international students were allowed to remain

in dorms, as the universities realized they could not return to their home countries. The international students in this study expressed great appreciationforthispolicy.Studentsalsopointedoutthatthe communication were constantly improving and appreciated the frequent updates and appraisals by their universities. *"They did a pretty good job in keeping students updated as long as they check their email and website."* For international students, COVID-19 has posed a unique challenge to not only their academic endeavors but also their daily life. Having consistently updated information helped them in navigating such challenges. Thus, while in the beginning, the information was perceived as chaotic, in the long run, the universities gained students' trust after disseminating practical and helpful information to students that was regularlyupdated.

V. DISCUSSION

This study extends the scope of SCCT to the realm of higher education organizations by exploring how they communicated COVID-19 information to international students and how such communication was perceived by the international students. Universities frequently employed information giving strategies. These communication messages showed compassion and diligently provided frequent updates as an avenue to help students to cope physically and psychologically with COVID-19. The use of response strategies is aligned well with SCCT's recommendation of helping the public adjust to crises [15]. Instructing information was ubiquitous at the beginning of the cases to help students protect themselves from COVID- 19, which was a priority from the beginning of March when the growing number of COVID-19 cases in Louisiana and the U.S. forced the universities to close their in-person operations. After more information about COVID-19 was disseminated from experts, the universities were able to formulate plans on how to respond and sustain the process. Subsequently, the strategies shifted to focus on informing students of what had been done to reduce the spread, how students could get help and assistance, and such messages were communicated compassionately. As a result, students indicated their approval of this strategy. Expressing concern and showing compassion and empathy was an appropriate crisis communication strategy that was perceived positively by the international students, which is consistent with previous studies [16][17].

Whereas COVID-19 falls into the victim cluster of SCCT, the public, in this case, international students, understandably did not blame their universities in the early stage of the crisis response, despite the students' perceptions that the communication was largely chaotic in the initial stage. Nonetheless, while the universities were not blamed for COVID-19, they were still held responsible for their response to it. With the emerging new COVID-19 clusters in severaluniversities,studentsmayblametheiruniversitiesfor thefailuretokeepthemsafe.Assuch,theyaremaintainingtheperceptionthattheuniversitymustrespondtoCOVI D-19 related situations efficiently and timely to protect both the studentbodyandthereputationoftheuniversity.Bykeeping international students in the communication loop relative to changes and responses, universities sent a signal that they were on top of the issue, which serves to maintain their reputation. In addition to reinforcing the applicability and relevancy of SCCT, the results of this study also support the need for continued high-frequency communication touchpoints with students through the most frequently accessed sources. Due to the fluidity of COVID-19, universities can take specific actions to build students' trust and safeguard theirreputation.

The findings offer practical implications for organizational leaders and public relations professionals. Transparency and accuracy of the communication are critical. Due to the dynamic nature of the pandemic, a holding statement is better than silence. For example, if a university facility or service is closed for no other reason than an abundance of caution, it needs to be communicated accordingly. Students look to their university to act with timelycommunication,andassuch,silencewillsendasignal that the university is ill-prepared. If universities do not meet this challenge, students may seek to fill any communication vacuumsbyseekinginformationfromothersourcesthatmay not be in the best interest of the university. Second, message consistency is essential. It is necessary to have a consistent message across all university leadership, including faculty. Students are more likely to seek information from their professors than from university leadership teams. It is, therefore, essential that the messages that are sent out should also be written with the understanding that they will be recirculated. The tone of communication is also critical. An empathetic tone is effective in gaining trust from students. Continuity of tone amplifies confidence in the information the university is sharing; as such, it will be more likely to be accepted andfollowed.

Additionally, it is critical to establish a mechanism to monitor how the public responds to communication messages throughout the different stages of a crisis. Data obtained from such feedback loops is beneficial in helping leaders preserve the reputations of their institutions as the crisis advances. As suggested by previous studies, merely monitoring mass media to predict how the public will react to a crisis does not suffice [6]. It is equally important to closely monitor how the public engages in online media as members of the public can serve as valuable influencers, which can help to shape students' attitudes and behavior [18]. Thus, further study should examine how international students and students, in general, react in their social media environments to COVID-19 related communication. Their online engagement could be

valuable data that can inform further communication strategies. As this study only employed focus groups to examine international students' perspectives, the findings may not be generalized fully. Future research can further apply surveys to international students to provide a more accurate understanding of their perspectives.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study help extend current knowledge on SCCT, particularly in the context of higher education and COVID-19. By doing so, this study provides further insights into the research in connecting information, meaning, and communication variables that is the perception of the recipients. Due to their status, international students are a vulnerable group in the host country and are often neglected in crisis communication studies. As global crises are on the rise, COVID-19 may represent a new normal for universities. As they face other crises, leaders and communication professionals in higher education will need to adapt to this incertitude and be prepared to respond effectively when an unforeseen crisis surfaces. This study helps shed light on thisperspective.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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