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Employees' Cognitive Perception on Covid-19 Sources of Information: Case of Higher Institutions of Learning in Buea

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Abstract

The study is titled "employees' cognitive perception on covid-19 sources of information: case of higher institutions of learning in Buea". Media use is an important component in crisis period. This is because from its use, people are able to determine the perceptions they have about information sources as concerns their trust levels. The study seeks to examine employees' level of trust towards information sources on Covid-19. This study makes use of the Uses and Gratification theory of communication this study first and foremost seeks to investigate employee perception about Covid-19-19 sources of information. The study employs the quantitative research design with a descriptive method (survey). The questionnaire is used as the instrument for data collection with 365 employees constituting the sampled population. Statistics reveal that 136(37.3%) consider their trust to be moderately, 109(29.9%) trustworthy relationship with information sources, followed by 76(20.8%) of respondents who are slightly trustworthy of employer's ability to provide them with accurate information about the pandemic. In addition, 26 (7.1%) consider the sources not at all trustworthy.

Keywords: Cognitive perception; level of trust; Covid 19; Sources of Information

Introduction

Cognitive perception includes seeing, smelling, tasting and feeling, using the senses, that is the way in which we deal with information. It involves processes such as learning, remembering, and problem solving. In regard to public opinion, public relations' goal is to reinforce positive attitudes, change negative attitudes, and provide information in a way that causes the un-opinionated and neutral to form the opinion most conducive to the organization's function (Fearn-Banks, 2007). In order to direct a public's opinion in a positive direction, public relations officials must handle a crisis with immediacy.

A crisis is thrust upon an organization, often with little or no warning, and dealing with the crisis in a proactive manner is necessary for the future reputation of that organization. Fearn-Banks (2007) believes a crisis ignored is an organization failing. Waiting for a crisis to dissolve will benefit the organization in no way; taking action is mandatory to maintain, restore, or create positive public opinion.

The promptness of the release of information is just as important as the truthfulness of the information. Zdziarski (2007) states the speed with which an institution responds to a crisis by disseminating critical information to its various target audiences can become to primary factor in whether or not the institution is perceived as managing the crisis well. The sooner information is released, the less time publics have to form distrust with the institution or base their perceptions on rumours or assumptions.

In a crisis situation, tensions run high for the target publics, so not knowing information causes doubt and suspicion in their minds. If information sources remain silent and wait for the crisis to dissolve, publics will perceive this as guilt or dishonesty. During a crisis, no news is bad news. It is also important to know who the university's publics are, so that at the time of a crisis, these people can be efficiently reached. Hayes (2013) suggests that public relations practitioners list internal and external audiences in their crisis plan, which should be the starting point of communicating during a crisis.

The internal and external publics are large in number. Some of the important audiences Zdziarski (2007) lists are the way in which information sources releases its information can affect how the public perceives the situation.

affective, and physiological systems for the restoration of

Background to the study:

Perception is the input to cognition; that is the ability to capture, process and actively make sense of the information that our senses receive. Organizational crises, such as a plant explosion, employee violence, toxic spill, or transportation accident usually generate widespread public and media interest and often criticism. This crisis communication role of PR derives from the need for skilled communicators to strategically defend and explain the organization's position in the face of crisis-induced criticism, threat, and uncertainty. During crises, PR practitioners typically face a hostile and inquisitive press and provide accounts of what went wrong, why, and what is being done in response. Thus, historically, crisis communication served as spokesperson, buffer, and disseminator of information (Seeger, 1998).

In general, the management of natural disasters and public health emergencies has always included a significant communication component in the form of warnings, risk messages, evacuation notifications, messages regarding self-efficacy, information regarding symptoms and medical treatment. Different kinds of crises, however, manifest different forms of threat and communication exigencies (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003).

This perspective most often involved two defensive strategies: deny that a crisis exists, refuse to answer media questions, and resist involvement by appropriate government agencies or releasing partial, often inaccurate and delayed information while concealing unfavourable facts (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1986).

According to WHO (2020) in Cameroon, there was a sense of optimism that somehow, Africa, unlike other continents, would manage to avoid the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic. The multi response fell into place through the direct involvement of the United Nations, the Government of Cameroon and other stakeholders. Communication no doubt is real especially when it concerns the various perceptions employees have about the virus through information sources. In the interest of employees in Cameroon other additional measures have been put in place by government to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Statement of the problem:

At the level of literature gap, not enough studies have been carried on COVID-19 from a social science perspective with particular focus in Cameroon. This absence in local literature no doubt constitutes to the essence of investigating this problem. Worth stressing is the fact that the ILO Centenary Declaration adopted in June 2019 declared that safe and healthy working conditions are fundamental to decent work. This is even more significant today, as ensuring safety and health at work is indispensable in the management of the pandemic and the ability to resume work. This pandemic has led to a distortion on the job flow at every job place with new ideas like use of hand sanitizers, wearing of face mask, washing of hands regularly and of prime importance the social/physical distancing. This has revealed the problems people face within the outbreak of this pandemic. Reactions from top management during this period has been lacking in so many aspects as they are still instances of people in job sites without wearing mask, without physical distancing and without regular

hand washing. This has raised concerns on how employees rely and trust on the different sources of information they receive which has an effect on implementation of prevention measures. This explains why this study is imperative in assessing employees' perception on the level of trust towards information sources on Covid-19.

Objective:

- The objective of this study is to examine employees' level of trust towards information sources on Covid-19.

Justification of the study:

A crisis is perceptual and defined by the perceptions that are held by the stakeholders about the crisis, it is the organization's responsibility to alter its crisis communication based on their beliefs. It is also unpredictable just like Covid-19. While the nature of a crisis can be anticipated, this is not the same as in the instance of something being unexpected. A crisis disrupts stakeholder expectations. A crisis can disturb the operations of an organization, causing an interruption in expectations. Finally, a crisis disrupts organizations (Wekesa, 2013). These explain why this study is worth exploring, since it has a severe impact and society, it should be treated with the utmost seriousness

Literature review:

As to who should be the primary communicator about COVID-19 within the organization, nearly half (49%) of communication executives said the CEO should be the primary communicator, even though a few noted this may be contextual. After the CEO, significantly fewer respondents noted other C-suite executives should be primarily responsible for communicating: CCO (12%), CHRO (10%), and COO (8%) (CDC, 2020). Also, communicating to employees on COVID-19 was a "high" or "essential" priority to the communication function for 81% of respondents, versus 66% for customers and 35% for suppliers. Some 20% said communicating to suppliers was a "low priority" or "not a priority.

In terms of who is working with the communication function on a cross-functional team to oversee the COVID-19 pandemic, findings revealed that if the communication team is part of the cross-functional team, three functions were identified by more than half of the participants to be on that same team: Human Resources (77%); Operations (67%); and Legal (52%). Only 3% of respondents said the communication function was not part of a cross-functional team, and 6% said their company did not have one (IPR, 2020).

In terms of the state of the company's crisis communication plan, communication executives differed on the status of updating their crisis plans with nearly one-third (32%) reporting making good progress on the updates. 23% said their plans had been fully updated. 10% did not have a crisis communication plan, and 13% had either not updated and would not, or had made little progress (IPR, 2020). As to whether their company's crisis communication plan specifically address an infectious disease outbreak, more than half of respondents (57%) said their crisis communication plan specifically covers an infectious disease outbreak, while 44% said it did not.

Furthermore, as to how much do you trust the following sources to provide accurate news and information about COVID-19,

health-related agencies were reported to be the most trust sources of information during the COVID-19 crisis. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (71%) have "a lot" of trust in federal agencies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or the National Health Service) and international health organizations (the World Health Organization) (CDC, 2020). Social media, online health websites such as WebMD, and country leaders such as presidents and prime ministers were the least trusted sources of information. Concerning trust, 82% of respondents said they had "not much" or "not at all" in social media (Facebook and Twitter), and 56% reported having not much or not at all in country leaders. The study also wanted to find out which sources communication executives referring stakeholders to for more information most often, health agencies and organizations were sources communication executives were referring their stakeholders to for more information. More than three-quarters (77%) referred stakeholders to federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Internal platforms and sources were also frequent go-to sources, with 45% reporting they were sending stakeholders to internal media platforms and 36% to internal executives, supervisors or managers. Mainstream media outlets (9%), country leaders (5%), online health websites (3%) and social media (2%) were referred to stakeholders by less than 10% of respondents in each category. Nearly 1 out of 3 respondents said their company is already implementing a program related to COVID-19 to help those affected. Several respondents commented that if an employee was affected by the virus, that they would support that individual (CDC, 2020)

Conceptual review:
Covid-19:

Going by European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020), COVID-19 is a respiratory illness with a clinical spectrum of mild to moderate disease (80%), severe disease (15%), and critical illness (5%) with an overall case fatality rate of 0.5–2.8% with much higher rates (3.7–14.8%) in octogenarians. The severe and critical illness categories (about 20% of all infections) have overwhelmed health systems worldwide. SARS-CoV-2, the agent of COVID-19, primarily spreads by droplets, is easily transmissible (reproduction number R0: 2–3, meaning one infected individual could infect three), and can spread through asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic individuals. It has a median incubation period of five-to-six days and a period of infectivity extending from two days before symptom onset to two weeks after disease onset in severe cases.

Proven therapeutics for the treatment of COVID-19 is lacking. Nevertheless, a myriad of investigational regimens is being explored. In its efforts to help find an effective treatment for COVID-19, the WHO has recently launched an international clinical trial called the Solidarity Trial. The quest for a vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 is an urgent priority, and its development and global availability is a prerequisite for ending the COVID-19 pandemic. Vigorous and internationally coordinated efforts mainly through the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations for vaccine development are currently in progress. However, an effective vaccine may not be available for the first wave of the pandemic (WHO, 2020).

Pending availability of an effective vaccine, proactive containment strategies (travel restrictions, case finding, contact tracing, isolation of confirmed cases, and quarantine of exposed individuals) and measured mitigation/suppression interventions (lockdown measures, social distancing, school and educational institutions closures, and postponement or cancellation of large-scale public gatherings) are our only viable options to control this pandemic, and their relaxation must be thoughtfully calculated (Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team, 2020). Understandably, these drastic public health measures were inconceivable months ago.

Crisis communication:

Utilizing community leaders' efforts as a potential resource to inform and alert the public during specific incidents (Centre for Disease Control 2012), crisis communication accounts for the majority of communication activities of any organization or agency facing a crisis. Overall, the management of crisis within organizations and society in general would not be complete without a communications component that not only takes action in correcting the issue at hand, but one that contains an effective crisis communications which articulates, warnings, risk messages, evacuation notifications, messages regarding self-efficacy, information regarding symptoms and medical treatment, towards it intended audience (Reynolds, 2005). While the nature of a crisis may assume variant forms, it is important to note that these disparate events also demand their own unique forms of management along with communications to regulate the flow of information.

Crisis communication is a rapidly developing field of research that examines the communicative responses of organizations in crisis (Coombs, 1998). This section draws on previous research on crisis communication and at the same time tries to respond to the call for more theory and empirical research on internal crisis communication (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen 2012), as prior studies have chiefly examined the external dimension of crisis communication and its impact on external stakeholders. Crisis management can be divided into three main phases (Coombs, 2007b), pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis, with different types of crisis communication linked to each of them, like risk communication for the pre-crisis stage (Palenchar & Heath, 2007).

Organizational Communication:

The ultimate aim of every organization is to accomplish its set goals. But more often than not, the attainment of this noble target is always ensured or jeopardized by the communication network put in place by the management. Communication is a central activity to human existence. It bears on every sphere of human endeavor. According to (Miller, 2011) it is the medium through which relationships are established, extended, maintained and sustained. It informs all human actions because it is occasioned by the need to interact with fellow humans.

Organization on the other hand, is a social system composed of interdependent groups (of people) attempting to achieve commonly recognized goals. Through communication, new entrants are introduced to their jobs and work environment. Properly used communication helps to get such new employees integrated into their new work environment and networks of interpersonal relationships of peer employees, supervisors and subordinates (Soola, 1998).

Theoretical review:
Uses and Gratification Theory by Blumler and Katz (1974):

This theory challenges the "magic bullet" view of mass communication effects being all-powerful and having direct influence on people. It instead promotes people as being rational and specifically paying attention to media messages that aim at fulfilling their needs. The objectives of the uses and gratifications theory are: (a) to explain how people use media to gratify their needs, (b) to understand motives for media behaviour, and (c) to identify functions or consequences that follow from needs, motives and behaviour. Blumler and Katz (1974) provide a description of underlying logic of investigations into media uses and gratifications derived from them, as expressed in the model below.

It reveals that the audience is not docile, but rather active and makes motivated choices, based on previous experiences with the media. Other researchers at the time were questioning media effect on audiences which assumed that the audience was passive, and the media were doing things to the audience (Baran & Davis, 2003). Katz was referring to newspapers when he argued that communication research at the time had been asking the question "What does media do to people?" Katz suggested that the discipline might do better to ask the question "What do people do with the media?" (Severin & Tankard, 1988/1997).

For communication planning, audience activity is the core concept in uses and gratifications. Therefore, when designing messages or a campaign, it is important that the audience's needs, and expectations are taken into consideration. This human element in the model addresses the fact that this study is out to examine employee perceptions about COVID-19. This entails their reactions when information about the virus is communicated through the mediums of communication available.

Within the framework of COVID-19, employees should and by the basis of this study participated in the campaign process right from the initial stages when the virus was declared a pandemic. Therefore, uses and gratification is believed to have introduced the human being into communication theory. By implication, the theory suggests that the audience (employees) play an active role in choosing and using the media. They have the ability to seek out a media source that best fulfils their needs and, besides, they have alternate choices from which they can satisfy their needs.

Research methodology:

The descriptive nature of this design is used in this study because of the perceptive nature of the topic which requires the research to go close to the respondents for justifiable data collection. Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). Survey research means carrying out a study on people's opinions on a particular idea which is usually done by asking questions. Yang (2005) suggests that quantitative studies provide a more systematic comparison of results as details of numbers are provided and that a quantitative study has the ability to learn the opinions of a large group of people on a particular issue.

Population under study:

The population of the study is made up of employees of University of Buea, Catholic University Institute of Buea, Higher Institute of Management Studies, and Higher Institute of Business Management and Technology Buea (HIBMAT). The study was conducted among middle/low level employees in Buea. The categories chosen were thought to be involved in the low-level management, decision making and operations of their workplaces. The study population was 800 employees within the four selected higher institutions of learning individual university sources. From the above population of respondents, the researcher consulted the Research Advisors (2006) sample size table when calculating the population to be sampled and finally obtained 396 employees as the one to be sampled out of the above N of 800

Area of the Study:

The main study area is the South West region with a surface area of about 25 419 km2 and a population of about 1 427 076 persons, and six divisions that include Fako, Lebialem, Manyu, Meme, Ndian and Kupe Muanenguba with their headquarters Limbe, Menji, Mamfe, Kumba, Mundemba and Bangem respectively. The subdivision in question to be specific is Buea stipulated by Decree No. 008/376 of 12 November 2008, organising the administrative setup of Cameroon.

Instrument for data collection:

In other for us to carry out our indirect observation and get the valid information a questionnaire was formulated with 22 questions which were mostly closed ended and a few opened ended questions. The reason being that the questionnaire designed aimed at keeping it short and simple (KISS), so as not to bore the respondents. Survey methods rely on use of questionnaire as they can be distributing thed to a wider number of participants to increase the reliability and validity of research findings.

Study validation:

Validity looks at the extent to which a study if carried out once more, can obtain the same accurate. The instrument used which was questionnaire can be tested again to obtain similar results. This is so because the sample population represented the population of employees who have an understanding of the subject matter. In other to better understand validity, it is important to get the appropriateness of the data material, tools and selected methods in relation to the study's research questions. Construct validity was also assured from the rigour of the instrument which made use of the five liketh scales while content focused on language use.

Findings:

- Examining employees' perceptions'' as concerns level of trust towards information sources on Covid-19.

Terms	Not at all trustworthy	Slightly trustworthy	Moderately trustworthy	Trustworthy	Very trustworthy
Employers'	26(7.1%)	76(20.8%)	136(37.3%)	109(29.9%)	16(4.4%)
World Health Organization	32(8.8%)	89(24.4%)	122(33.4%)	79(21.6%)	43(11.8%)

National agency in Cameroon (Ministry of Health)	31(8.5%)	111(30.4%)	107(29.3%)	96(26.3%)	20(5.5%)
Regional health Delegations	28(7.7%)	66(18.1%)	142(38.9%)	105(28.8%)	24(6.6%)
Employer	26(7.1%)	76(20.8%)	136(37.3%)	109(29.9%)	18(4.9%)
Hospitals/academic medical centres	18(4.9%)	58(15.9%)	93(25.5%)	158(43.3%)	38(10.4%)
Mainstream local media (TV, radio, newspaper)	14(3.8%)	64(17.8%)	86(23.6%)	151(41.4%)	49(13.4%)
Mainstream foreign media outlets (Newspapers, TV, Radio)	11(3%)	74(20.3%)	107(29.3%)	121(33.2%)	52(14.2%)
medical practitioner in your organisation	41(11.2%)	66(18.1%)	45(12.3%)	61(16.7%)	152(41.6%)
Cameroon's leaders (e.g., President, Prime Minister, Ministers)	31(8.5%)	64(17.5%)	97(26.6%)	145(39.7%)	28(7.7%)
Online health websites	22(6%)	77(21.1%)	109(29.9%)	115(31.5%)	42(11.5%)
unaffiliated medical practice in your organization	49(13.4%)	90(24.7%)	60(16.4%)	102(27.9%)	64(17.5%)
Social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp)	43(11.8%)	68(18.6%)	53(14.5%)	53(14.5%)	148(40.5%)
Friends	77(21.1%)	71(19.5%)	59(16.2%)	114(31.2%)	44(12.1%)

Source: Author's field work (2020)

Out of a total of 365 respondents who answered this question, 136(37.3%) took a moderately trustworthy opinion by saying that on a neutral standpoint, they do trust employers in giving them accurate information about coronavirus. On a rather different perspective, 109(29.9%) hold that they have a trustworthy relationship. This is followed by 76(20.8%) of respondents under study, who this time around are slightly trustworthy. In addition, 26 of them under study making up 7.1% not at all trustworthy when it comes to them providing accurate information about the coronavirus. This is followed similarly by 16(4.4%) who consider the trust in getting accurate information from their employers about coronavirus to be very trustworthy, with 2(.5%) of not answering the question. Furthermore, health-related agencies like WHO, Public health, Regional delegations etc were reported to be among the most trusted sources of information in the on-going Covid-19 with nearly three-quarters of respondents (71%) of trust. Social media, online health websites, and country leaders such as presidents and prime ministers were the least trusted sources of information. 40.5% of respondents said they very much trust social media (Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter), and 39.7% country leaders (President, Prime Minister and other Ministers). Additionally, 41.4% and 33.2% trust local mainstream and foreign mainstream (radio, TV, and newspaper) media in giving out information on the pandemic.

Discussion of findings:
To identify the various information sources employees trust in providing information on Covid-19:

It is important to note that the level of response and attitude towards the messages by employees is a reflection of the perceptions employees have on the sources of the information disseminated on Covid-19. Findings from the study as already presented in the first part of this chapter indicates that majority of employees trust their employers in giving them accurate information about coronavirus, despite concerns some show in terms of regarding the trust to be moderately trustworthy.

How effectively various organization leaders and teams are communicating updates and information to them during COVID-19 is instrumental going by the findings. The trust is indicative with employees as per the basis on the study resulting to alternative means of communication with their direct supervisor/manager (via phone, video conference) currently, compared to before COVID-19. The level of trust it should be recall extends to both the World Health Organisation which employees have a lot of trust in its communication about the crisis, the government and local authorities.

For that reason, this research sought to explore how effective the various channels have been used by institutions in communicating about the coronavirus with employees especially on the various safety measures already identified in the results. This therefore entails how they react when a crisis occurs, from a relationship management perspective, and how their interactivity, responsiveness, and transparency affect their employee perceptions about the pandemic.

Findings as already presented in the study reveals that institutions make use of all available media channels ranging from mainstream media as part of information sources (TV, Radio and Newspaper) to get its coronavirus response mechanisms to its employees. It has also further revealed that the social media is an active media space utilized by these institutions to be able to communicate with employees given the issues that surround Covid-19 like working from home and social distancing. Compared to previous mode of communication before Covid-19 (face to face) the pandemic has let to identification and the importance of effective internal communication during the pandemic.

There is no doubt that the mass media (Radio, TV, and Newspaper) including the social media (Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter and Websites) has become a big part of organizations' communication strategy during a crisis. The conglomeration of these mass media channels as a giant force has created possibilities for organizations to engage in two-way interactions with employees on their different platforms. Fan pages, whatsapp chat groups, emails applications, tagging, messaging, videos, photos, and likes and the traditional media be it local or foreign allow organizations to communicate with their employees quickly and efficiently.

These applications are giving organizations the opportunity to boost networking on their organisations, increase interactivity and maximize engagement. These applications are designed to help companies communicate with their publics to create personal and long-lasting relationships with them. This is imperative especially given the present situation with which the Covid-19 pandemic has

changed the job place situation.

These findings align with Helft & Hempel (2011), who says that the social media (Facebook) to be particular is at the center of the universe, and much of what people do online these days starts there. As a result, thousands of websites and apps have essentially become satellites that orbit around Facebook with organisations joining the bandwagon effect. This is because these online platforms at this time are easy-to-use and easy-to-implement tools and features; it allows organizations to be simultaneously interactive, responsive, and transparent with the public, especially when a crisis occurs.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the study is indicative of the consistent use of different trusted sources on information on Covid-19 ranging from institutions to media channels. This therefore explains why social media through Webinars (internal communications) during the pandemic by institutions, use of websites, TV, Radio, Print media for information on the virus. This is particularly important as they rely by determining their level of trust of information sources.

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