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### Higher Education Social Media: Student Perceptions of University's COVID-19 Crisis Communication

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Higher Education Social Media:  
Student Perceptions of University's COVID-19 Crisis Communication

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Communication Studies

Bridgewater State University

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## Introduction

In March 2020, the nation closed down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Bridgewater State University (BSU), a mid-sized 4-year public university in Massachusetts, was one of the many institutions across the globe to close down as a result of the virus. At this time, what was known of COVID-19 and the shifts it would cause in everyday life were yet to be discovered. Businesses, offices, schools, and universities closed their doors, sending their employees and students home without much further instruction, as there was very little instruction to give. Classes went from in-person to virtual, friends and families socially distanced from one another, and masks were required when in public spaces, such as to the grocery shop.

BSU extended its spring break for an extra week in March 2020 as Massachusetts shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly thereafter, the temporary move became permanent, and all classes moved to an online format. For many students, there was a belief that a two-week quarantine period would be enough time to protect communities from the virus, only a short time away from everyday life before returning to normal procedure. However, this two-week period quickly changed and adapted to multiple weeks, causing many plans to be extended as society learned and were forced to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed every way of life including the operations of the university and how it interacted, supported, and communicated with its stakeholders, especially students. One major way the university communicates and interacts with its students is through social media, as it is an accessible medium all students can participate with. Social media is a large part of any young person's experience in the world today. The primary age of an average college student, 18-22 years, makes them a member of Gen-Z, as anyone born after 1996 falls into this grouping (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). It is important to note here then that the Gen-Z

population has a large relationship with their screens, more than any prior generational grouping seen (Rue, 2018). This relationship with their screens, and given their population being the most generally seen age group in college classrooms, there is a perceived value in understanding symbiotic relationship between online communications and these audiences. As the COVID-19 pandemic quickly developed in March 2020, the university was faced with configuring a plan for communication with its main audience, its students. As students are a stakeholder of the institution they attend, there is high value in their experience and how this relates to their trust in their college or university (Sears & Hall, 2000). As colleges and universities navigated the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, their stakeholder population in their students was an important relationship to prioritize in their social media crisis communication plans, and more the perceptions of these stakeholders. This idea of stakeholder perception is the foundation and purpose of this phenomenological research study.

This study, as stated, is aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of full-time undergraduate students of the university's social media crisis communication. These students, the stakeholders of BSU, have followed Instagram accounts and have both accessed and been the audience of during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is a novel health crisis, the findings of this study have significance and can provide insights into effective crisis communication strategies that organizations and crisis communicators can implement in the current pandemic and future health crises. Experiences with different aspects during the pandemic such as participating in education online during the pandemic (Barzani & Jamil, 2021), as well as the emergency transition to online learning (Novikov, 2020). However, there is no literature on higher education social media as a means of stakeholder perception of an organization's COVID-19 crisis communication efforts. This study fills this gap in the social

media crisis communication literature, as the vast majority of crisis communication research is organization-centric and lacks stakeholder perspectives. This study will add to the knowledge of crisis communication by focusing on stakeholders who are directly impacted by a higher education institution's communication. By understanding students' perspectives, this study will provide a blueprint for strategic social media communication practices that universities and crisis communicators can employ during a health crisis.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Crisis Communication**

Crisis communication has received significant attention across public relations, branding, and communication research. A crisis can be defined as, "...the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes," (Coombs, 2015). A crisis in an organization can be defined as, "Furthermore, the four qualifying parts of an organizational crisis, as follows: 1) Crises involve uncertainty, change and disruption; 2) crises as it pertains to being harmful or threatening to the organization and its stakeholders; 3) crisis as a behavioral phenomenon, so that crisis is constructed socially by varying actors, and not the singularity of an objective environment; 4) crises being the result of a larger experience, and not related to singular events (Bundy et. al., 2017). More, the response of BSU was personalized to their stakeholders and what the thought needs of this population needed, because of the overall experience of the pandemic and not in relation to singular events. As the COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis to the country and human population overall, it can also be defined as a crisis on the organizational level to BSU specifically, for these reasons. Crisis communication then is the way organizations inform

stakeholders in a crisis with updates and information regarding the situation and status of the organization, and in some scenarios, the steps the organization is taking to alleviate stressors and effects of the crisis. In this study, we will be utilizing the crisis communication strategies of BSU for which a specific stakeholder group (students) were informed during the crisis (COVID-19 pandemic), with a direct study on this stakeholder group's perception of the organization (BSU).

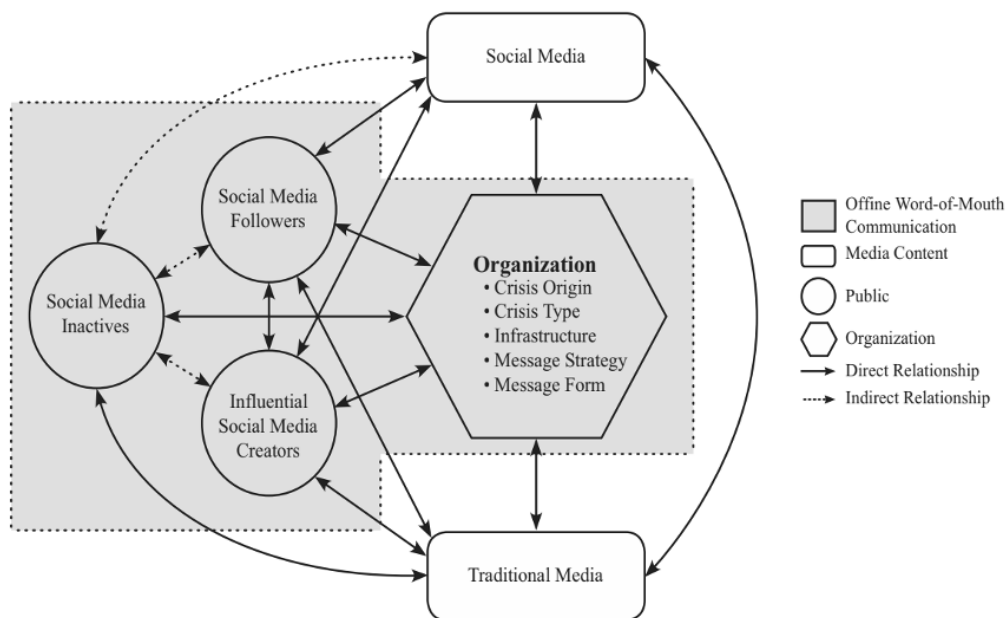
### **Social Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC model)**

Social media is a large source of communication through which organizations interact and share information with their stakeholders (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). As discussed in the previous chapter, Gen-Z are the primary group in college and university classrooms, and their relationship with their devices and screens make social media a prime space for higher education communication. With the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, and the study of BSU's stakeholders' perceptions, it is valuable to include social media as it applies to the university's crisis communication. British Petroleum's Oil Spill crisis in 2010 offers an example of the importance of Twitter and related social media platforms as key elements of a crisis communication plan, and how these platforms are inherently devices that should be monitored for key messages throughout a crisis (Austin et. al., 2012).

The Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC) illustrates the way in which organizations communicate with their audiences, and the messages shared (see Figure 1). The SMCC Model, "...describes the interaction between an organization in crisis and three types of publics who produce and consume information before, during, and after crises," (Austin et. al., 2012). With this research study, the SMCC model will be utilized to understand and categorize the organizational communication model used by BSU social media in the COVID-19 pandemic to inform stakeholders (students). The stakeholders, or students, who will be identified as

participants of this study will be named ‘Social Media Followers,’ in relation to the SMCC Model; the BSU social media will be categorized as ‘Influential Social Media Creators.’ The last part of this model, ‘Social Media Inactives,’ will not be important to this study, as those who do not engage and interact with BSU’s social media are unable to form an opinion of perception of the university's crisis communication. The relationship between the two groups, ‘Social Media Followers’ and ‘Influential Social Media Creators,’ will be vital to the recognition of stakeholder perception via the SMCC Model. All parts of this relationship will be conducive in understanding the opinion of stakeholders in the perceived success of BSU’s social media in informing audiences of the crisis.

Figure 1. Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model (Austin et. al., 2012)

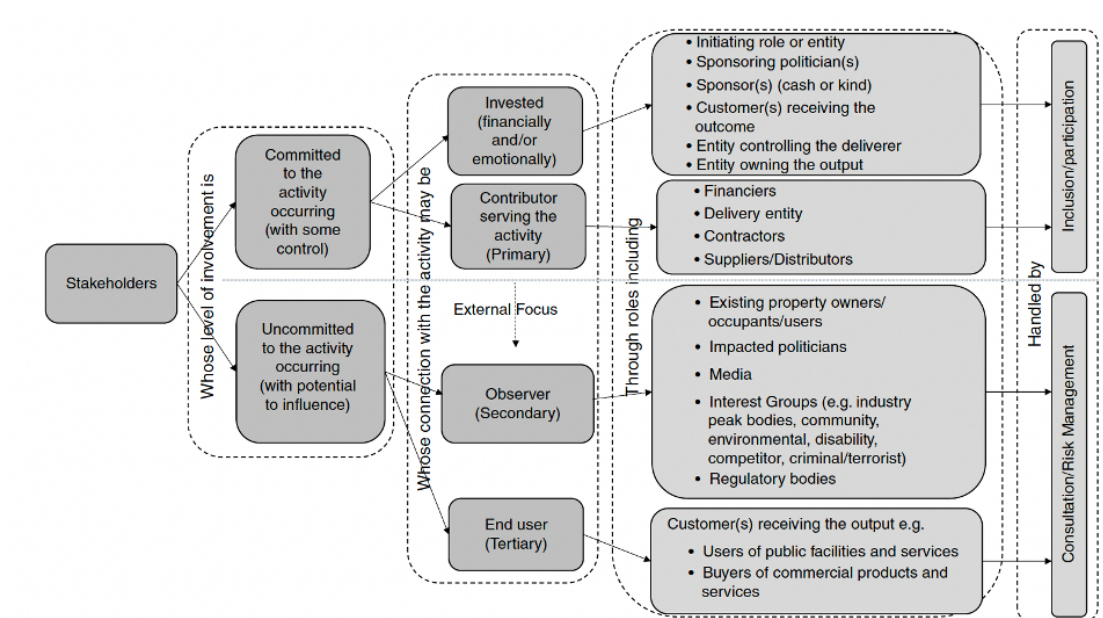


## Stakeholders

Stakeholders help to define the relationship between BSU as the organization, and students as the stakeholders, and more, how this organization to stakeholder relationship operates within this research study. To define ‘stakeholder,’ it is first important to define ‘stake,’ as an

interest. Therefore, ‘stakeholder’ means, “...an entity with [where] a stake (interest) is the subject of activity,” (McGrath & Whitty, 2017). When we consider this phenomenological study, the stakeholder is categorized as a student at Bridgewater State University, with the ‘stake’ being the institution itself. This study will research the relationship between stake and stakeholder, focused on the key messaging used on university channels during the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Though BSU is a higher education institution, “...stakeholders who desire social support from corporates seek it on social media,” (Jahang & Hong, 2017). BSU’s social media messaging, therefore, is an important part of the stakeholder perception in this study and will be a direct part of this research. As BSU students operate as primary stakeholders (see Figure 2), this research will examine their group as being, “Committed to the activity occurring,” as they are, “Invested (financially and/or emotionally),” (McGrath & Whitty, 2017). These investments in the organization make for the importance of this research, as these stakeholder perceptions are valuable to the organization’s overall success, again, with context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Figure 2. Stakeholder Locus of Interest (McGrath & Whitty, 2017)





## Trust

The trust between stakeholders and organizations in different relationships is critical as it is the foundation for all operations between these two groups. Trust is defined by Hosmer (1995) in the following: “Trust is the reliance by one person, group, or firm, upon a voluntarily accepted duty on the part of another person, group or firm, to recognize and protect the rights and interests of all others engaged in a joint endeavor or economic exchange,” (Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2010). For stakeholders (students) of BSU, the goal of their trusting relationship in their university is for BSU to recognize and protect their rights and interests; a lack of this protection would be detrimental to this stakeholder and organization relationship. Misztal (1996) found trust to be highly important in organizations as it is, “...essential for stable relationships, vital for the maintenance of cooperation, fundamental for any exchange and necessary for even the most routine of everyday interactions,” (Karlsen et. al., 2008). As the COVID-19 pandemic was a phenomenon of itself, the crisis communication that ensued was not an everyday or routine interaction on behalf of the organization with its stakeholders. Therefore, the trust that was so valuable prior to March 2020 was even of greater significance during and after its initial impact between BSU and BSU students. In an earlier section of this chapter, ‘crisis’ was defined by Wilk (2021) as it relates to the, “...unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders,” with inclusion of a stakeholder’s environment and finances. Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic as it affected the stakeholder can be defined as the closing of campus and in-person classes and activities, financial hardships, and the restructure of learning and working environments, to name a few. The value of trust from a stakeholder to its organization to seek support in the navigation of all these and more impacts is huge and is therefore made a priority in this research study. The perception of stakeholders (BSU students) in their organization (BSU)

will be considered with the context of trust by these students in their university, as this is, “...essential for [a] stable relationship,” among both groups (Misztal, 1996).

## **Reputation**

Reputation is a huge part of an organization’s relationship with its stakeholders; a positive reputation of an organization can make for an easier road when it comes to crisis, garnishing more sympathy and support (Morgan & Wilk, 2021). In understanding trust as a large part of organizational crisis communication, reputation is of the same degree of importance. In the research to be performed in this study, BSU’s reputation involves not just the perceptions of current stakeholders (students), but of future stakeholders, or prospective students. The research performed in this study will illustrate the effect of crisis communication in higher education, and how stakeholder perception is directly correlated to the reputation of the organization overall. A perceived lack of reputation can also mean a lack of trust, and as earlier stated, positive experiences in both these areas by stakeholders is vital to the overall success of the organization, regarding times of crisis and times of standard operation and procedure. It is plausible then that times of crisis for an organization are opportunities for stakeholders to test and uncover whether their organization is honorable in its existence to the stakeholder.

This phenomenological research study will be important as it fills gaps in the literature, but also prioritizes stakeholder perception in its vitality to organizational success. This study explored the following research question: What were the perceptions of full-time Bridgewater State University students of the university’s social media crisis communication at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020?

## Methods

### Qualitative Research

The method of this IRB-approved study will be based in qualitative research to gather and analyze data in relation to the phenomenon. Qualitative research is of value in this study, as this type of research aims to, “[Contribute] insights from existing or new concepts that may help to *explain* social behavior and thinking,” (Yin, 2016). The reliability and trustworthiness of qualitative research will be key to the understanding of the data, as it will present useful information that will help to fill the gap in the literature on this subject, as this subject has not yet been researched (Creswell & Poth, 2013). More, the trustworthiness of the research is important. The principal investigator reviewed the codes and themes developed by the student researcher to verify accuracy and appropriateness. The qualitative research performed was completed with the respect of the participants and their various answers during the interviews to different questions, all aimed at gathering data to understand stakeholder perception of BSU’s social media crisis communication in the COVID-19 pandemic. These perceptions would be discussed and analyzed using the SMCC model (see Figure 1) and the Stakeholder Locus of Interest Model (see Figure 2), as well as ideas of trust and reputation from a stakeholder in their organization.

### Phenomenological Research

This study’s research can be defined as phenomenological, as it involves the study of, “...the way that a person experiences or understands his or her world as real or meaningful,” (Wilson, 2015). The phenomenon can be categorized as the COVID-19 pandemic, as participants of this study experienced and lived through the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects in March 2020 as, “...real or meaningful,” (van Manen, 1997). As this phenomenon is an ongoing event at the time of this thesis, the perceptions of participants are crucial to the complete understanding of

the COVID-19 pandemic overall and it's real implications and impacts on stakeholder life and experience.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were full-time undergraduate students at Bridgewater State University who follow at least one of the university's social media channels. Researchers used a snowball sampling method to identify and secure participants. The researcher used her best judgement to identify the first participant who met the criteria in this study, and was referred to the next participant, and so on. Participants were secured in this way using snowball sampling, until 6-8 participants were interviewed, and sufficient data had been collected. In total, six interviews were conducted, with two participants being as male, and four participants being female. To protect the identity of study participants, participants will be referred to with pseudonyms such as Student 1, Student 2, etc.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection in this study included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants. The researcher conducted were 45-minute semi-structured interviews on Zoom with participants, with predetermined and preapproved questions. The interviews were recorded and only the audio file downloaded for verbatim transcriptions. All data was reviewed and kept in a password-protected file, that would be later destroyed one year after the conclusion of the study. Following the collection of data and verbatim transcriptions, the data was analyzed through inductive and deductive methods, with effort made to find major themes of convergence and divergence with individual and across cases.

## Results

All the IRB pre-approved questions surrounded the main research question, “What was the perception of students at Bridgewater State University of the social media crisis communication at beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020?” The results of this study were found at the conclusion of the qualitative research, in which six participants were interviewed and appropriate data was collected. Two of these participants identified as males and four identified as females. All participants were full-time students at the university and followed at least one of the university’s social media accounts. All participants followed the university’s Instagram account, as well as liking Facebook account. Of those interviewed, two identified as Juniors, who had three consecutive years of schooling at BSU. The four other participants identified as seniors, having four consecutive years of schooling themselves; two of these four identified as ‘super seniors,’ meaning, one was in their 5<sup>th</sup> year of education at BSU, and the other was in their 6<sup>th</sup> consecutive year.

### Preferred Channels

None of the participants indicated that the university's social media pages were their preferred channel for information and details during the pandemic. The primary source for all participants was email and a few mentioned the university's website, specifically the COVID-19 dashboard. Student 2 when asked what part of BSU’s university communications did they turn to, said, "Their Emails were the most helpful, and the most informative.” Student 4’s response to the same posed question was, "I... of course checked my email, uh, almost every hour like when the whole pandemic was like, really hitting...email is one of the major forms of communication for universities, so I kind of looked at my email mostly.” With this data, the university’s

Instagram and Facebook channels, were secondary sources to email being the primary one for students looking for information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and university plans.

### **BSU Social Media Builds Community**

Moving in to a second theme found in the data, it was apparent across different participant interviews the importance of observance of BSU's social media, and how it has a direct focus and objective of reaching student interest first. Across different participant interviews, a common theme was found about social media being student-centered, at which it builds community. When asked about BSU's social media presence and how it may differ from other university's channels, Student 3 stated, "Bridgewater I felt like is very centered toward the community, very much toward like, "We're doing it for the students." When asked the same question, Student 5 said, "...their presence is just very current with like, what's going on [on] campus and with the BSU community...even if it's just a casual post it'll be like, "Spring is happening," and will have pictures and videos of people from the different springtime events and it just makes you, gives you a sense of what's going on around campus." This view is an important theme to recognize, as it lays out the importance of stakeholders the value of social media within a college student's university experience.

### **Social Media Has Value**

Participants expressed their complete support of universities in higher education having a social media presence, uncovering a third theme found in the study. Many participants gave single worded answers, like, "100%," and "Definitely," when asked if a university having a social media presence is important. Student 1 expanded on their answer, stating, "I think there is value to the university having a social media page because without it... without students, you don't really have a university and I think the most important part of a university's presence is

like, showcasing students, so I think there is a lot of value to it because it helps current and potential students see what the university has to offer.” The value of social media in higher education is important to stakeholders, as participants unanimously attested to its value in their relationship with the organization.

### **Timely Communication**

With these themes in mind, a fourth theme to be considered based on participant interviews and data collected is the importance and appreciation found in the timeliness of communication with stakeholders. Student 6 expressed the following, after being asked their opinion of BSU’s success level in sharing information initially about COVID-19 in March 2020: “I would say obviously the most frustrating part was like the not knowing, but BSU was on the ball, we were one of the first schools who from what I remember had a lot of decision and outreach and things like that, so I think BSU was pretty on the ball.” Student 4, being asked the same question, said, “I think [BSU] kind of came out with their updates and communication quickly, I think we were one of the first like, one of the first schools....I have other friends at different universities and I was one of the first people to find out what our plan was for the remainder of the semester [in March 2020].” The swiftness of released information was favored by the participant sample, as it was equitable to a level of transparency valued by stakeholders of their organization.

### **(Dis)Trust in the Organization**

As results have varied across the convergence of ideas participants enjoyed or found positive about BSU’s social media strategy as it applies to the COVID-19 crisis, other themes emerged from the study across interviews that are helpful in examining and evaluating crisis communication in higher education. A fifth theme to follow the mentioning of the others was

BSU's lack of commitment in communication of a plan moving forward in university policy and procedure regarding COVID-19, which had a direct effect on participant ability to trust the university. As we have defined trust in earlier chapters of this thesis to be, according to Hosmer (1995), "...the reliance by one person, group, or firm...to recognize and protect the rights and interests of all others engaged in a joint endeavor or economic exchange," (Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2010), then distrust is the absence of these qualities. In a few words, distrust in an organization by its stakeholders can operate as an organization not protecting the rights and interests of their stakeholders. This distrust is seen in Student 1's response to a question posing how their trust in BSU may have been impacted by the university's COVID-19 communication, in which the participant expressed, "It was like, 'We're gonna revisit [the mask mandate] on February 1<sup>st</sup>,' 'We're gonna revisit on March 1<sup>st</sup>,' like they kept revisiting... They wanted to give students a lot of hope in moving forward, but especially in Fall 2020, they were like 'Oh yeah, hopefully we'll be in person!'...By the time we actually got to be back in person, it was like, 'Oh, they'll revisit on March 10<sup>th</sup>,' or whatever it was, I didn't think they were going to lift [the mandate]. I didn't think anything was going to change because they had [stated a revisit to the mandate] so much." This same sentiment was shared by Student 5, who said, "I think people put a lot of trust into like, the words that were being said, or like shared with the community, um, so if those did end up changing, it was like, a little bit nerve-wracking for everyone." These sentiments in nerve-wracking feelings helped researchers pinpoint topics of discussion for later analysis of the data, in centering the student, or stakeholder, experience in instances of higher education crisis communication. This distrust in communication outlines better steps in crisis communication in higher education, with stakeholder perception in mind.



## **Discussion**

The applied themes found in the research are conclusive of a bigger picture, in which the data helps to argue the importance of stakeholder perception in their organization. All the themes (Preferred Channels, BSU Social Media Builds Community, Social Media Has Value, Timely Communication, and Distrust in the Organization) work together in understanding participant's values as expressed through the interviews. These valuable findings can lead to relevant conclusions to help fill the gap in the crisis communication literature.

### **Social Media's Impact**

This high value in universities, colleges, and higher education institutions to have a strong social media presence was found across all six participant interviews and instructs scholars to recognize this as it applies to this and other research founded in this discipline. All participants agreed that the university's social media is a valuable channel (or mode) of communication with students, the university's primary stakeholders. It was due to this finding across all channels, that there was questioning on why, in knowing the organization's strong sense of connection with their audience on these different channels, did not more content be posted directly to these feeds. As the research illustrated these findings across all interviews, one participant, Student 3, expanded on this thought, saying, "I wish there was more specific, like social media posting about the pandemic specifically, that was able to like, relay more information to the students, rather than like leaving everything to the emails and stuff like that."

This study found that email was the primary source of information for students looking to learn about the university's next steps in the pandemic, the social media channels fell short, underserving as a second source of information for stakeholders. Moreover, all participants agreed on varying degrees that social media use in higher education is important to the

collaboration and foundation of a strong community overall. Even in comparison of other universities, participants agreed BSU has a solid understanding of their audience, creating and implementing student-focused content that engages and prioritizes the student experience. With this level of understanding, social media content fell short where it could have really escalated to support stakeholders' needs in March 2020, among the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study found that BSU did not follow the SMCC model directly because the same content that was found in email communication (traditional media) was not found on the university's social media channels, which created an incomplete relationship across all groups in the model (see Figure 1). Without the neutrality of these relationships, there are only roadblocks created that prevent Social Media Followers (students, stakeholders) and Influential Social Media Creators (organization, BSU) from gaining the most out of this relationship and having the most high-quality experience overall. To directly fix this, it is required for BSU and other institutions, in the face of crisis communication, to utilize university social media channels as not only a space for student-driven content, but also as a bulletin of sorts for next steps about the crisis at hand. These acts support the structure of the SMCC model and support the stakeholder and organization relationship overall.

### **Building Organizational Trust in Crisis**

As earlier defined, organizational trust by stakeholders is key to the relationship between the two groups, as organizations need stakeholders to function, and stakeholders need organizations they can trust to seek safety and protection. BSU's crisis communication was respected by stakeholders for its timeliness, and this timeliness, especially in the face of other colleges and universities who did not move as fast to announce plans and next steps, honored the

trust and respect of stakeholders, gaining a positive reputation in the eyes of eager students in March 2020. However, the data from participants uncovered how this same timeliness was also met with uncertainty, as strategies and plans shared with students were often met with uncertainty in the stakeholders, as these same plans were constantly changing and evolving. With accordance to the Stakeholder Locus of Interest (see Figure 2), BSU students are, as mentioned, primary stakeholders of the university as they have emotional and financial interest in the university. In March 2020, BSU students were required to shift to online learning, move off-campus if a resident of a residence hall, and perform other tasks as needed as an adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic. These quick shifts were directly correlated to students' emotional and financial stakes in the university, therefore, when BSU changed or argued a reevaluation of plans was coming, it made it hard for stakeholders to trust in the organization, because once comfortable with the newly afflicted information and guidelines, another shift sat potentially waiting. This unknown and uncertainty at times of BSU's next steps regarding the COVID-19 pandemic could only be met with levels of distrust from stakeholders, as there were needs for answers, and the answers kept changing.

To support stakeholder relationships, BSU could have selected a policy and procedure plan that would have lasted the entirety of the future, and not used language such as 'revisiting' and 'reevaluating', as this was the cause for stakeholder uncertainty. There is value in BSU's timeliness and need for wanting to consistently give audiences answers for crisis plans that were fully updated and in line with the recommendations of larger entities in March 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC). But the lack of commitment to a certain plan made for "nerve-wracking" feelings, to again quote a participant from an earlier chapter. For BSU, a better route of action

would have been to create and communicate a crisis plan that was solid in its structure and language and did not promise stakeholders of later changes. This would give certainty to stakeholders and support their trust in the organization overall. Therefore, it was timely information, but also changing information, which caused struggle in the stakeholders, or students.

This is not to say overall there is not great trust in the university's communications; on a scale of 1-5, in asking participants their overall trust in the university's communication, all participants gave an answer between 4 to 5. This data illustrates that because of the strong, student-centered content and presence on social media, students have trust in the university's communications. But, in the face of a crisis, students want to see more from the university as far as crisis-centered content, still in the timely manner, but without the consistent change that creates struggle in trust and reputation between stakeholder and organization. This study found that participants experienced anxiety and felt uneasy with BSU due to a lack of consistency and stability in crisis communication messaging, which impacted the trust the students felt in the university. Therefore, the student perception of BSU's reputation was consequentially impacted. The findings of this research confirm earlier findings by Misztal (1996) in how trust is, "...essential for stable relationships" (Karlsen et. al., 2008). The stability of relationships between stakeholders and the organization as it relates to stakeholder trust then creates an overall impact on the organization's reputation. In other words, this study confirms a positive experience with an organization's crisis communication plan results in high levels of trust by stakeholders, adding to the stability of the stakeholder and organization relationship, which creates a positive organization reputation overall.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research served to uncover multiple themes across participant interviews that help to fill the gap in the literature as it relates to higher education social media and crisis communication. Scholars can note from this research that college students, in the face of crisis, look to their emails first in information as a primary source, and second to social media. Participants of the study noted in their interviews that information being sent to their emails was in some ways a signal to look at the university's social media channels next. For college students, social media being a secondary source for information does emphasize the value college students have in these channels. Social media is robustly an important part of the student experience, and student-centered content and engagement is met with positive affirmations from a university's audience, their students. Therefore, taking the detailed content from these interviews and applying it in the social media channel feeds is a preference of stakeholders, as these channels are already watched and explored largely in the everyday, outside of a crisis. As well, this content shared, is as appreciated if it is done in a timely manner, and more, if it is committed and accurate, without future promises for reevaluation, as these instances for future condition changing create unease in the eyes of the stakeholders. In closing, timely, consistent information shared on all possible platforms in a crisis is how best to support the stakeholder (student) and organization (university) relationship, furthering the trust of the stakeholder in the organization, benefiting the reputation of the university.

## **Limitations**

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all BSU students or undergraduate students in general. The findings are true for these participants, in this place, and at this time. However, the findings still are significant because they help to see the similarities in opinion

across six stakeholders of the university, who, because of the qualitative data collected, help to fill the gap in the literature as it pertains to crisis communication in higher education social media.

### **Future Research**

Future research could explore students' perceptions through quantitative survey research across multiple universities to ensure results could be generalized to the entire undergraduate student population. More, focus groups could be utilized as individualized interviews cannot offer opportunities for the collaboration of ideas, as it applies to a shared experience across all participants, in this case, being the COVID-19 pandemic. More, future research can be completed at a closer timeline to the phenomena; at times during the interviews, the researcher found it took a noticeable amount of time for participants to answer the questions, as they pertained to March 2020, which was over two years ago in the past. Data also can be collected over an elapsed length of time, to perhaps see if there are any shifts in perception along a given amount of time, for example from March 2020 through March 2022. Still, the data collected was entirely useful to the study overall and helped to draw conclusions about the perceptions of stakeholders as it applies to crisis communication.

### **Implications for Practice**

In future instances of crisis on the organizational level, implications for practice based on this study in agreement with stakeholder perception are as follows:

- Utilize email as a primary source of information regarding the crisis, and when available, use university social media channels as secondary sources of information
  - o In preparation for potential crisis, and in the framework of creating a positive stakeholder experience, create engaging and student-centered content on these

same university social media channels, as stakeholders (students) largely enjoy the community built in these content strategy efforts

- Timeliness in university's efforts is met with large support from stakeholders, as the knowing of information eases potential stress and uncertainty in the face of crisis
- With timeliness of information, the commitment to ideas and little to no promise of future reevaluation also works to ease the minds of stakeholders, as these reevaluations create uncertainty in the minds of students; create a crisis plan and abide by it as much as possible, to protect stakeholder relationships and organizational reputation overall.

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