

A Review of Factors Influencing Business Communication Channels During Pandemic

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Abstract

Effective communication is key in business to improve performance. A key success factor in achieving communication effectiveness is the channel selection made by the business. When channels are effectively applied, it results in a higher degree of engagement which then boosts productivity and through that leads to business success. Social distancing strategies during the Covid-19 crisis create barriers to communication. Businesses would need to plan on the best communication channels in times of crisis for continuing business and should a similar crisis recur. This paper examines the available evidence on the most used communication channel by businesses during the pandemic crisis year 2020 and examines the factors influencing the choice. We conducted a literature review, searching related articles from Scopus and Web of Science databases and the Google Scholar search engine. The review showed that the most used communication channel is digital platforms namely email, social media, websites, and television. We identified three categories of factors influencing business communication channel choice: (1) Information effectiveness; (2) Business networking; and (3) User literacy. Given the changing preference of people along with the evolving technology, we hope to offer some insight for a better plan of communication that would enhance the effectiveness of business communication to have a high-quality business.

Keywords: Business Communication, Communication Channel, Pandemic

Introduction

People stay in quality relationships through communication. In communication, there is always an exchange of something informative such as ideas, documents, problems, solutions, or views whenever two or more individuals interact (Theory of Communication, 1970). The pace of today's business means people are communicating information more than ever before. Doing business internationally leverages a new global multicultural workplace, global virtual teams, and advances in communication technology (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). The

evolving technology offers new multiple modes through which people can communicate. Understanding what makes and breaks effective communication is challenging and it is at the core of any modern business operation to preserve the relationship.

The choice of channels used in organizations is an important element for positive organizational outcomes. Communication channels show a strong link with communication satisfaction (Vercia & Spoljaric, 2020). When channels are effectively applied, it leads to a greater level of people engagement which then contributes to an organization's productivity and through that the success of companies. On the other hand, an inappropriate and unacceptable choice of the channel will lead to unsuccessful communication. Thus, the best communication channel choice should depend on how it might affect the message and how the recipient interprets it.

Now that the pandemic has happened, companies have been working from home. The implementation of a lockdown strategy in combating Covid-19 led to an increase in working hours and effort. Businesses could have been operated remotely. Dealing with the remote working environment has caused a great social presence crisis in managing social distancing. Face-to-face communication is no longer a necessary component in maintaining relationships. Digital communication is increasingly the norm in this remote environment and most of the communications are done by email, but the results of previous studies found mixed evidence on digital communication (Albitar et al., 2021).

This paper attempts to review a body of literature on communication channels or modes between business and their stakeholders during a crisis. We conduct the study to accomplish the following objectives:

- To review the choice of business communication channel mostly used during the Pandemic, and
- To identify influencing factors of the choice of communication channels during the crisis.

After the introduction, we outline the literature and theoretical background to provide readers with relevant concepts. Secondly, we describe the methodology used to examine the research questions. Thirdly, we present and discuss the results of the study. Finally, we summarize the findings and conclusions for future research direction.

Literature Review

Choice of Communication Channels During Crisis

Numerous studies pointed out that the best communication is when the receiver of information feels the 'presence' with whom he is communicating. Human-to-human direct communication conveyed many vocal and non-verbal cues in analyzing management's impression. Regular use of multiple complex phrases when speaking, speaking with a high-pitch voice, informally attired speaker, delay in that person replying, and long waiting time for an appointment could mean engaging with a less-trustworthy person and this creates a bad impression for the company (Hellmann et al., 2020). Zant & Kray (2014) find individuals responding to face-to-face communication are more sincere than they are through an intermediary. Short et al (1976) also stressed the effect of communication on employee performance, satisfaction, and perception. The study concluded that the higher the level of

presence, the better the awareness of those engaged in the interaction. However, there are limited studies exploring which communication channels offer the best result in times of crisis. During the pandemic, organizations need to still be apparent to their members. Even during the pandemic, Japanese company executives and employees prefer working from the office and face-to-face interaction over online communication (Watabe et al., 2022). The face is a motivating factor for good communication in their culture. Lee (2022) studied how an organization's communication affects public responses during the Pandemic. The result of the study indicates that the consumers have more trust and thus greater behavioral intention when organizations share product information face-to-face rather than on social media leading them to buy the product despite the crisis. During the epidemic, many small essential and non-essential businesses found ways to remain open as they place a strong emphasis on the "personal touch" approach to business which is to stay connected with the customers. That comes with face-to-face communication (Thambusamy & Bekirogullari, 2020). Some industries such as those providing food services, private care services, legal services, and retail-related businesses are more unlikely to change in their communication mode as they are more intensive in face-to-face interaction despite the pandemic (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020).

However, living with Covid-19 for an uncertain time now urges the call for a new effective communication mode. Face-to-face communication which offers 'social presence' would not be the preferred platform in this pandemic environment. Working remotely increases the risks of wrong information being delivered and issues on ethics. The credibility of messages or information is thus depending on the communication channels used to deliver them in times of crisis.

Numerous studies suggested alternative communication methods to face-to-face used by businesses to communicate during the recent health crisis period to ensure the uninterrupted flow of their operations. Remote workings have led to interacting with many mediums that are connected to the Internet (Faqihi et al., 2020). Most scholars of crisis communication have identified social media as the crisis communication channel (Obembe et al., 2021). Some papers studied how communication helps educate the community about health and safety for a stronger community during the pandemic. For effective communication, television, the Internet, radio, newspapers, friends, and neighbors are used by the authority to transmit information aimed at immigrants because they are not proficient with the native language, and the fact that there is an increase in the number of Covid reported cases among them. Studies in business settings concentrated on designing communication strategies for company survival beyond the Pandemic. Lee (2022) studied how an organization's communication affects public responses during the Pandemic. The result of the study indicates that the consumers have more trust and thus greater behavioral intention when organizations share product information face-to-face rather than on social media leading them to buy the product despite the crisis. Studies on health care settings noted that doctors spend more time telecommunicating than face-to-face communication during an office visit in gathering data about patients during Covid 19 restrictions. Patients rated telehealth visit quality as better than Face-To-Face (Drossman et al., 2021). Text messaging apps are also used to facilitate communication between doctors and multiple older patients at a time during the pandemic (Goldberg et al., 2022).

Coman et al (2022) did a survey on other professionals and the study highlighted a new role of professional accountants as there is a restriction to traditional face-to-face communication between economic players due to the current health crisis. When asked which specific IT-related abilities are highly valued for interaction amongst the corporate players and the impact of the crisis, the respondents ranked first communication-facilitating technologies like WhatsApp and email. Similarly concurred in the study of auditor-client relationships where communications are mostly via emails (Albitar et al., 2021). A study in retail banking sectors highlighted a downward trend in customers' visits to the bank during the Pandemic. Due to the important use of cash, the percentage of consumption of online banking services during the Pandemic is greater but with a little upward trend as it was widely used even prior to the Pandemic (Baicu et al., 2020). In Terason et al (2022), virtual meetings are the main method of communication between executives, an alternative to physical monthly committee meetings in the sport management context amid crises. Sports competitions and coach-athlete interaction are also done virtually, either through the Association's web page or a live broadcast over the Internet.

Antunes et al (2022) carried out a review of the literature to analyze the choice of communication mode from the tourism industry perspective. Most studies identified online digital communication such as social media and travel websites for electronic bookings and payments as essential to promote tourism during the outbreak period. Many tourism providers also choose electronic communication channels to regularly respond to tourist queries (Melovic et al., 2022). In these times of worry and uncertainty, the audience, a crucial component of the media industry, has also a rising need for accurate and real information. Geni et al (2021) explained that print and electronic media were the primary forms of mass communication in the past, but it has been merged into internet-based media content. Some authors had different perspectives. A study conducted in Germany found that people had more communication via text-based messages as compared to the audio-visual-based telephone during the social distancing measure. The first was chosen as people can still communicate without being concurrently available (Kluck et al., 2021). Diwanji et al (2020) suggested the use of both traditional synchronous and the new media technology communication channels for communicating during disasters. While the use of the telephone would result in an immediate transmission of information, the asynchronous channels via websites, apps, and e-mail when repeatedly using the technology, provide richer informational cues. The study suggests using a variety of mediums, either via the telephone or sequentially via a website or app before reaching them on the phone. Multi-channel communication is also recommended by Blasco-Arcas et al (2022) as a requirement for being ready to respond to external communication flows and communicate appropriately and promptly when a crisis arises.

Factors that Influence the Choice of Communication Channels

Information Effectiveness

With the shift to digital communication channels, various criteria for channel choice are present. Since face-to-face interaction is restricted, online communication channels with high social presence can contribute to effective relationships as it inhibits dialogues in communication (Zhou & Xu, 2022). Vercia & Spoljaric (2020) investigated the best communication route to adopt for internal and external communication. If the channel is considered acceptable and appropriate, it can be considered effective communication. Some

studies prefer communication channels that provide richer information cues despite their low synchronicity (Diwanji et al., 2020). The information must be conveyed efficiently for communication to be effective. Communication always needs a channel or medium to send and receive information. Visual, textual, and electronic are among the mediums used to convey messages and information.

It is also written in a paper by Antunes et al (2022) that among the factors to be taken into consideration in establishing a communication choice plan is the effectiveness of communication messages. Speed in disseminating messages is also among the major factors in effective disaster-management communication (Diwanji et al., 2020). Antunes et al (2022) have the same thought that digital communication eases the spread of information just through an active Internet connection. Also, how users perceive the usefulness of that channel to their job performance, there will then be greater acceptance for choosing the channel.

Business Networking

A study during the first lockdown in Germany noted that people prefer communicating via channels where they can feel socially connected (Kluck et al., 2021). They experienced closeness when there is a greater bandwidth of the channels. In Goldberg et al (2022), the decision to encourage telehealth communication has some relation to the law, flexibility, and literacy of people. Deregulation or relaxation of certain policies under the Health Act such as waiver of rules that allow doctors to use personal mobiles to face time with patients would reduce the technological barrier.

The need to maintain a human touch with clients such as doing live chat or video calls is also highlighted by Baicu et al (2020), who studies the impact of pandemics on consumer behavior in internet banking services. Besides usefulness and ease of use, trust, communication, and education about technology have a positive correlation with the changing attitude of users toward the use of digital channels. Similarly, Diwanji et al (2020) also mentioned that a higher-quality channel is one where users can gain more knowledge and experience from the channel. The analysis of a survey done in the tourism field recognized five factors influencing the use of digital technology by tourism providers: their characteristics, attitudes, perception toward digitalization, Covid-19, and future development trends of the global tourism industry (Melovic et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Zhang et al (2020) studied the relationship between emotion and communication in disseminating information during an emergency. Besides it being instant and concise, social media such as Twitter is the preferred channel choice as the emotion contained in the message induces attraction and it can be used as one of the elements to increase information sharing behavior in an emergency. Coman et al (2022) obtained responses from professional accountants and they found that the decision to go digital is dependent on both the human element and the availability of telecommunication resources and infrastructure. Bringing back business to the next normal is expected by all especially the young professionals thus, the willingness to expand to digital channels.

User Literacy

In media broadcast overview, the migration of corporate communication to the digital world is purposely to try to get closer to the new habits and media consumed by audiences at present (Hidalgo-Mari et al., 2022). The new normality of the social mitigation strategy also causes a continuous limitation on the physical interaction between professional accountants and entrepreneurs and concerned third parties. For regular corporate financial reporting, especially during uncertain situations, disclosing frequent ad-hoc financial information via social media could engage in more dialogic communication with the stakeholders besides the annual report as the main communication channel (Crovini et al., 2022).

Digital illiteracy could also hinder the choice of modern channels for communicating as low literacy would mean low-income or older persons and those living in rural areas with the shortage of IT facilities. This is also mentioned in the study by Koval et al (2022) that when communicating information, it is important to understand people of different cultures and their diverse linguistic backgrounds as non-verbal communication can be a more effective channel. Some other studies made the point that their options for communication channels are based on the combined factors of human touchpoints, knowledge, and perceptions. When they acquire more knowledge from the selected channels, they are better in their attitude, which ultimately results in better performance (Deepa & Baral, 2022). As such, the characteristic of people could be the contributor to the form of communication for better acceptance of message contents (Terason et al., 2022).

Theoretical Background

The social presence theory implies that when the receiver of information feels the 'presence' with whom he is communicating, effective communication is made (Short et al., 1976). Even in an online medium, the way a message is successfully conveyed depends on whether the message receiver would feel like a real person in the communication process (Oh & Ki, 2019). Many researchers have investigated the effects of presence on effective communication and see positive outcomes. Greater presence results in improved task outcomes and created more feedback to questions (Bennett & Hatfield, 2018). High social presence would also create stronger interaction between the sender and receiver of information, and this would eventually build relationships (Oh & Ki, 2019). When people are both present and communicating, they would convey natural language and give cues and this would produce very rich and meaningful information (Kahlow et al., 2020). It is very crucial for people to communicate directly in exchanging knowledge and building relationships (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). Andel et al (2020) studied online learning and highlighted that students were motivated to participate and learn more when they perceive a higher level of presence in class. Similarly, Saiewitz & Kida (2018) noted that greater social presence in auditor-client communication leads to greater cooperation by the audit client which would lead to increased willingness to accept proposed audit adjustment. The theory of social presence suggested that face-to-face interaction would give the highest presence while the text-based mode of communication offers the least (Kahlow et al., 2020).

A Crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that can cause disruption to organizations. The covid-19 pandemic, which many have referred to as a "sticky crisis" is expected to return and will continue to pose a threat to the world's business environment going forward (Dhar & Bose, 2022). A crisis communication strategy is thus crucial to lessen the impact of a crisis on

an organization and its stakeholders. Many corporate communications literature base their studies on a theory of situational crisis communication (SCCT). SCCT suggests that how a business communicates information to the stakeholders in response to a crisis will affect the perceptions of the business. To help businesses respond to a crisis, they need to consider the type of crisis and the level of responsibility of the organization. The higher threat a crisis is anticipated to bring, the more responsible the organization will be, thus, the more it should focus on the people affected by the situation (Coombs & Tachkova, 2022). Thus, clear and reliable communication of businesses to all the stakeholders is necessary to sustain during disrupting times. Due to uncertainty, the stakeholders demand an accurate, timely sharing of information, thus increasing the use of different communication channels to stay connected and informed (Diwanji et al., 2020).

Methodology

We reviewed, summarizing the body of literature covering any aspect of communication channel and looking at what influences people's channel preferences. We employed a thorough search strategy using the terms "communication channels" and "pandemics". We expand further by reviewing articles with the following keyword search: communication AND channel OR mode OR type AND of AND communication AND during AND crisis OR pandemic OR Covid 19. We reviewed literature from two electronic databases (Scopus and Web of Science) and the Google Scholar search engine published from 2020 – 2022. This time frame was selected due to the pandemic crisis year. The articles selected are restricted to Journal Articles, those available online and must be full texts and the search strategy was specific to business and industry settings.

Results and Discussion

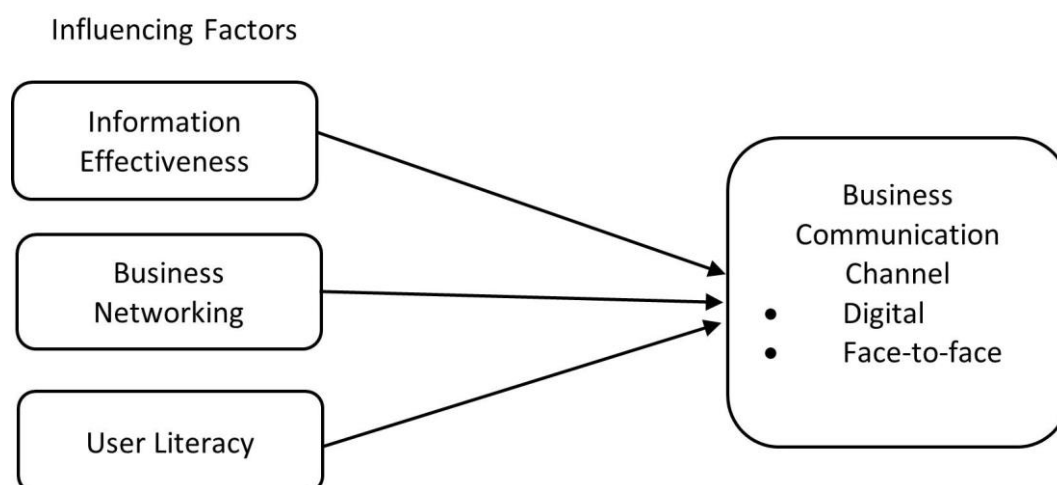


Figure 1: Factors that influence the choices of business communication channel

Communication had become more challenging especially throughout the pandemic years, particularly for business as everyone is forced to maintain social distance and is required to work remotely. From the literature, we found out that during the pandemic, the most used choice of communication channels is digital platforms such as email, social media, websites as well as television (Diwanji et al., 2020; Geni et al., 2021; Melovic et al., 2022).

Businesses' communication channels can be influenced by certain factors which are information effectiveness, business networking, and user literacy. These factors will influence the likelihood of using digital platforms or traditional face-to-face interaction. However,

during the pandemic years, the preferred communication channel is a digital platform as there are barriers to the locality of people to meet one another (Runfola et al., 2021). The effectiveness of business information flow undeniably influences the choices of the communication channel. It includes the richness, usefulness, and availability of information being communicated that subsequently leads to a better choice of the communication channel. Another factor that influences the business communication channel is business networking which refers to the trust between the users and the quality of the information being conveyed. Furthermore, user literacy on the digital platform also influences the preferred communication channel.

Conclusion

The repercussions of Covid-19 led firms to pivot and embrace new modes of communication in order to stay in business and be more resilient. A resilient business can weather storms and adapt to change more easily. Digital resilience is important in a competitive and constantly changing business environment. According to the findings, digital platforms such as email, social media, websites, and television are the most often utilized communication channels chosen by businesses. As such businesses will be better prepared for future crises if they have an effective communication plan that leverages technology. Furthermore there are three types of characteristics that influence corporate communication channel selection: (1) Information Effectiveness; (2) Business Networking; and (3) User Literacy.

It is hoped that our study could offer future research direction on designing more interactive communication channels [face-to-face interaction through digital channels] for effective communication and widen the study on the impact of a communication channel's choice to work efforts, talent management, and stakeholder satisfaction. Given the changing preference of people along with the evolving technology, there is an urge for investment in integrated communication channels that would enhance the effectiveness of business communication leading to a greater work effort which would subsequently result in greater quality of business activity and service.

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