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Making Sense of COVID-19:
Varied Approaches to Internal Crisis Communication in Kuwait

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Abstract

Two-way communication and transparency are two elements of the strategic approach to internal communications. This study examined the relationship between these elements and their influence on employees' sense-making and sense-giving in Kuwait during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research used a mixed-method approach incorporating interviews, survey data, and a review of organizational communications. The sample included six Kuwaiti organizations representing the private, government, and nonprofit sectors. The statistical software package SPSS was used to calculate ratios and rates, confidence intervals, tests of statistical difference (Kruskal–Wallis and Mann–Whitney tests), the Pearson correlation coefficient, and multiple linear regressions. The study found a positive association between the strategic approaches of two-way communication and transparency and employees' sense-making and sense-giving behaviors. Gender, nationality, and years of employment also influenced communication and transparency. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study of internal crisis communication in a Kuwaiti context. This study's findings shed light on the importance of employees' internal communications as organizations address and engage during a crisis.

1.   Introduction

In late February 2020, a sizable portion of Kuwait's population traveled abroad for the week-long National and Liberation celebrations. By the time most of them had returned, the country had begun implementing some of the earliest and most restrictive social lockdowns outside China to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus virus behind the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations across the country immediately lost autonomy over many decision-making processes concerning employees and their operations. Organizations in every sector were forced into a crisis mode, regardless of their level of preparedness. In a country where 70% of the population of 4,464,427 are expatriates (PACI, 2022), the restrictions on operations and travel also directly impacted people's residency status and ability to either enter or remain in the country. Under these extreme conditions, many employees struggled to make sense of the new situation—and many organizations struggled to survive.

Such unstable circumstances can place tremendous pressure on internal and external communications. This study sought to understand how the communications of six Kuwaiti organizations representing the private, government, and nonprofit sectors influenced their employees' sense-making. The study incorporates interviews, survey data, and internal reviews to examine the relationship between the organizations' internal crisis communications during the COVID-19 pandemic and the employees' ability to make sense of the situation, or sense-making, which is how people work to understand new issues or events.

1.1   Kuwaiti cultural and managerial working settings

Located in the Arabian Gulf, Kuwait shares borders with Iraq and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Kuwait Government Online, 2022). Of Kuwaiti's population of 4,464,427 million people, 1,502,138 (33.6%) are Kuwaiti nationals, with 736,514 of these being male (PACI, 2022). Kuwait is a collectivist, high-context culture emphasizing groups rather than individuals and obligations over rights in matters extending to core life decisions, including marriage and career (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005). In this high-context culture, statements from credible sources or sciences are often colored by cultural and religious clues from the Quran (Kuwait National Assembly, 2021).

Several cultural frameworks propose useful approaches for examining the Kuwaiti culture, including Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (1984, 1991, 2001; 2007), which categorized national cultures (AlMutairi, Yen, & Heller, 2018; Steenkamp, 2001). To characterize a culture, Hofstede (1984, 1991, 2001) defined and indexed five dimensions of culture: uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and long- vs. short-term orientation. With respect to the uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), Kuwaiti society has a low tolerance for uncertainty and change. To reduce uncertainty, societies adopt and implement strict rules, laws, policies, and regulations to reduce the likelihood of unanticipated actions and reactions. Kuwait also scores high on the masculinity index (MAS) for its preference for competitiveness over cooperation and low on the individualism index (IDV)—although arguably both scores would be the least extreme among the Arab world overall. Hofstede (2001) viewed low-level individualism as evidence of a close and long-term commitment to family members, including extended family and extended relationships; this is in keeping with Kuwait's collectivist culture, in which loyalty is of the utmost importance, overriding other social rules (Hofstede, 2001).

Kuwaiti society is highly family-oriented, with the family generally being very closed and private (Al-Thakeb, 1985). The family unit consists of a close-knit extended family network, with even those only distantly related considered part of a cohesive institution; individuals help and support each other, rallying in difficult times and often pooling resources for business ventures or to overcome hardship (Al-Mekaimi, 2003; AlMutairi & Yen, 2022). In Kuwait, the extended family is an accepted social structure that determines individual identity and includes the nuclear family, immediate relatives, distant relatives, members of a tribe, friends, and even neighbors (Al-Thakeb, 1985). Kuwaiti

culture emphasizes interpersonal relationships. According to Al-Kandari and Gaither (2011, p. 271), 'For Westerners, communication is generally a conduit for information transmission; for Arabs, almost all forms of communication are infused with emotions, even petty and quick messages'.

Kuwaiti cultural characteristics influence managerial practices in Kuwait. For example, power distance (that is, unequal distribution of power) and a strong preference for uncertainty avoidance create a centralized discussion process (or, as argued by Bill and Leiden (1984), restrict decision-making to the wealthy elite) in which top management controls their proletarian behaviors and practices. The collectivism common to Islamic religion and Arabic culture supports employees' loyalty toward their organizations and their obedience to management, whom they consider their superiors (Ali, Taqi, & Krishnan, 1997).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internal crisis communication

As an unexpected event, the COVID-19 pandemic created an atmosphere of uncertainty for organizations, which is the basic definition of a crisis (Coombs, 2015). Crisis management in organizations has long interested scholars and practitioners alike, and interest in employees as a strategic internal public has recently grown (Al-Shamali & Kashif, 2023; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Jiang & Men, 2017; Jeong-Nam Kim & Rhee, 2011; Y. Kim, 2018; Lee, 2017; Mazzei, Kim, & Dell'Oro, 2012). Employees have special relationships with their organizations that run deeper than those of the general public (consumers), making them critical strategic stakeholders, especially during crises. Employees receive the organization's messages, but they can also serve as its messengers. Therefore, their involvement, interactions, and reactions in crises are crucial to how organizations perceive and manage emergencies (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2019).

Employees' reactions to crises can directly influence their organization's survival (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012; Mazzei, 2010) and can have a lasting impact on its reputation. Communication with and among employees is critical in any crisis, as everyone needs information to help them adapt to a new and rapidly evolving situation. Johansen et al. (2012, p. 271) defined *internal crisis communication* as 'communicative interaction among managers and employees in a private or public organization before, during, and after an organizational or societal crisis'. Poor internal communication intensifies issues during crises and fosters mistrust and resentment after the crisis (Goodman & Hirsch, 2010). However, organizations that provide sufficient information to their internal public through effective internal communication are more likely to reduce uncertainty and produce healthy sense-making or understanding. Such actions can mitigate damage, minimize the duration, and provide a foundation for suitable organizational responses to crises in ways that bring about satisfactory results (Mazzei et al., 2012). This has led public relations practitioners to pay more attention to the influence of internal communication on employees' behavior during crises (Kang & Sung, 2017).

In addition to helping employees interpret and make sense of crises, effective internal communication considers employees as both receivers and senders of organizational messages (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). During crises, employees typically receive top-down information from the management. At the same time, they communicate information laterally (with each other and back to management) and externally (to customers, friends, and family) (Y. Kim, 2018). Through this process, they seek information (sense-making) and share in or influence others' sense-making (sense-giving). Those two concepts are discussed below.

2.2 Sense-making and sense-giving

Weick's theory of retrospective sense-making (1993, p. 105) focused on employees' situational comprehension during an organizational crisis, which he describes as a 'cosmology episode [that]

occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system'. According to Weick (1995), *sense-making* is a rational thinking process that fosters comprehension of interruptions of normal activities. Through sense-making, organizations' employees can adapt to new situations and decide how to react. As a cognitive process, communication is essential to sense-making, affecting how employees connect socially with their environment and select clues that help them interpret the new situation and minimize uncertainty (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Sense-making is a common research focus when examining internal crisis communication (Adamu & Mohamad, 2019; Y. Kim, 2018; Weick, 1988, 1993; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). As a search for meaning, sense-making is triggered during crises by the ambiguity and uncertainty imposed by new and changing circumstances (Y. Kim, 2018). Therefore, the more accurate and sufficient the information management teams provide to their employees, the more readily the employees can grasp the situation within a shared context, contributing to the organization's stability (Weick, 1993). Conversely, a lack of information will increase employees' anxiety because ambiguity can lead them to resist or reject cooperation with the management's policies and procedures (Mazzei et al., 2012).

Sense-giving, a voluntary communication behavior related to passing on an understanding, occurs when people influence other people's interpretations of a crisis by sharing information and interpretive frames (Jeong-Nam Kim & Rhee, 2011). In an organizational context, employees seek information and disseminate information that can enhance (or impede) the interpretations of colleagues and other stakeholders. Sense-giving often is often associated with particularly active employees, and it can influence an organization's crisis response and reputation management (Y. Kim, 2018).

Scholars have investigated different factors influencing employees' sense-making processes, such as the organization's size and culture, employee demographics, and other vriables. The current study emphasizes strategic internal communication during a crisis and its influence on employees' sense-making, looking specifically at the independent factors of transparency and two-way communication. The research considered the importance of the organization's broader communication philosophy and general atmosphere as essential foundations for understanding employees' reactions to crises.

2.3 *Strategic internal communication*

Another well-known research paradigm in managerial communication is the strategic communication approach (Toth, 2010)), defined by Hallahan et al. (2007, p. 3) as the 'purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission'. Grunig (2001) suggested that the strategic approach was ideal for controlling employee communication because it can produce strong relationships between the organization and its various communities. From this perspective, employees are a strategic community that requires dedicated and effective communication to strengthen organizational relationships with other strategic communities (J.-N. Kim & Ni, 2010; Jeong-Nam Kim & Rhee, 2011).

2.4 *Two-way communication as a predictor of sense-making and sense-giving*

The paradigm of strategic management of public relations prioritizes two-way communication (TWC) to build healthy relationships through interactive dialog by inviting employees' involvement in management decisions (Grunig, 2011). This symmetrical model of communication drives organizations to be more open and trustworthy (James E Grunig, 2013). Kim and Ni (2010) called TWC the most effective way for organizations to communicate with their various publics.

TWC's central aim—mutual understanding—can encourage employees to participate in an organization's decision-making process (Men & Stacks, 2014). This co-construction of meaning

minimizes misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the organization's messages (Y. Kim, 2018). This is an especially salient concern during a crisis that can ferment ambiguity and uncertainty, ratcheting up employees' anxiety levels and preventing healthy sense-making.

TWC can improve efficacy during a crisis by disseminating sufficient and accurate information to minimize rumors and misinformation. Rumors are common in crises when employees are struggling to make sense of a changing situation (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). Therefore, when the management adopts a TWC approach, they can directly influence both sense-making and sense-giving (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: TWC in Kuwaiti organizations will be positively associated with employees' sense-making and sense-giving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.5 Transparency as a predictor of sense-making and sense-giving

In the organizational context, transparency means truthful, relevant, complete, and substantial communication with employees, whether negative or positive (Y. Kim, 2018; Men, 2014; Stirton & Lodge, 2001). A component of strategic internal communication, transparency encourages employees to voluntarily seek and distribute information (Cotterrell, 1999; Lee & Li, 2020) by increasing their trust in the organization's credibility (Men, 2014).

In this sense, transparency is a process (Y. Kim, 2018) that motivates employees to acquire and distribute information (Cotterrell, 1999) essential for interpreting the organization's positions and policies during a crisis. Three commonly identified dimensions of transparency are informational, accountable, and participative (Balkin, 1999; Y. Kim, 2018). *Informational* refers to truthful, substantial, and useful content focused on the receiver's needs rather than the sender's (Y. Kim, 2018; Rawlins, 2008). *Accountable* transparency requires full disclosure of information from the organization, regardless of its negative valence (Lee & Li, 2020). Such practices directly influence rumors and misinterpretation (Men & Yue, 2019). In addition, such transparency encourages employees' participatory behavior in the distribution of relevant information (sense-giving) motivated by the organization's own communicative approach (Cotterrell, 1999; Lee & Li, 2020).

Transparency goes beyond providing information to include fostering active information-seeking (Cotterrell, 1999) in which employees collaborate in a trusting atmosphere that encourages sense-making and sense-giving (Y. Kim, 2018). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Transparency in Kuwaiti organizations will be positively associated with employees' sense-making and sense-giving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methods

This study used a survey method for data collection, with personal interviews to substantiate the results and provide input for the discussion. The semi structured interviews were recorded for review. Each lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. There were 11 interviewees: three CEOs, one chairman, one owner, two human resources professionals, three crisis managers, and one information technology employee. The interviewees represented upper management, internal communicators, and key internal publics in six organizations from governmental, private, and nonprofit sectors and organizations in education, health, security, civil society, and real estate.

Interviews are a primary means of accessing the narratives people use to make sense of internal communications within an organization (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). Such narratives can help verify quantitative findings. The interviews (covered more extensively in the discussion section) helped inform us about the purpose of implementing crisis plans and executing their related internal communications. Furthermore, the interviews provided insights into the relevant environmental factors related to organizational and national cultural norms that were not explicitly revealed by the quantitative method and the internal communication structures that can influence communication

effectiveness. The interviews' insights informed the discussion section because they illuminated people's experiences during the COVID-19 crisis, their crisis preparation, and the communication philosophy they applied with their employees during the pandemic. The researchers chose to interview manager-level employees because of their influential decision-making roles during crises and because they were considered the starting point for coordinating and instructing crisis management.

3.1 Survey procedure

The original survey, conducted in English, contained two independent variables: two-way communication and transparency. The dependent variables were sense-making and sense-giving. There were also several demographic variables. The items representing the dependent and independent variables were adapted from Kim (2018).

Since the sample comprised Arabic speakers, the scale items were translated following a rigorous procedure to ensure that they conveyed the intended meanings. First, a specialized bilingual commercial agency translated the questions into Arabic. The Arabic version was then proofread by an Arabic linguistic scholar and compared against the original English version by another bilingual expert. Finally, the bilingual authors rechecked the translations and resolved any discrepancies. After the pilot study, the survey was distributed via the organizations' management using internal communication channels.

We randomly selected 99 participants for a pilot study to test the accuracy of the translation and remove or edit vague wordings. The pilot study also enabled the researchers to ensure that the Cronbach's alpha reliability score for each scale was at least .70. The final version of the survey included 24 questions, in addition to other demographic variables. The estimated time to complete the survey was 10–15 minutes.

3.2 Criterion variables

This study included two criterion variables: sense-making and sense-giving. The sense-making variable consisted of an index with five statement items: 'I would voluntarily meet and check with those people who have complaints against the organization,' 'I would voluntarily check people's feedback on this issue or crisis,' 'Even after working hours, I would contact stakeholders for their complaints and new information and share the information with colleagues,' 'I would meet people who work for similar businesses and check rumors and news about organization or business,' and 'I would start conversations or give information to relevant colleagues about new trends or unusual signals related to work.' The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .84.

The sense-giving criterion variable also had five statements: 'I would say good things to friends and neighbors about positive aspects of the management and company,' 'I would recommend my organization and its service/products to people,' 'I would attempt to persuade people who have negative opinions about my organization,' 'I would refute prejudiced or stereotyped opinions about my organization,' and 'I would argue with those who criticized my organization and business.' The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .88.

Both criterion variables had seven response options: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree, and strongly agree.

3.3 Predictor variables

The predictor variables covered the type of work environment relative to symmetrical, two-way communication and transparency. The symmetrical two-way communication index consisted of five items: 'Most communication between management and other employees in our company can be said to be two-way communication,' 'Our company encourages differences of opinion,' 'The purpose of

communication in our company is to help managers be responsive to the problems of employees,' 'Supervisors encourage employees to express differences of opinion,' and 'Employees are usually informed about major changes in policy that affect our job before they take place.' The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .90.

The transparency index comprised nine statements: 'My company provides detailed information to people like me,' 'My company makes it easy to find the information people like me need,' 'My company provides information in a timely fashion to people like me,' 'My company provides information that is complete,' 'My company provides information that is easy for people like me to understand,' 'My company provides accurate information to people like me,' 'My company provides information that is reliable,' 'My company is open to criticism by people like me,' and 'My company freely admits when it has made mistakes.' The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .97.

As with the criterion variables, the predictor variables had seven response options: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree, and strongly agree.

Other predictor variables were gender, nationality, years of employment, and work sector.

3.4 Respondent profile

This study's sample comprised 388 individuals: 152 (39.2%) were men and 236 (60.8%) were women; 128 (32.9%) were Kuwaiti nationals and 261 (67.1%) were expatriates; 98 (25.9%) reported the they had been in employment for 1–4 years, 103 (27.2%) reported 5–10 years, 117 (30.9%) reported 11–20 years, and 61 (16.1%) reported more than 20; and, finally, 130 (33.5 %) worked in the government sector, 218 (56.2%) in the private sector, and 40 (10.3%) in the nonprofit sector.

3.5 Statistical analysis

We used IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 27.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.), to calculate the ratios and rates, confidence intervals, statistical difference tests (Kruskal–Wallis and Mann–Whitney tests), Pearson correlation coefficients, and multiple linear regression. We conducted two multiple regression (MLR) analyses, with one each for the predictors of sense-making and sense-giving. For the MLR SPSS procedures, we always entered sense-making and sense-giving in the dependent variable block. For the predictors, we entered the demographic data in the first block of independent variables and the nature of the work environment (symmetry and transparency) in the second block.

4. Results

4.1 TWC and sense-making and sense-giving

The survey data confirmed that participants largely perceived their organization to practice TWC (M = 5.3, SD = 1.43). Nevertheless, the survey data also showed some variation in employees' perceptions of their organization's TWC compared to their managers' perceptions. The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test showed a statistically significant difference at the level of $p < 0.001$ between the mean scores of the TWC component according to the organizational sector. Through the mean ranks (206.97), the private sector (educational organizations, real estate, and hospitals) perceived the highest levels, followed by the government sector 168.02 (educational and research organizations), with the nonprofit sector 99.85 scoring the lowest.

The MLR that looked at the predictors of sense-making was significant at the second level, which considered symmetrical two-way communication and transparency in addition to demographics: R^2 change = 0.135, $F(2, 307)$ = 10.534, $p < 0.001$. At this level, symmetrical two-way communication (β = .173, $t(313)$ = 1.993, p = .047) was a positive predictor. The MLR for sense-giving was also significant (R^2 change = .234, $F(2, 309)$ = 23.282, $p < .001$). The results indicated that

symmetrical two-way communication was also a positive predictor of sense-giving (β = .245, t(311) = 3.098, p = .002). This finding confirmed the first hypothesis (H1) regarding the existence of a positive association between TWC in Kuwaiti organizations and employees' sense-making and sense-giving during the COVID-19 crisis (Tables 1 & 2).

4.2 TR and sense-making and sense-giving

The survey data were consistent with the qualitative data, showing that participants generally perceived their organizations as practicing TR (M = 5.1, SD = 1.44). However, as with the TWC model, the survey data showed a variation in employees' perceptions of their organization's transparency. The Kruskal–Wallis test showed statistically significant differences between the survey results' mean scores for the transparency questions according to the organizational type $p < 0.001$ and the mean ranks of the private sector, which were the highest at 225.88, followed by the government sector 159.80, and the nonprofit sector at 116.69.

For transparency, the MLRs for both sense-making (R^2 change = 0.135, F(2, 307) = 10.534, $p < 0.001$) and sense-giving (R^2 change = .234, F(2, 309) = 23.282, $p < .001$), indicated that transparency was a positive predictor of sense-making (β = .244, t(313) = 2.736, p = 0.007) and sense-giving (β = .355, t(311) = 3.766, p = 0.001). This finding confirmed the second hypothesis of the existence of a positive association between transparency in Kuwaiti organizations and employees' sense-making and sense-giving during the
COVID-19 crisis (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1 : Multiple Regression Analysis of the Predictors of Sense-making

Predictors	First level			Second level		
	B	**SE B**	**B**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**
Demographics						
Gender	-.334	.139	-.138*	-.393	.130	-.162**
Nationality	.189	.145	.078	-.182	.145	-.075
Years of employment	.119	.067	.106	.104	.062	.092
Enterprise sector	-.039	.031	-.073	-.048	.029	-.089
Work envoirnment						
Symmetrical two-way communication	-	-	-	.147	.074	.173*
Transperancy	-	-	-	.199	.073	.244**
Statistical significances						
R^2	.035			.171		
Adjusted R^2	.023			.155		
F for change in R^2	2.839			25.040		

* p < .05, ** p < .01, p *** < .001

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis of the Predictors of Sense-giving

Predictors	First level			Second level		
	B	**SE B**	**B**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**
Demographics						
Gender	-.275	.112	-.138*	-.338	.098	-.169***
Nationality	.473	.117	.237***	.070	.109	.035
Years of employment	.070	.054	.075	.054	.047	.058
Enterprise sector	-.028	.025	-.063	-.038	.022	-.085
Work envoirnment						
Symmetrical two-way communication	-	-	-	.173	.056	.245**
Transperancy	-	-	-	.207	.055	.305*

Statistical significances		
R^2	.077	.311
Adjusted R^2	.065	.298
F for change in R^2	6.482	52.583

* p < .05, ** p < .01, p *** < .001

5. Additional Findings

The MLR analyses also showed that several demographic factors influenced employees' perceptions of sense-making and sense-giving. For example, the Mann–Whitney test at the significance level of $p < 0.05$ showed that the male employees 214.56 were more successful at sense-making than the female employees (179.97). However, the Mann–Whitney test found that nationality had a significance level of $p < 0.001$, showing a variation between the Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti employees' perceptions of their organizations' TWC and TR. Non-Kuwaitis perceived their organization as employing TWC (218.11) and transparency (220.44) more than their Kuwaiti counterparts (145.21 and 141.19). Lastly, years of experience seemed to influence the subjects' perceptions of transparency and sense-making. According to the Mann–Whitney test, at a significance level of $p < 0.05$, those with 11–20 years of work experience were most likely (199.85) to perceive their organizations as transparent.

Interestingly, employees with more than 20 years of experience were the least likely (154.35) to perceive their organizations as transparent, at the same significance level ($p < 0.05$). The research assumed that years of experience were roughly correlated with the subjects' positions in the organizations since organization managers usually have more experience than their subordinates. Participating in or witnessing more years of management behavior relating to organizational transparency might have tempered employees' expectations about the level of transparency they should expect. According to the Kruskal–Wallis test, the subjects with over 20 years of experience also exhibited the highest mean scores on sense-making (213.70). Their potentially higher positions within the organization might also help explain their higher levels of sense-making.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Two-way communication and transparency are two elements of the strategic approach to internal communications. This study examined the relationships between these elements and their influence on employees' sense-making and sense-giving in Kuwait during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings confirmed the significant positive association between the strategic approach to internal communication and employees' sense-making and sense-giving. This study provides new insights into organizational communication in a region of the world that has been largely understudied (Almutairi & Sriramesh, 2020). The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the role of internal communication, especially from a strategic approach. This approach values organizations' employees, treating them as strategic stakeholders. The following sections relate the study's findings to the literature by referencing the interviews conducted to elucidate the quantitative findings.

6.1 Two-way communication and sense-making and sense-giving

The interviewees understood the value of two-way communications and an 'open-door policy', allowing both top-down and bottom-up communication throughout the organizational hierarchy. Each of the sampled organizations claimed to inform employees daily about the latest news, regulations, policies, decisions, planning, and other details related to the coronavirus health crisis following the outbreak. The highest-level management claimed to be open to receiving feedback from their employees regarding their health or financial status and their families' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The broad perception of two-way communications expressed by organizations could be

associated with several factors. For example, the CEO of a real estate company attributed TWC to organizational structure, stating, 'We have a flat organization [with] one manager at the top and the rest [of the employees] down one level. It makes relationships with all employees good. The nature of communication is easy.' Despite working in a more complicated organizational structure, the CEO of a private hospital believed that TWC came down to structural factors. He described the benefit of the monthly employee meeting as follows: 'Our friendly, supportive environment helps [people] to speak out, and usually those who bring the best things to the table will be rewarded…to make sure that their opinion about a certain matter is available to everybody.' In contrast, the deputy owner of a private school attributed TWC to a more personal approach: 'Since I was put in charge, we made sure employees had easy access to me, HR, and [the rest of the] management.'

These insights into three work environments were in line with this study's quantitative finding that TWC predicted sense-making and sense-giving. Scholars suggest that TWC boosts a healthy relationship with internal strategic publics because it involves them in the decision-making process (Grunig, 2011). Communication built on openness and trustworthiness is the most effective way for organizations to disseminate information internally and externally (J.-N. Kim & Ni, 2010). Research has also found that when management involves its employees using a TWC approach, they are more successful at sense-making and more likely to contribute to sense-giving. This is especially important during crises that engender ambiguity and uncertainty (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016).

Similarly, the interviewees in this study said that the symmetrical two-way form of communication enabled employees to obtain relevant and sufficient information to make sense of the crisis. For example, the deputy owner of the private school said, '[as upper management] I am accessible to all employees, 24 hours, through email and phone calls [and] a WhatsApp [group] that is assigned to handle complaints and questions.' The head of the HR department at the same organization said, 'We send daily updated emails to all employees. We tried our best to answer all of their questions, to respond to rumors if they spread, and we always wanted them to get the information from us.'

6.2 Transparency and sense-making and sense-giving

The interviewees demonstrated an understanding of the need to provide comprehensive, accurate, and relevant information pertaining to employees' health, salaries, and well-being in general during the COVID-19 crisis. The real estate CEO said, 'Through our HR application, the employee can check all [of] the rules, procedures, announcement, and updated information, besides the employee's job profile.' The CEO of a private hospital explained that through various communication channels, the organization could provide transparent information to employees during the crisis:

We do have email and we have periodical reports that we publish in the organization. We use WhatsApp for communication, and we also have digital screens with audio and visuals displayed in the hospital. We also have normal face-to-face meetings.

The interviewees predicted the association between transparency and sense-making. For example, the chairman of a nonprofit organization said that:

Transparency is an established practice in our organization that we are proud of. Actually, we are campaigning for the government to issue a freedom-of-information law for employees. This law should ensure the employees' rights of inclusion and access to information related to their salaries, bonuses, and any other information that affects their status and career.

The interview feedback elucidated why transparency was found to be statistically significant in predicting sense-making and sense-giving. The finding was in line with a previous study reporting that transparency positively affected employees voluntarily seeking and distributing information (Lee & Li, 2020). Scholars have emphasized that transparency stimulates employees to obtain and distribute information about an organization's position and policy during a crisis (Cotterrell, 1999). Transparency, which contributes to active information-seeking (Cotterrell, 1999), can encourage sense-giving (Y. Kim, 2018).

Interestingly, many of the interviewees mentioned loyalty when discussing transparency. Nearly all of the interviewees, most of whom were in upper management, said that employee loyalty was a natural consequence of transparency. For example, a manager from a real estate company explained the following connection:

I think the loyalty that I built comes from two factors: one, all employees are the same…. Two, decision-making involvement, where you get all employees involved in the decision-making, [even though] the CEO makes the final decision. I meet with employees daily about three to four times…. At the end of the day, you get the right suggestions.

The CEO's comments referred to transparency in the context of participation (treating employees as an essential part of the company) and consistency ('I meet with employees daily about three to four times'). The head of a crisis team at the private hospital also commented on transparency as loyalty: '[Employees] are fairly loyal…because we are a family, and if one falls down, we as one family are around. We are not doing that to show off, but this is our policy.' This suggests that employees' engagement and empowerment through transparency creates loyalty, which is in line with Men (2012, p. 172), who reported that the 'hospitable work environment' led to employee engagement.

The survey's findings also suggested that gender, nationality, and years of employment were important factors predicting sense-making and sense-giving. In this sample, the male employees were more successful at sense-making than the female employees, which might be explained by cultural influences and gender gaps in the workplace; while Kuwait ranks among the top worldwide in women's workforce participation, it does not rate as well in the proportion of women in management (Alzougool, AlMansour, & AlAjmi, 2021). In the Kuwaiti social hierarchy, 'the only formal authority to which [a Kuwaiti male] was answerable was that of the older male kin and the state' (Longva, 1997, p. 128). Therefore, the male employees might have been more readily viewed as having credibility and authority, which would better position them to deliver and receive the information required for sense-making during a crisis. Kuwaiti men are more likely to hold positions of authority in organizations, giving them a disproportionate level of influence over communications and, consequently, sense-making.

Concerning nationality, non-Kuwaitis were more likely to perceive their organizations as employing TWC and transparency than their Kuwaiti counterparts. Cultural norms might help explain this variation. Notions of power difference in Kuwait are such that a greater gap exists between expatriates and their local employers than between employers and Kuwaiti nationals. Expatriates' residencies are sponsored by their employers, so they must rely on organizations to provide transparency in managing their employment status and conditions. In contrast, Kuwaitis have greater privileges to work and other labor rights, which lessens the employers power. Kuwaiti nationals are more likely to see the government as the arbitrator of their rights and their companies as subjects required to uphold their entitlements. Thus, expatriates might have a more vested interest in believing that their organizations are communicating openly with them, while Kuwaitis, more trusting of the state, might be more skeptical.

In addition, the qualitative data confirmed the variation in the quantitative findings that the private sector seemed more invested in two-way communication and transparency than the public and government sectors. One example came from the private school, when the management called for a general employee meeting at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis for the deputy owner to discuss 'what is going to happen, especially regarding the financial situation'. In another example, the private hospital established a command center to connect its employees with a crisis task force of 38 people with four sub-teams: safety, medical (clinical), infection control, and social. The social team was an illustrative example of TWC. Elaborating on its role, the head of the command center said this:

This team manages the social, nonclinical, and nonmedical needs of people who fall ill with COVID to help manage the psychological implications. It is meant to take care of the family and children to ensure they have proper housing, …food, or other materials. Everything at the social level helps take care of those at home, the hospital, and in quarantine.

The government and nonprofit organizations were less proactive about encouraging TWC. While they described supplying employees with essential information about the COVID-19 crisis, they were less able to provide examples of their interest in eliciting communication from the bottom up. One manager at a governmental organization admitted that the entrenchment of a top-down communication style in the organization resisted opportunities for more symmetrical information flow: 'My suggestion of granting full access to the employees to the decision-making process was rejected by the top management'. According to him, controlling information was a common practice in many governmental organizations, as those who have access to information have more authority and power.

The variations in transparency levels were also evident in the qualitative data. The private sector expressed a deeper interest in understanding employees' informational needs. The head of one of the private sector crisis teams said the following:

The most important issues we had to deal with in the beginning were fear and phobia about the disease, and we [had to] manage rumors and people's psychological and [ethical considerations]. To prevent rumors, we used effective communication and reports. However, you cannot sell words. You need to be real supporters for [the staff]. We did not only take care of their personal payrolls, but also their family's stability.

The government and nonprofit organizations were also concerned about their employees' well-being and wanted to supply sufficient information. Nonetheless, their communicative practices were not of the same magnitude as those in the private sector. As mentioned, the government sector's management style and resistance to TWC also served as an obstacle to transparency. The nonprofit organizations' management style was similar to the government organizations' management style, which might be attributed to two factors. First, almost all of its employees and management were volunteers or part-time workers who also held government jobs. Second, Kuwait's nonprofit organizations' activities are monitored by and accountable to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, which provides rules, regulations, and funding.

In conclusion, while the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing at the time of this writing, the initial 'crisis' mode that occurred as organizations adapted to the new conditions created has subsided somewhat. The authors hope that the lessons learned about managing internal communications during the pandemic might encourage organizations in the country and elsewhere to consider the net benefits of communicating strategically and openly with their employees during crises.

Similar to other social science studies, the current study has its limitations. Sample size can be critical. The fact that the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic restricted the ability of the researchers to solicit more responses from individuals. However, this limitation was mitigated by the use of a qualitative approach of personal interviews. The interviews provided functional in-depth outcomes. The generalizability of the results has to be carefully approached therefore. The results reflect response of individuals who were under unusual circumstances. The respondents' perceptions and beliefs were affected by the crisis and blockade. Accordingly, the results can be better generalized to times of crises and uncertainty.

7. Acknowledgment

References

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