

*Original Research Article*

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

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## Abstract

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The study is titled 'Employees' perception on Covid-19 sources of information: Case of higher institutions of Learning in Buea.' Information during pandemics plays a critical role in employee perception of the sources of that information. Due to current events involving incidents like terrorist attacks, famine, conflicts and now the Coronavirus pandemic, the perceptions of employees' towards how pandemics are handled from an effective crisis communication perspective in protecting the organization from reputational damage is imperative. This study seeks to investigate employee perception about COVID-19 sources of information. The study employs the quantitative research design with a descriptive method (survey). The questionnaire is used as the instrument for data collection with 365 employees constituting the sampled population. In terms of the theoretical underpinnings of the study uses the Persuasion-Communication theory as it attempts to resolve the issues which emerge as a result of a given crisis (COVID-19). Based on the findings, majority of respondents 191(52.3%) of employees collectively agree as opposed to 47.7% who consider it not an overblown phenomenon. Statistics have equally revealed that majority of respondents 55.3% of employees say they do not feel at risk for the coronavirus, 24.9% strongly disagree that they feel at risk for the coronavirus, while 35.6% feel at risk for the virus, with 23% who neither agree nor disagree that they feel at risk for the coronavirus. To conclude, employees consider coronavirus as an overblown. Thus, institutions should derive a crisis communication prototype that can better address issues of health concerns effectively.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Crisis communication, Employees' perception, Health communication

## INTRODUCTION

Perception here refers to the way people interpret events and situations. Perception is a cognitive process that let persons stimuli affect their senses and people turn to have perception defence that shield themselves from negative stimuli, where individuals turn to make perceptual errors at times due to their perceptual stereotype. During the past two decades, humanity has

been confronted with multiple crises that came in many shapes and forms, from natural disasters, vicious acts of terrorism, outbreaks of viruses, massive school shootings, migration overflows to cyber-attacks. The commonality which this kind of events possesses is that they are stressful and unpleasant situations for the public. The moment a complex system (society, economy, family

or an international organisation) faces an event that puts them in a slippery and dangerous situation it is when one can speak of a crisis (Bundy, 2017). In order to protect the well-being of society, it is of great importance that they communicate in the best way possible.

The term crisis originates from the Greek word 'krisis' which, when translated has a similar meaning as the English words choice or decision (Paraskevas, 2006). A crisis is portrayed as any emergency situation that disturbs and destabilises a complex system while affecting an individual, a group, an organisation or society altogether. It emerges without any notice and creates a sensation of uncertainty and fear among the affected ones. It is vital for those in charge to recognise the early signals of a crisis and to inform the predisposed population and stakeholders about it. When a crisis is detected, actors must quickly act and make swift difficult choices or decisions (Mitroff, 2000).

When crises occur, especially without warning, they have negative impacts on society, environment, political structures, economy or (national) security. In times of a crisis, citizens look at their leaders (presidents, mayors, politicians, elected administrators and so forth) in the expectation that they will fend off the menace or at least minimise the impact it will have (Boin 2005).

In order to counter crises, crucial decision making is needed. That brings us to the notion of crisis management, which in some cases can be a matter of life and death. If the actors in charge respond well to a crisis, the damage will be limited; when they respond poorly, the impact of the crisis will increase. The concept of crisis management is commonly defined in the literature as being the process through which an organisation or state handles a disturbing and sudden event that threatens to damage an organisation, state, stakeholders or the public (Bundy, 2017)

In stressful situations, people desperately seek answers and often believe the first piece of information thrown at them, regardless of what the information is and where it is coming from. Public opinion becomes truth before facts and sources are checked.

According to Fearn-Banks (2007), an organization in crisis must prove to its publics, and often to the general public, that the prevailing negative opinion is not factual. There are several factors that form a person's public opinion, many of which are predetermined and uncontrollable. These attitudes are based on age, educational level, religion, country, state, city, neighbourhood, family background and traditions, social class, and racial background (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

## Background to the study

The concept of employee perception about Covid-19 and the issues surrounding the workplace is shifting from ideas of a physical location to a state of mind. Physical

location of a working place has been gradually losing its importance due to growth of information technology. Modern working life adapted the system of work from home. Work from home referred as the concept of working in a concern where the employees do not have to commute to a central and single place of work (Shahid, 2020).

The Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to biggest number of employees globally bound to work remotely. The citizens in many countries including India are urged to stay at home and to reduce social contacts to a minimum in the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic COVID-19. This pandemic affected each and every sections of economy. The concept of work from home got more popularity at this point. This pandemic also affected educational institution, which lead to online classes, webinars etc. in order to continue academic activities, which eventually led to many sectors started following the same pattern (Shahid, 2020).

In wake of the events surrounding Covid-19 pandemic from 2019 to present day 2020, the relevancy of crisis communications among management, emergency response personnel in addressing public concern and outrage has risen to vital importance (in the 21st century) regarding situations of high unpredictability, threat and uncertainty. This is because communication, in work places during pandemics usually in the form of public relations (PR), is also a traditional activity following a crisis (Coombs, 1995 and Seeger, 1998.)

The development in information and communication technologies has made it very easier to complete the tasks outside of the workplace because of good internet connectivity as well as reasonable price, more user-friendly computers, laptops and other similar gadgets. This made working from home easier as well as feasible to perform tasks and likely reduced the employer costs of providing such arrangements Shahid, 2020).

According to Shahid, (2020), this 21 century the only flexible work arrangement in organization is working from home. The outcomes of these arrangements consist of both positive and negative. The working from home provides to employees more opportunity to focus on their work tasks. The regular face to face contacts with co-workers significantly reduce, when working away from the office.

According to Lai (2019), approximately eight years after the MERS-CoV epidemic, the current outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, has emerged as a global outbreak and significant public health issue. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) (Euro surveillance Editorial Team, 2019). Astonishingly, in the first week of March, a devastating number of new cases were reported globally, and COVID-19 emerged as a pandemic. As of 12 March 2020, more than 125,000 confirmed cases across 118 countries and more than

4600 deaths had been reported (World Health Organization, 2020). COVID-19 is spread by human-to-human transmission through droplet, feco-oral, and direct contact and has an incubation period of 2-14 days.

### Statement of the problem

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created a global health crisis that has had a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and our everyday lives. Not only the rate of contagion and patterns of transmission threatens our sense of agency, but the safety measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus also require social distancing by refraining from doing what is inherently human, which is to find solace in the company of others. Within this context of physical threat, social and physical distancing, as well as public alarm, what has been (and can be) the role of employers within institutions towards handling this pandemic. It is also within the thinking in line with the phenomenon that the research thought it wise to look at the role (radio, movies, television, the internet, mobiles) roles different mass media channels have played at the individual, social and societal levels. The problem is thus: How do employees perceive Covid-19?

### Objective

The objective of this study is to examine employee perceptions about Covid-19

### Justification of the study

The justification of this study is centered on the fact that over the course of the past two decades, the world has witnessed a number of infectious disease outbreaks, which have shown a high speed of transmission. Currently, concern is growing over the continuing rise in COVID-19 infections in some parts of the world and the ability to sustain declining rates in others. Governments, employers, and their organizations face enormous challenges as they try to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and protect safety and health at work.

### Literature review

#### Employee perception of COVID-19

According to Shandwick and KRC Research (2020) in a national survey conducted among 1,004 Americans, 18 years of age and over, to ask how they feel regarding the pandemic, precautions they're taking, confidence in medical and healthcare facilities and organizations and

support from their employer. The survey, conducted online, is demographically representative of the U.S. adult population. Its findings revealed that more than half (55%) agree coronavirus fears are overblown; 41% disagree, and 4% are not sure. Younger people (18-44) are more likely to feel fears are overblown (62%) Gen Z in particular (70%). Least likely to feel fears are overblown are people who feel at risk (39%) and seniors (65 years and older, 44%). Overall, 32% say they feel at risk for the coronavirus. Six percent say they know someone who has the coronavirus.

To Shandwick and KRC Research (2020), a higher proportion of people living in urban areas feel at risk (36%) than in suburban (29%) or rural areas (31%). Further, a higher proportion of people living in the Northeast (40%) feel at risk compared to the Midwest (34%), South (27%), and West (30%). A higher proportion of Baby Boomers (56 to 74, 40%), seniors (65 years and older, 43%) and retired people (40%) feel at risk compared to younger people. About a quarter (24%) of the adult population say they have elderly parents or friends they are checking on. Most say they are at least somewhat informed about the coronavirus what it is, and how it is transmitted (92% very or somewhat informed, 52% very). Most say they know what to do if they think they may have come into contact with the virus (88% very or somewhat informed, 50% informed).

Further findings suggested that 79% are confident (33% very) that U.S. medical and healthcare facilities will be able to handle an outbreak of the coronavirus up from 75% in two weeks. 70% are confident (27% very) in local schools can handle an outbreak up from 48% in two weeks. 63% are confident (22% very) in businesses to handle an outbreak. 73% of employees are confident (34% very) their employer can handle an outbreak up from 60% in two weeks. Confidence is much greater (81%) among employees who have received information from their employer

Going by APCO World Wide (2020). 9-in-10 of American employees view coronavirus as serious with more than a third (38%) calling it extremely serious and more than a quarter (29%) very serious. Findings equally indicated that employees are worried about getting coronavirus by a 3:2 margin, with (60% worried, 40% not), and a quarter (24%) are extremely worried.

Additionally, some see coronavirus as most serious, indicated with (76% as extremely or very serious), with those in the while others see it as least serious (58% as extremely or very serious). Employees with highest-income earnings consider coronavirus as most serious. This is demonstrative of (83% as extremely or very serious among those with annual earnings of \$150,000 or more); those earning less than \$50,000 are less likely to see COVID-19 as serious (63% as extremely or very serious)APCO World Wide (2020).

Methodology wise, APCO Worldwide (2020) conducted a poll of n=1,000 American adults. The study

is based on a national sample provided by Dynata, balanced by age, gender and region. In terms of information response, most employees' view coronavirus as being serious with a majority worried about contracting the virus a majority of the U.S. public is relying on mainstream national media as a primary source of information about coronavirus, with few turning to the White House or their employers.

### **Conceptual review**

Throughout history, infectious diseases have caused havoc among societies. Emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases are now occurring at unprecedented speed. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the world has witnessed the emergence of several disease outbreaks and epidemics caused by more than 20 infectious agents over the past decade (World Health Organization, 2020). Some of these epidemics were caused by novel infectious agents such as H1N1 and MERS (Balkhair, 2009 and 2013). Over the past two decades, the emergence of coronavirus-associated diseases (SARS and MERS) inflicted global challenges to public health systems. De Wit E, van Doremalen N, Falzarano D, Munster VJ (2016). SARS-CoV-2 (the causative agent for coronavirus disease COVID-19) is the latest addition to this growing list of unwelcomed novel agents.

### **Crisis**

Plainly, a crisis event denotes a state of chaos in the apparently regular evolution of a system. A personal crisis marks a period of disorder that was preceded and afterwards followed by stability. An ecological crisis involves the endangering of the very existence of a population or species by modifying their environment. An economic crisis refers to a decline in an extensive period of growth and development. A political government crisis pertains to a circumstance in which institutions and political elites are at risk of being replaced by another group of actors. Crises are phases of transitions in which the usual ways of functioning do not work anymore (Boin, 2016).

### **Crisis communication**

Crisis communication is defined as the correspondences that take place between the organization and its audience before, during, and after the crisis (Gainey, 2006). As a primary function of crisis management, crisis communication conveys the information relevant to its audience, defines the crisis at hand, and places it in a

context then conveys the organization's stance to its various publics (Cooley, 2011).

Moreover, being essential to an organization's survival, the ability to effectively communicate in the event of a crisis not only enables organizations to recover from its after-effects, the advantage of effective crisis communications also allows for the analysis of various dangers and consequences that can be used to plan and enact future corrective actions (Wekesa, 2013).

As a primary theme of Public Relations, crisis communication is devised with both the avoidance and/or recovery of a crisis as the ultimate objective. It is also the primary means in which organizations are able to manage stakeholder perceptions, thus enabling the defense and preservation its reputation (David, 2013).

### **Internal Communication**

In an organization where the flow of communication is done between or among employees regarding their work shows a form of internal communication has taken place. Internal communication according to Trahan (2008) is operationally stated as the exchange of communication both informal and formal between top hierarchy members and employees within an organization. In other words, it exists between leaders, managers and employees or peer-to-peer, from leader-to-leader or employee-to-employee, for instance. Mainly, the focus of internal communication is geared at connecting employees as well as groups and organization in general to simplify realization of collective interest and unstructured cooperation (De Ridder as cited in Reinout, 2006).

### **Health Communication**

The relationship of communication and health started in the mid-1970s, which resulted into a health communication discipline. To date the field of health communication has been defined with greater emphasis being placed on communication than health. (Finnegan and Viswanath, 1990) attribute this to the fact that it was communication scholars who sought to exercise their expertise in health situations rather than the health experts who sought to illuminate communication effects

Berlin and Donohew (1990) define health communication as the dissemination and interpretation of health-related messages. The disseminator may be an individual, an organization or a mass medium, whereas the interpreter may be an individual, a group and organization, or an indiscriminate mass public. (Finnegan and Viswanath, 1990) notes that health communication is the study of the process by which individuals acquire and convert data about health into meaningful or consumable information, the ends of which are those of adaptation.

## Theoretical review

### The communication–persuasion model (McGuire 1976, 2001)

The communication–persuasion model (McGuire 1976, 2001) is different from other theoretical models in the health field, and its uses are predominately found in the field of advertising. The communication–persuasion model has guided *public health* communication particularly in using mass media (Elder 2001), which makes it different from other health promotion models that traditionally focus on small-scale, at-risk populations. This model has been used in a variety of ways. These include the examination of consumer behaviour in response to messages; for example, Kaphingst (2004) use McGuire's communication–persuasion matrix to help analyze direct-to-consumer television prescription drug adverts. McGuire is responsible for developing both an information–persuasion model (IPM) and the communication–persuasion model. The IPM can be used in conjunction with an information–persuasion matrix (McGuire 2001).

The output variables (or stages) are a sequence of events that, according to McGuire (2001), must take place in an order (1 to 13) to enable the message to have an effect and a change to happen. It is assumed that a person cannot, for example, complete step 6 (acquiring relevant skills) without first completing step. McGuire is proposing that all of these stages must be completed to reach the final stages of 11 (acting on the message) to 12 (post-action cognitive integration of the behaviour) to finally 13 (proselytizing, or advocating, others to behave likewise).

By the persuasion model, employees in this context are able to get exposed by turning to the media for sources of information on Covid-19 prevention and working from home message, paying attention to the messages from different channels and stakeholders, liking and understanding the message concept behind the virus and how to prevent it.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study approached is quantitative. The method use for any scientific work involves its rules of interpretation and criteria for acceptable explanations as well as research designs, data collecting techniques and data processing routines that have been deduced from these rules and criteria. For any work to be scientifically valid it should be based on a strong scientific character of the researcher. It should be noted that for a research work to be scientific, it must make use of a well proven scientific theory to explain social phenomenon Creswell (2014).

## Population of the study

The population of the study is made up of employees' who form the middle management sector of higher institutions in Buea, in the SW Region of Cameroon. These institutions include; University of Buea (UB), Catholic University Institute of Buea (CUIB), Higher Institute of Management Studies (HIMS), AND Higher Institute of Business Management and Technology Buea (HIBMAT). The study was conducted among middle/low level employees in Buea. The categories chosen were thought to be involved in the low level management, decision making and operations of their work places. The study population was 800 employees within the four selected higher institutions of learning individual university sources.

## Area of Study

Gay and Airasian (2003) also offered similar guidelines in their work for selecting sample size in a research study. From the above population of respondents, the researcher consulted the Research Advisors (2006) sample size table when calculating the population to be sampled and finally obtained 396 employees as the one to be sampled out of the above N of 800, thus, going by The Research Advisors (2006) the sample size for a population 800 is 396. The main study area is Buea, South West region of Cameroon with a surface area of about 25 419 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 1 427 076 persons, and six The subdivision as stipulated by Decree No. 008/376 of 12 November 2008, organising the administrative setup.

## Instrument for data collection

In order for us to carry out our indirect observation and get the valid information a questionnaire was formulated with 22 questions which were mostly closed ended and a few opened ended questions on "*Employee Perception on COVID-19 Sources of Information: Case of Higher Institutions of Learning in Buea*". The main tool for this research in terms of instrumentation is the questionnaire within the survey method of data collection and also a primary source of information. It also allowed the researcher to control the answers participants can give for ease of data analysis and coding. Survey methods rely on use of questionnaire as they can be distributed to a wider number of participants to increase the reliability and validity of research findings.

## Study validation

Validity looks at the extent to which a study if carried out

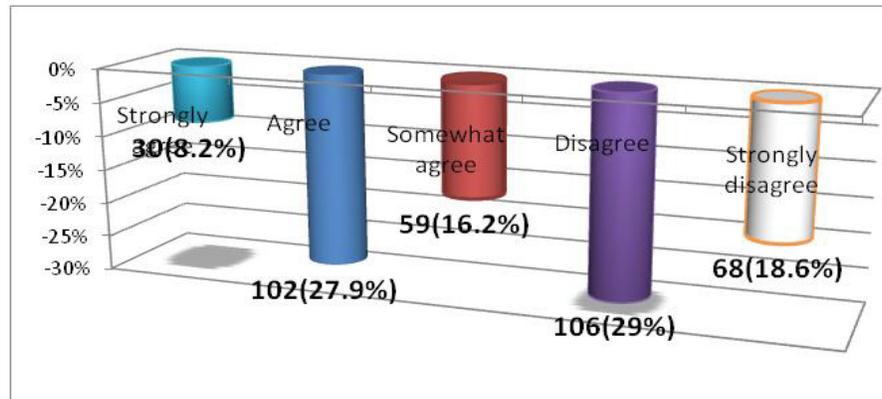


Figure 1. Source: Researcher's field studies (2020)

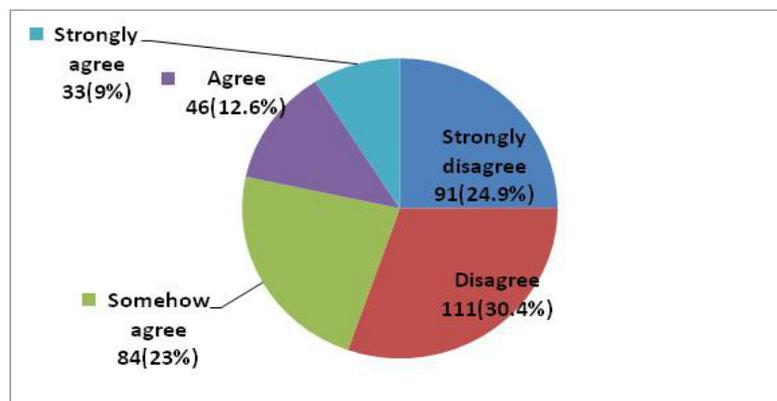


Figure 2. Source: Researcher's field studies (2020)

Table 1. Respondents views on the Chief executive officer as primary Covid-19 communicator

Terms	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	38	10.4%
Disagree	87	23.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	45	12.3%
Agree	59	16.2%
Strongly agree	136	37.3%
Total	365	100.0%

Source: Researcher's Field study (2020)

once more, can obtain the same accurate. The instrument used which was questionnaire can be tested again to obtain similar results. This is so because the sample population represented the population of employees who have an understanding of the subject matter. In other to better understand validity, it is important to get the appropriateness of the data material, tools and selected methods in relation to the study's research questions (Grønmo, 2004). It is important to note that the construct validity of this instrument was determined based on the different three phases on pretesting or pilot testing that was conducted before final data collection.

## FINDINGS

Based on the findings, 106 (29%) disagree and another 68 (18.6%) strongly disagree with the assertion that the coronavirus fears are overblown; 102(27.9%) agree, and 30(8.2%) strongly agree that the coronavirus has been overblown. However, 59(16.2%) of employees somewhat agree that the coronavirus is overblown. Figure 1

Further findings reveals that overall, 11 (130.4%) of employees say they disagree with the fact that they feel at risk for the coronavirus, 91(24.9%) strongly disagree that they feel at risk for the coronavirus. While 84(23%) somehow agree that they feel at risk for the coronavirus,

46(12.6%) of the employees say they agree to the fact that they feel at risk for the virus. This is followed by 33(9%) who strongly agree that they feel at risk for the virus. This is illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 1.

Analysis reveals that 38(10.4%) of employees strongly disagree that the primary communicator about COVID-19 within an institution is the chief executive officer, with 87 (23.8%) disagreeing to that respect, that the primary communicator about COVID-19 within an institution is the chief executive officer. On a neutral note, 45(12.3%) neither agree nor disagree that the primary communicator about COVID-19 within an institution is the chief executive officer. At the level of agreement, 59(16.2%) of employees, as well as 136(37.3%) agree and disagree correspondingly that the primary communicator about COVID-19 within the institution is the chief executive officer.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Employee perceptions about COVID-19

In this study, the researcher equally set to map out the perceptions employees have about and model risk perception of COVID-19 as a new pandemic. This is because across the world, they have been diverse reactions as to the extent to which the pandemic has been blown out. Consistent with the literature in the domain of employee perception on the coronavirus, findings share a contrasting yet overlapping view about the virus. According to findings from the study, a majority of the respondents feel that the coronavirus pandemic has not been overblown.

However, the findings tally with literature and the work of Shandwick and KRC Research (2020), whose findings revealed that more than half of employees agree coronavirus fears, are overblown as many are more likely to feel fears are overblown.

Where there is a sharp contrast between the results of this study and that of (Shandwick and KRC Research, 2020) is that majority of respondents in this study hold that they do not feel at risk in contracting the virus. This is sharply contrasted with their study which shows overall, a majority of people say they feel at risk for the coronavirus. This to them constitutes a higher proportion of people living in urban and suburban area who level feel at risk of contracting the virus.

The findings equally share similarities with the outcomes of APCO World Wide (2020) as identified in a review of. 9-in-10 of employees sampled view coronavirus as serious with more than a third calling it extremely serious and more than a quarter very serious. Findings equally indicated that employees are worried about getting coronavirus than the findings of this study.

Furthermore, the study's findings tally with their study as majority see coronavirus as most serious; the others

see it as least serious. Just like the outcome of this study on employee perception of Covid-19 and employer response, terms of information response, and some employees' view coronavirus as being serious with some worried about contracting the virus.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has largely been based on perceptions of the employees and at times has tried to tie a knot between perceptions and the real-life situation with the outbreak of the pandemic. To a certain extent invaluable insight has been provided on different aspects of employee perceptions by identifying various associated components that determine perception. There have been some interesting results that the outcome of the findings have brought out in the results section, some expected and some unexpected.

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