

COVID-19 Communication in Small Liberal Arts Colleges in the Southeast

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1. Introduction

As COVID-19 continues to impact educational institutions, communication, related to the pandemic and the subsequent vaccine, has been crucial to maintain students and staff healthy and safe (Johnson, 2021). Choosing what platforms to employ communication has been a challenge for various institutions (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). The most crucial elements in keeping their publics informed have been to employ quick and accurate information as it is received (Johnson, 2021). This has been done through several outlets. Many include the university's own resources but many have also been through social media platforms, specifically, Instagram (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). This platform has been chosen by various institutions to provide information to its students and staff (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). Instagram is one of the most popular choices of social media as a communication platform (Pew Research Center et al., 2021).

Universities should make the commitment to communicate clearly and in a timely manner, says Johnson (2021). The students' stress and anxiety are alleviated by concise messages, which are considerate of their time and requirements (Johnson, 2021).

2. Rationale/Literature Review

2.1. Colleges and social media

Most college students use Instagram as their main tool to connect with other people (Knight-McCord et al., n.d.). The second most popular social media among college students are Snapchat and Facebook (Knight-McCord et al., n.d.). College students prefer Instagram because it allows them to post and see photos and videos (Knight-McCord et al., n.d.). In general, they don't prioritize social media platforms which may help develop their professional network, such as the platform, LinkedIn (Knight-McCord et al., n.d.). Instagram

targets a young and diverse audience (Salomon, 2017). Furthermore, the audience of Instagram allows the platform to be an asset for colleges (Salomon, 2017). The use of Instagram by colleges can be an effective means to reach their undergraduate students. Undergraduate students are very impacted when their colleges post photos and post about topics that raise their attention (Salomon, 2017). This knowledge can be used in classes and by colleges in order to communicate more effectively and encourage further interactions between the faculty, the staff and the students (Knight-McCord et al., n.d.).

For example, using social media is useful for college libraries (Burkhardt, 2017). It is a means to provide information about the library and to encourage interaction with the students (Burkhardt, 2017). Effective communication in libraries' social media includes a link to the website of the college, some information about the community, some feedback, and answers to the commentaries. Maintaining constant communication is important, the relationship between the owner of the account and the follower should be seen as a friendship (Burkhardt, 2017).

Social media is a part of most college students' routines. In fact, only 11 percent of college students had never used social media in 2008 (Lewis, 2009). Thus, being present on social media is very important for college students as well as the students who turn toward social media as their first means of getting the news. Those individuals tend to be very receptive to social media as a communication tool (Lewis, 2009). Colleges use social media for different purposes, for example, they use it to recruit their potential new students (Lewis, 2009). Social media has a real impact on college student life as students have a positive perception about social media. Platforms have improved engagement and

collaboration between the students, but also between the students and their professors and the campus's staff (Mbodila, 2014).

2.2 Colleges' utilization of social media for communicating health information to students

Examining the true effectiveness of social media on communication, a study by Prybutok & Ryan (2015) found that 18- to 30-year-old college students have social health information source preferences, reasons for seeking health information on the Internet, and message design factors that improve their perception of site and message credibility. The preference to find health information through social media sites can be utilized by health educators to present important risk management/disease prevention information to college students. Not only do college students prefer a social media interface, social media is advocated as a prime channel through which to reach this population with health-related messaging (Shi, Poorisat, & Salmon, 2018). Educational institutions, with an understanding of student's habits, may find social media to be a beneficial medium for health-related messages (Paige et al., 2017). According to Waters et al. (2011), colleges, specifically campus health centers, have begun to utilize social media for health communication, for initiatives such as alcohol use, widespread pandemics, and wellness practices. Health risk communication and social media use were important in determining psychological symptoms, especially health anxiety in college-aged students (Li et al., 2020). Paige et al. (2017) points out that college students tend to depend on social media platforms, specifically Instagram, for all their health information. Those with lower electronic health literacy, or the ability to understand health information disseminated through technology, are more likely to utilize social media for their health information (Paige et al., 2017). According to a study done by Waters et al. (2011), Facebook is found to be used in correlation with campus

websites to provide college-specific health news as well as external resources, such as news reports. About half of these health messages on Facebook include timely materials and an identification of a mission and audience (Waters et al., 2011). While most campuses provide information on their upcoming events (Waters et al., 2011). Additionally, an experimental study conducted by Arceneaux and Dinu (2018) showed that college students' information retention is greater on the visual platform, Instagram, rather than the text-based platform, Twitter.

2.3 Use of Instagram

With roughly one billion monthly active users, Instagram belongs to the most popular social networks worldwide. The social photo sharing app is especially popular in India and in the United States (Statista, 2021). Instagram is the fastest growing social media network globally (Sheldon, 2016). The younger generation actively uses Instagram due to its attractive and enhanced visual functions (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). These visual features allow Instagram users to share, view, and comment on photos, videos, and stories; publish their daily lives, memories, and emotional status as visuals or in texts; make a friend or continue existing relationships; and interact with the other people from all around the world (Lee et al., 2015; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). Though the social network is based in visual elements, it encompasses the centrality and specificity of its visual identity in shaping the platform's culture and functionality (Leaver, 2020). Instagram sets a tone for cultural practices, norms and genres in society (Leaver, 2020). Instagram creates a culture with the rule of pictures first, texts second which makes it unique (Lee et al., 2015) Instagram is now being used for more purposes and communication, whether commercial or social, has developed to be personal and intimate for the user (Leaver, 2020).

3. Research Questions

RQ 1: Did colleges use Instagram to communicate COVID-19 information?

- a. Did the posts feature keywords related to COVID-19 and the vaccine in the caption?
- b. Did the colleges use static images to communicate COVID-19 information?
 - i. Did these static images feature real elements?
 - ii. Did these static images feature digitally developed elements?
 - iii. Did these static images include information related to preventative measures regarding COVID-19?
- c. Did the colleges use video to communicate COVID-19 information ?
 - i. Did these videos feature real elements?
 - ii. Did these videos feature digitally developed elements?
 - iii. Did these videos include information related to preventative measures regarding COVID-19?
- d. Did the colleges use a combination of both video and static image to communicate COVID-19 information?
 - i. Did the video and static image combination post feature real elements?
 - ii. Did the video and static image combination post feature digitally developed elements?
 - iii. Did the video and static image combination post include information related to preventative measures regarding COVID-19?

4. Methods

Participants

We used random sampling to determine which colleges to include in the scope of our study in relation to the total number of small, liberal colleges in the Southeast United States. After the division of the total number of colleges, we developed inclusion and exclusion criteria. This was done by searching for the “Official” page of the institution and an official link to their Instagram accounts. From this process, a total of 16 liberal arts colleges were examined.

Measures

After establishing the scope of our study, we then evenly divided the colleges between group members. Each conductor of the study had three specific colleges assigned to them to be able to more specifically track social media postings of each organization. Each respective college post was screenshotted by assigned members and uploaded into labeled folders to ensure organization from August 8th, 2021 to November 25th, 2021. As group members continued to monitor postings from participant colleges, we began developing a codebook to provide a stable frame for dynamic analysis of contextual data and to create explicit guidelines for quantitative data analysis (MacQueen, McLellan, 1998). We continued to refine existing codes to build a cohesive codebook.

Data Analysis

The development of a comprehensive codebook guide was then adapted to the online Qualtrics program to effectively examine uploaded posts. As researchers identify all posts uploaded, the codebook itself will ensure consistency and accuracy, while also allowing unique perspectives for the team-based quantitative analysis of data (Fonteyn et al., 2008). This set of codes with definitions of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied to each individual post for content analysis and sorted to come to a final consensus.

Link to drive:

[COM 403 PR Research](#)

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Codebook

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Content Codebook: Covid-19 Vaccine Communication on Small Liberal Arts Colleges in the Southeast

Category	Code	Operational Definition
Code Information	Covid-19 vaccine related post	If the post includes information regarding the Covid-19 vaccine, INCLUDE.
	Non Covid-19 vaccine related post	If the post does not include information regarding the Covid-19 vaccine, EXCLUDE.
Caption of the post: Includes the text under the post.	Related to the vaccine	Mark YES if the word "vaccine" is written in the caption of the post.
	Related to the symptoms	Mark YES if information relating to Covid-19 "symptoms " is written in this post. This information must include symptoms such as fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headaches, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea.
	Related to an incentive for receiving the Covid-19 vaccines	Mark YES if the post includes an incentive for students who receive the vaccine. This information must include monetary incentives, food incentives, or gift card incentives.
	Link directing to another source	Mark YES if the post includes a link to a third-party source for more information on the

		vaccine. This must include links to the following medical organizations CDC, WHO, FDA, or the college's COVID database.
	Link to get the vaccine	Mark YES if the post includes a link to make an appointment to get the Covid-19 vaccine.
Hashtags: Includes the hashtags in the text of the post.	Covid-19 Vaccine Related Hashtag	Mark YES if the post includes hashtags relating to the Covid-19 vaccine. This must include the words vaccine, vaccination, Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson and Johnson, shot, immune, or immunization.
Mandates	Covid-19 Vaccination Mandate	Mark YES if the post includes a requirement for students to receive the Covid-19 vaccination in order to attend classes on campus.
	Covid-19 Mask Mandate	Mark YES if the post includes a mask requirement for students who are not vaccinated against Covid-19.
Static image: Illustration	Illustrations	Mark YES if the image includes an illustration. This information includes illustrated images, digital graphics, emojis or cartoons.
	Infographics	Mark YES if the image includes an infographics. This must include information on vaccine information, symptoms, incentives, or vaccine mandates.
	Masks	Mark YES if the people in the illustration are wearing a mask.

	Vaccination	Mark YES if the image displays a person receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. This must only include students, faculty or staff.
	Medical Staff	Mark YES if the image includes medical staff, this includes a doctor or nurse.
Static image: Real	Real people in a real environment	Mark YES if the image includes real people in a real environment. This must include students, faculty or staff.
	Real people cropped on a fake background	Mark YES if the image includes a real individual digitally cropped on a fake background.
	On-campus	Mark YES if the image is taken in a college campus environment. This must only include a classroom, dining hall, gym, bookstore, dorms, or library.
	Masks	Mark YES if the people in the real world environment are wearing a mask.
	Vaccination	Mark YES if the image displays a person receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. This must include students, faculty or staff.
	Medical Staff	Mark YES if the image includes medical staff, such as a doctor or a nurse.
Video: Includes moving visual images or sound (music or people speaking).	Illustrations	Mark YES if the video includes an illustration. This information might include emojis, cartoons, and digital graphics.
	Infographics	Mark YES if the video

		includes an infographics. This information might include emojis, cartoons, and digital graphics. This can include information on vaccine information, symptoms, incentives, or vaccine mandates.
	Real people	Mark YES if the video includes real people in a real environment. This must include students, faculty or staff.
	On-campus	Mark YES if the video is taken in a college campus environment. This must only include a classroom, dining hall, gym, bookstore, dorms, library.
	Masks	Mark YES if the people in the video are wearing a mask.
	Vaccination	Mark YES if the video displays a person receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. This must include students, faculty or staff.
	Medical Staff	Mark YES if the video includes medical staff this includes a doctor or a nurse.
	Voice Over	Mark YES if the video includes a voice over. This can include descriptive information regarding Covid-19 vaccines.
	Narration	Mark YES if the video includes a narration of the events taking place in the video. This can include narration regarding the Covid-19 vaccine information.

	Direct speaker	Mark YES if the video includes a direct speaker. This must include an individual being interviewed or a scripted speech.
Mix of static images (includes real elements or illustrations) and videos (includes moving visual images or sound such as music or people speaking)	Illustrations	Mark YES if the post includes an illustration. This information can include emojis or cartoons.
	Infographics	Mark YES if the post includes an infographics. This information might include emojis or cartoons. This must only include information on vaccine information, symptoms, incentives, or vaccine mandates.
	Real people	Mark YES if the post includes real people in a real environment. This must include students, faculty or staff.
	On-campus	Mark YES if the post is taken in a college campus environment. This must only include a classroom, dining hall, gym, bookstore, dorms, library.
	Masks	Mark YES if the people in the post are wearing a mask.
	Vaccination	Mark YES if the post displays a person receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. This must include students, faculty or staff.
	Medical Staff	Mark YES if the post includes medical staff this includes a doctor or a nurse.

	Voice Over	Mark YES if the post includes a voice over.
	Direct speaker	Mark YES if the post includes a direct speaker. This must include an individual being interviewed or speaking from a scripted speech.

Link to Qualtrics Survey: https://flagler.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0kvnbcGgBJzk5o2
https://flagler.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0kvnbcGgBJzk5o2