

# Digital Communication in Sport Sector: A Brief Analysis of the Pandemic Crisis Period

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the general behaviour of the society regarding leisure and entrainment in social media. The pandemic had huge impact in the world of marketing and communications. Starting from the social distance to the lockdown period, the society converted their actions to access and consume content from the different social media channels. Some marketing practitioners argue that making money is critical right now whereas others strongly believe the opposite. The strength of digital and social media communication in times of crisis has been proven in the past and it has been proven during this pandemic as well. During this pandemic we have witnessed similar communication practices that are adapted by the global companies. It became evident that brands must make tough choices affecting customers and develop the right message through right channel while ensuring the honesty and trust in their campaigns. With the uncertainty of next quarter or even next months, brands have had to adjust their marketing budget drastically. Whatever they have planned in the beginning of 2020 was no longer applicable and it leads to quick and sweet adoption of new realities in their communication strategies. Being transparent, supporting local communities and overall focusing on brand awareness rather than product push have been the common practices amongst brands. In addition to successful communication practices, we have also witnessed common pitfalls such as brands communicating the same message without giving any solutions to their customers when it comes to products or services adoption. This research aim to analyze the digital communication strategies adopted in crisis during pandemic period.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, COVID-19, sports marketing, sport communication

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 became a true unknown to be explored in each and every single field of study, marketing and communication being one of them. Being the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two, its implications on any sector was unpredictable (Guterres, 2020). Unpredictable changes to our day-to-day lives, and businesses everywhere are understandably worried about the impact it will have on them. Any marketer or content strategies that has developed a COVID-19 campaign realised this for the first time. There was no past behavior or pattern to analyze, no data available, only predictions and hopes remained to survive the crisis. Therefore, we decided to take analyze the communications that took place in the past, during and post COVID-19 and give recommendations for the post-pandemic era. It is important to synthesize the theories of online crisis management for digital communication and strategies and to identify the patterns used by brands have used in their communications during COVID-19. The aim of this paper is to analyse to answer the following research questions: “How digital communication has showed itself in in the during the COVID-19 crisis? How companies have adopted their communication strategies during crisis? Is there a correlation between the buyer persona and social media engagement during crisis communication? If yes, how to propose a better framework for personas that differ from each other?”

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Digital Communication during COVID-19 Crisis

*“Media and communications are changing rapidly and their transformation is having a momentous impact on the abilities of individuals to communicate and how society communicates within itself. Such changes are important because media convey ideas, opinions, information, social values, experiences, and entertainment and those are influenced by social, economic, and political forces in society. The changing nature of communication is especially important because media and communication platforms are increasingly the primary location in which contemporary identity, culture, and values and norms are manifest and contested.” (Picard, 2016)*

According to a study of the role of social media in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, researcher, Jevin West - Associate Professor at the Information School, University of Washington - stated that not only are people dealing with repercussions of this pandemic, but they are simultaneously dealing with additional effects of the “information virus.” This is a direct result of social media progressing into a key source for mass communication regarding the pandemic (Dixit, 2020). This indicates that social media has become a reliable source of information for the public, especially during the lockdown period. The research states that social media has transformed journalism practices, especially after the rise of real-time engagement with audiences. However, reports have also indicated an abundance of misinformation about the pandemic on social media platforms. Some media reports revealed that misinformation spread as rumors of possible cures, only fueled panic in society (Dixit, 2020). As a result, there has been a significant increase in the volume of two-way social media communications, that include users as media prosumers.

In the study of Social Networks’ Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain: Health Media vs. Healthcare Professionals (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020), participants are considered equals in digital media, due to the development of interlinked conversations on a global scale, that also acknowledges the importance of these digital Agoras. In addition, studies have shown a strengthened number of participation from the younger generations, due to their increased consumption of social media (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). One of the most prominent issues around social media is engagement, which is considered as the act that brings about a new communication path in the transient role of the producer-consumer and the medium-audience roles (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020). Therefore, it also expanded accessibility to a more diverse and proactive audience.

In contrast, a study on the impact of digital surge during COVID-19 pandemic (De’ et al., 2020) brought forth an opposing effect that resulted from the rise of digital platforms. For countries and communities that have limited to no access to the Internet, let alone social media platforms, the pandemic has created a further divide between them and the developed world. These individuals now experience total exclusion at a time where social and physical distancing have become the new norm, leaving them more isolated than before. Whether this exclusion is the result of inaccessibility to devices, Internet, access skills or uncontrollable factors such as government ordered Internet shutdown it highlights the need for ensuring connectivity in a landscape where COVID-19 has transformed internet access into a necessity for survival. According to Digital inequality research suggests that people vary in their quality of Internet access and skills, which then may influence the benefits they can reap from communication technologies (De’ et al., 2020).

According to an online survey on the Impact of Online Advertising on Generation Y’s Purchase Decision, consumer behavior findings have shown that 51% of responders acknowledge the importance of online ads, but are primarily driven by their need of esteem and self-acceptance, which is evident in the way they mainly utilize the Internet to obtain information and news (pursuit of knowledge). In contrast, for their secondary need for peer acceptance, they are not easily susceptible to being persuaded to purchase from ads. However, they do socialize over the internet, therefore making it their preferred medium to receive ads. This indicates that online advertisements do not directly affect purchasing decision, but are considered more effective as credible sources of digital information. (Tang & Chan, 2017).

To further explore this notion, the study was also supported by The Media Ecology Theory proposed by Marshall McLuhan. His renowned theory claims that people’s lives will be impacted by modern technology, and it will also constantly change due to the evolution of media. Additionally, this would ultimately influence the future of communication media as many industries transform their own communication platforms to more advanced forms, such as video conferencing, to adapt to the new era where new media has turned its users into consumers and producers (McLuhan & Powers, 1989). This change requires PR practitioners to be capable of engaging with their audience effectively, by controlling the flow of communication, especially with regards to social media platforms that have become the primary online source for information – consequently creating a two-way communication

process - compared to the traditional news source (Tang & Chan, 2016).

### *2.2 Elements of Online Crisis Communication*

According to Hoekstra (2020), in order for a potential problem to be considered as “crisis” there are 3 conditions:

- The problem must pose a threat to the company.
- There must be an element of shock or surprise – what happened wasn’t expected.
- The issue forces the business to make a fast and (hopefully) effective decision. (Hoekstra, 2020).

If we look at the COVID-19 crisis, we could see that many companies were indeed were faced with a global crisis. Many company faced closure or heavy economic losses which is a threat to all the companies. It caught whole world as a shock as nobody was expecting this crisis and the businesses were forced to take fast and effective decisions. Communicating with clarity, speed, and being able to ensure the effectiveness of their reach, targeting and receipt of critical messages is paramount in a crisis. During the crisis, with so much misinformation, companies and leaders needed to be reliable and credible in sharing information and answering questions. (Mendy et.al, 2020) Taylor and Kent’s (2007) research finds that having a crisis web sites is a best practice for using an Internet during a crisis. It is crucially important that the site to be designed prior to the crisis. This requires the crisis team to anticipate the types of crises an organization will face and the types of information needed for the web site. According to the PWC Global Crisis Survey 2021 report which included more than 2,800 business leaders shared company data and personal insights on the impact of the crisis, 95% of the respondents said they need to improve their crisis management capabilities. (PWC Global Survey, 2021). The companies were not ready with their communication plans and therefore we have seen common pitfalls which will be discussed later on the paper.

It is important to look at the different online crisis communication theories. Situational Crisis Communication Theory(SSCT) aims to protect stakeholders by providing instructing information for physical coping and adjusting information for psychological coping. After mending the reputation through deny, diminish, rebuild, and/or reinforce strategies reflecting varying levels of accommodation (Coombs, 2012).The SSCT does not limit the communication to online therefore it is necessary to look at the Social Mediated Crisis Communication Model(SMCC) and the Networked Crisis Communication Model(NCC) (Fearn-Banks, 2002 & Utz, et.al, 2013). Both theories attempt to comprehensively incorporate social media and that potentially may provide image making, complexity understanding, and resilience generating insights. SMCC and NCC is highly used by others in the field as the vast amount of information created in social media potentially creates a threat for companies and their reputation (Jin & Liu, 2010).

After defining the crisis the company, organization or brand need to think about the solutions. Argenti identifies the key pillars of communicating online during a crisis as being early, timely, being honest, open to conversation, open to maintain credibility, being empathetic, understand their anxiety and being transparent(Argenti, 2020). But should the companies wait until the crisis comes and then handle or can they use other tools to understand the sentiment of their consumers? In this case we can use social listening to be proactive. Social listening is the proactive process of monitoring what is being said about a brand on the Internet, particularly on social media and online communities. (Stewart et. Al, 2018). It often involves social media monitoring software to filter massive amounts of unstructured data from social conversations into usable customer intelligence information. Big-data analytics are often used for the purpose of social listening.

Brand communication strategies, along with other theories that have the common underlying theme of consumers being motivated by fulfilling a specific need. For instance, purchase decision making theory, and the media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). According to an online survey on the Impact of Online Advertising on Generation Y’s Purchase Decision, consumer behavior findings have shown that 51% of responders acknowledge the importance of online ads, but are primarily driven by their need of esteem and self-acceptance, which is evident in the way they mainly utilize the Internet to obtain information and news (pursuit of knowledge). In contrast, for their secondary need for peer acceptance, they are not easily susceptible to being persuaded to purchase from ads. However, they do socialize over the internet, therefore making it their preferred medium to receive ads. This indicates that online advertisements do not directly affect purchasing decision, but are considered more effective as credible sources of digital information (Tang & Chan, 2017). To further explore this notion, the study was also supported by The Media Ecology Theory proposed by Marshall McLuhan. His renowned theory claims that people’s lives will be impacted by modern technology, and it will also constantly change due to the evolution of media. Additionally, this would ultimately influence the future of communication media as many industries transform their own communication platforms to more advanced forms, such as video conferencing, to adapt to the new era where new media has turned its users into consumers and producers (McLuhan & Powers,

1989). This change requires PR practitioners to be capable of engaging with their audience effectively, by controlling the flow of communication, especially with regards to social media platforms that have become the primary online source for information – consequently creating a two-way communication process - compared to the traditional news source (Tang & Chan, 2016).

With the intention of evaluating the effectiveness of communication, specifically in advertising, authors Shelly and Esther sought out individual definitions of ‘digital engagement’ to detect underlying themes and differences. The aim of their research was to investigate this unique sub topic to establish a better understanding of consumers’ digital engagement with advertising using branded content. In the digital marketing field, engagement is measured differently. Another point of view regards engagement as a concept of behavior that requires more effort such as the act of responding online to a brand message. Therefore, this form of engagement is considered to have a greater impact on subsequent processes such as purchasing decision.

### 3. Data Analysis

A qualitative approach of data gathering, and analysis is used as well as qualitative content analysis to evaluate the selected advertisements. Researchers use content analysis to find out about the purposes, messages, and effects of communication content. They can also make inferences about the producers and audience of the texts they analyze. Content analysis can be used to quantify the occurrence of certain words, phrases, subjects or concepts in a set of historical or contemporary time. Other benefits of using this methodology include unobtrusive data collection where one can analyze communication and social interaction without the direct involvement of participants, as a researcher the presence doesn’t influence the results. When done well, content analysis follows a systematic procedure that can easily be replicated by other researchers, yielding results with high reliability (Mayring, 2015). This method is widely used in studies characterized by emotions, feelings, perceptions, opinions, marked by the proliferation of technology, namely the internet (Carneiro, 2014). For the purpose of our study it was opted SocialBakers as a way of collection of social media content. Some selected posts that were subject to our analysis are shown in Fig 1 and 2.

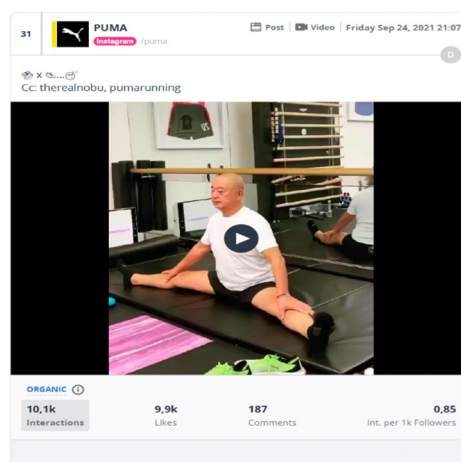


Figure 1. Puma Instagram Post- Source: Social Bakers

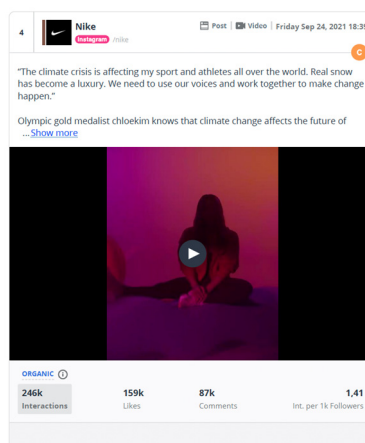


Figure 2. Nike Instagram Post- Source: Social Bakers

Our analysis yielded three main themes that were adopted by sport brands during pandemic:

1. Promotion of Safe Practices through #StayHome Content: During the pandemic sport brands as well as other brands emphasized the efficacy of encouraging safety measures through the dissemination of #stayhome content. The role of such content in fostering compliance with health guidelines among online communities. This approach resonated particularly well with engaging with Generations Y and Z during crisis situations.

2. Engagement through Non-Branded Content: We also have witnessed the effectiveness of non-branded content in maintaining audience engagement. This strategy aligns with common findings that emotional and value-driven content tends to generate higher levels of user interaction. Brands' ability to connect with their target audience through shared experiences and societal concerns contributed to brand-consumer relationships during times of crisis.

3. Integration of Product-Related Content into Messaging: Another common approach was incorporating product-related content into crisis communication. Brands that adeptly interweave their offerings into messages without appearing overtly promotional have been found to achieved greater success in retaining audience interest.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that while Generations Y and Z have historically constituted the primary user base, the emergence of a new user segment—Generation X—has been identified, as supported by recent data from Statista Table 1. This demographic shift underscores the evolving dynamics of digital communication during the pandemic.

Table 1. Changing media consumption by generations during pandemic

Change	Gen Z	Gen Y	Gen X
Spending longer on messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, etc)	62%	45%	40%
Spending longer on messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, etc)	58%	48%	46%
Watching more shows/films on streaming services (e.g. Netflix)	58%	58%	43%
Listening to more streaming services (e.g. Apple Music, Spotify etc)	57%	39%	25%

It is evident that brands adopting a modest approach to highlighting their contributions have garnered favorable recognition. The example of LVMH exemplifies the positive reception garnered by brands that prioritize community support without overtly boasting about their assistance. This subtle yet impactful approach underscores the evolving expectations of consumers and marketers in crisis scenarios. The journey of digital communication has been irrevocably altered by the pandemic. It has transcended its status as a discretionary tool, becoming an essential part of modern life. Furthermore, remote work arrangements are here to stay as we have seen and thereby creating a wider range of understanding digital Communication during crisis.

#### 4. Discussion

Although the buyer persona and the user persona seem the same in their essence, they have different meanings. Brands need to understand the problems and pain points of these two important personas before they produce any content that will be published during a crisis situation. Depending on the solutions offered by a brand, it is very important to understand and examine the characteristics of the user or buyer persona. It is necessary to examine and analyze the predictions that could potentially affect the development of the buyer persona. In the process of shaping user personalities, the focus towards a set of attributes that encompass skill sets, technological preferences, and previous experience should be taken into account. These aspects are often instrumental and capable of bringing about a shift in one's perception of the product or service.

Reinecke emphasizes the importance of deep and comprehensive research in understanding user characteristics and preferences (Reinecke, 2011). This methodological approach provides an in-depth understanding of users' motivations, pain points, and interaction patterns, thereby shaping user personalities. However, situations may arise where this approach is not feasible, such as during a crisis communication. In such cases, the importance of

personnel interacting with end users directly becomes crucial. The insights and interactions these personnel contribute to the user profile (Ronning, 2019).

As we know, big data is becoming indispensable to consolidate these efforts that define personality. Synthesis of relevant information from various sources such as customer support logs, web analytics, and user reviews is becoming more and more critical. These data stores offer a panoramic view that facilitates a comprehensive understanding of user behaviors and emotions (Harrison and Thomas, 2009). In order to strategize these efforts brands should look at the common characteristics of each potential customer group that is interacting with them. These common tendencies serve as the foundation on which later on contributes to the buyer personas. It is recommended to limit the number of these personas to a maximum of two, as the redundancy of segments can potentially cause complexities in later stages (Smith et al., 2018). Within the scope of buyer persona development, Brands must look at different set of qualities to ensure inclusion of each group. These not only encompass demographic aspects such as gender, age, location, marital status, and family structure, but also expand to include aspirations, necessities, impulses, frustrations, idiosyncrasies of attitudes, and prevailing purchasing barriers (Lee et al., 2019).

The creation of personas goes beyond simply putting together features. It also requires of plausible scenarios from each person's point of view. In a strategic attempt, solutions or journey maps must be expressed in response to these hypothetical situations. These scenarios should be also prepared in cases of crisis situations. (Wilson et al., 2017). The key aspect of this person-based approach lies in distinguishing the segments best suited to conversions. There should be a selective focus on an audience characterized by high profitability and a consequent acquisition cost (Zhou et al., 2022). Obtaining relevant data is of great importance in the production of crisis content for sports brands. This includes collation of generated leads, conversion examples, and acquired lead list (Rai et al., 2021).

After determining the buyer personas brands can follow two different methods for strategic positioning. At first, category-based positioning requires a rigorous assessment of the competitive environment against current market offerings. Secondly, consumer-based positioning requires positioning of one's product proposition against the background of the target demographic's behavioral patterns (Keller, 2013). Defining the decision criteria that shape the purchasing decisions in the sport sector is very important. Therefore, the next step in strategy making involves ranking both its own product and its competitors by these criteria. This hierarchical evaluation results in the creation of the Unique Selling Proposition (USP), which is inherently derived from these distinctive aspects. All public relations efforts should originate from this USP perspectives thereby ensuring consistent interaction (Kotler, 2020).

Leveraging the potential of Growth SEO, supported by the differentiation of keyword planning and content production comes as an important strategy too. In addition to SEO, a comprehensive Search Engine Marketing (SEM) initiative that includes focused advertising campaigns, thorough testing, and careful monitoring is crucial to strategic advantage. (Rust et al., 2021). Spreading insightful content through blogging and strategic announcement across various technological platforms increases reach (Kumar et al., 2021). Leveraging newsletters and email marketing to disseminate prominent product updates and event notifications is emerging as a powerful communication tool (Ahmad et al., 2022). Opinion leadership development is mobilized through the construction of thought-provoking writing by opinion leaders and their strategic dissemination through a variety of channels (Phelps et al., 2004). Increasing the digital footprint requires a concerted effort in the social media space, covering both organic and paid channels (Malthouse et al., 2013). Strategically deploying opinion posts, guest posts, and curated content on professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn is important in increasing thought leadership (Majchrzak et al., 2018).

A comprehensive review of the target audience requires a thorough analysis of your current customer base and illuminates their behavioral trends in product usage. A panoramic description of the target demographic together with systematic evaluation of less favorable segments, turns out to be a crucial aspect to distinguish. This analysis has implications for strategic efforts by informing about reasonable choices regarding resource allocation and go-to-market strategies (Wang et al., 2020). After a database of actionable insights is created by enriched by data processing and analytics, brands can be ready to implement marketing initiatives. Such insights go beyond mere accumulation of data and ultimately encompasses inclusive marketing efforts. (Riegger et al., 2021). Bettiol et. defends an expanded portfolio of segments is on the rise as a strategic compass that supports user-orientation, guiding the trajectory of future content derivatives. (Bettiol et al., 2017). These efforts should be supported simultaneously by a public relations (PR) campaign revolving around these identified personalities. This multifaceted campaign combines brand identity, distinctive voice, and strategically resonant message columns to create brand prominence and resonance (Chernev, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

Sport brands have been at the center of the discussion during the pandemic period when it came to marketing and content creation. Due to their nature of solutions offered outside they needed to get out of the box to keep their customers' attention. While we admit that this crisis seemed behind, it might not be the last one that the brands will need to embrace. Therefore, understanding the users and the buyer personas for each segment is very important while communicating during a crisis situation just like we faced 2 years back. These efforts should also need to be backed with the digital marketing efforts such as Growth SEO and SEM as we have seen their circularity during the pandemic communication.

In the end, it is important to organize targeted campaigns that are strategically fixed with the Unique Selling Proposition (USP). A strong web and social media presence backed by a solid Search Engine Marketing (SEM) strategies that include keyword optimization and AdWords distribution drives digital reach (Jansen et al., 2017). Alternatively, a task objective approach based on predefined campaign objectives provides a reasonable framework for resource allocation and strategy execution (Chandon et al., 2016). The strategic deployment of these initiatives, when optimally timed, promotes a smooth transition and strategically advances the brands (Rahmen et al., 2022).

As we have seen during the pandemic many sport brands have embraced a reactive approach to social media communication. Big brands such as Adidas, Nike and Under Armour followed each other's steps in content creation during the pandemic. However, the reasoning with the online communities have differed from brand to brand. Brands that had a in-house social media crisis management teams were the ones who could implement day to day content management. Therefore, moving forward it is crucial for each brand whether it is sport or other to have a ready crisis management communication plan. And not just for one scenario or one country, but across multiple scenarios and multiple countries. Only by doing so, they can have advantage of smooth communication across all digital channels.

### Authors contributions

Dr. Mônica Machado and Dr. Leonardo Jose Mataruna-Dos-Santos were responsible for study design and revising. Dr. Asli Cazorla Milla was responsible for data collection, draft of the manuscript and data analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors contributed equally to the study.

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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