

POLITICIANS AND ECONOMIC POLICY DURING THE PANDEMIC: EVIDENCE FROM EMERGING AND DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Our study explores economic policy communication in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the major role of Twitter in information dissemination, tweets are used as a proxy for examining politicians' crisis communication strategies in five countries, Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, and Singapore. By using a systematic content analysis approach, the study examined the degree to which the SCCT and IRT models can be applied to the political realm. We found two strategies emerge, bolstering and mortification, as the most frequently used by politicians. Further, new strategies, information provision and cohesion, as well as new categories, morale boosting, political positioning, and cross border cooperation surfaced, which further expanded on the SCCT and IRT model in explaining political crisis communication. As this study explored the role of context and situational factors that determine specific strategies, our findings demonstrate no substantial differences among developed and emerging countries in this regard. Notably, the use of a combination of bolstering, mortification, and cohesion strategies can be critical for politicians' career, as they may restore politicians' reputations, reinforce their political presentations, and foster public trust.

Keywords: *political crisis communication, crisis communication strategy, politicians, economic policy, social media*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the study of Crisis Communication Strategies (CCS) has been expanding.¹ Scholars have been intrigued with how CCS play a central role in affecting perceived credibility and reputation of organizations

¹ Jeffrey L. Bradford., and Dennis E. Garrett, "The Effectiveness of Corporate Communicative Responses to Accusations of Unethical Behavior," *Journal of business ethics* 14, no. 11 (1995): 875-892; W. Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*, n.p.: Sage Publications, 2021; Chang-Dae Ham, and Jeesun Kim, "The Role of CSR in Crises: Integration of Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model," *Journal of Business Ethics* 158, no. 2 (2019): 353-372; Bowen Zheng, Liu, and Robert M. Davison, "Exploring the Relationship between Corporate Reputation and the Public's Crisis Communication on Social Media," *Public Relations Review* 44, no. 1 (2018): 56-64.

or individuals when such entities communicate their attempt to manage and cope with a crisis.² Yet, the discussion in the field of CCS has been shaped by western studies,³ which predominantly were carried out in the context of corporations.⁴

This study is significant as it applies CCS logic in exploring patterns of political communication during the COVID-19 economic crisis. Although, theoretically, corporate and political crisis communication feature similarities, but there is fundamental contrast between them regarding the conceptualization and application of CCS.⁵ By assessing the political CCS carried out by world leaders, such as the president or Prime Minister (PM), the study can delve deeper into the distinctive side of CCS where very few studies have been performed.⁶

We consider the COVID-19 crisis a fitting background for studying political communication due to emerging tendencies of world leaders to heavily politicise the pandemic⁷ as it is connected to their political agendas, political status, and policy orientations. COVID-19 also offers an interesting avenue for scholars to evaluate the dynamics of CCS due to its longitudinal nature, particularly the core crisis has reoccurred several times since the pandemic started.⁸ In view of evolving economic and political situations as results of the pandemic, world leaders seem to change their response strategies to remain in line with the level of crisis responsibility as perceived by the public.

We specifically analysed how world leaders convey their economic policy messaging online to minimise the economic impact of COVID-19. We believe

² L. Schoofs, A. S. Claeys, A. Waele and V. Cauberghe. Schoofs, Lieze, An-Sofie Claeys, Aurélie De Waele, and Verolien Cauberghe, "The Role of Empathy in Crisis Communication: Providing a Deeper Understanding of How Organizational Crises and Crisis Communication Affect Reputation," *Public Relations Review* 45, no. 5 (2019): 101851; Bowen Zheng, Liu, and Robert M. Davison, "Exploring The Relationship Between Corporate Reputation and The Public's Crisis Communication on Social Media," *Public Relations Review* 44, no. 1 (2018): 56-64.

³ Yi-Hui Huang, Ying-Hsuan Lin, and Shih-Hsin Su, "Crisis Communicative Strategies in Taiwan: Category, Continuum, and Cultural Implication," *Public Relations Review* 31, no. 2 (2005): 229-238.

⁴ Yu Tian and J. Yang, "Deny or Bolster? A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19," *Public Relations Review* 48, no. 2 (2022).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ N. Chen, "Beijing's Political Crisis Communication: An Analysis of Chinese Government Communication in The 2009 Xinjiang Riot," *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 75 (2012): 461-479; Y. Li, Y. Chandra and Y. Fan, "Unpacking Government Social Media Messaging Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic in China," *Policy & Internet* (2021); Yu Tian and J. Yang, "Deny or Bolster? A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19,"

⁷ P. S. Hart, S. Chinn and S. Soroka, "Politicization and Polarization in COVID-10 News Coverage," *Science Communication* 42, no. 5 (2020): 679-697.

⁸ W. T. Coombs, W. Timothy, and Sherry J. Holladay, "Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of The Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Management Communication Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2002): 165-186.

this facet of political communication warrants a study, as the pandemic outbreak also led to a global economic recession with the magnitude and severity, we have not witnessed in nearly a century, the impact of which more than doubled the effect of financial crisis in 2008. The public health measures imposed by many governments have caused economic slowdowns and rising of unemployment rates where countries have been affected by major negative growth rates of their Gross Domestic Products (GDP).⁹ Given the significance of the economy, it is rather surprising that relatively little is known about economic communication efforts, although several studies have investigated health communication strategies implemented by the political leaders (e.g. Rufai and Bunce, 2020; Green et al., 2020; Hatcher, 2020; Tian and Yang, 2022).

This research answered the call of Tian and Yang's investigation of political communication in different contexts. Drawing on the SCCT (Strategic Crisis Communication Theory) and IRT (Image Restorative Theory), this study unpacks the dynamics of CCS by examining patterns of crisis communication in both advanced and emerging economies. The selection of these countries was also contingent on a variety of democratic systems and political ideologies. We specifically compared the similarities of crisis response strategies of the leaders of five countries (Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, and Singapore). Further, this study analysed the extent to which patterns of political communications conform to or differ from SCCT and IRT. Lastly, we examine which type of political communication most effectively engages the public. Additionally, the qualitative approach was employed to identify the presence of any patterns of political communication.

This study significantly contributes to body of theoretical knowledge of CCS. First, we applied CCS logic to political communication thus expanding the discussion of CCS. Second, we discerned the CCS in a lengthy crisis where we can investigate patterns of communication in pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis phases, thus capturing the multi-faceted challenges of this particular crisis. Third, we examined the extent to which the combination of SCCT and IRT may explain a diversity of political communications of world leaders during the crisis. Fourth, we explored the complex interplay between political crisis communication and contextual dimensions.

⁹ Tisdell, Clement A. "Economic, Social and Political Issues Raised by The COVID-19 Pandemic." *Economic Analysis and Policy* 68 (2020): 17-28. doi:10.1016/j.eap.2020.08.002

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

II.A. SCCT-IRT Categories of Messaging Strategies

In crisis management, there are two prominent theories on communication strategies used by organizations to manage crisis situation. Those theories are Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory (IRT). In existing research on developing guidelines for selecting the appropriate crisis-response strategies, Coombs¹⁰ integrated the works of Allen and Caillouet¹¹ and Benoit,¹² which fundamentally the incorporation of SCCT and IRT.¹³ This integrative typology resulted in a five-category model of messaging strategies used in response to crises, as follow:

Table 1.
SCCT-IRT Integrative Message Strategies

Strategies	Categories	Description
Nonexistence Strategies Seek to eliminate the crisis by denying its existence, stating unequivocally that there is no crisis, attaching a more aggressive strategy, or intimidating others who are less powerfull	Denial	asserts that crisis did not occur
	Denial	
	Clarification	explain why there is no crisis
	Attacks	confront those who incorrectly report nonexistence crisis
Distance strategies try to break the link between the crisis and the organization	Intimidation	threatens organizational power against someone
	Excuses	minimize the organizations' responsibility by denying intention
	Denial of violation	blaming someone else for the crisis
Ingratiation strategies Focus on gaining public acceptance	Justification	minimize the damage by assuring public that the crisis is not serious
	Bolstering	recalling stakeholder's positive attitudes
	Transcending	led public away from specific topic of crisis to more abstract explanation
Mortification strategies aim to win forgiveness and create public's acceptance	Praising	applaud for stakeholder's achievement to gain public approval
	Remediation	provide compensation for victim
	Repentance	ask for public's forgiveness
Suffering strategies portrays the organization as a victim in order to elicit sympathy from the public	Rectification	explicitly demonstrate that mechanisms are in place to prevent a repeat of the crisis

Source: Coombs (1995)

¹⁰ Coombs, W. Timothy, "Choosing The Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for The Selection of The "Appropriate: Crisis-Response Strategies," *Management Communication Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1995): 447-476.

¹¹ M. W Allen and Caillouet, R. H, "Legitimate Endeavors: Impression Management Strategies Used by an Organization in Crisis" *Communication Monographs*, 61, no. 1 (1994): 44-62).

¹² Coombs, W. Timothy, "Choosing The Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for The Selection of The "Appropriate: Crisis-Response Strategies,"

¹³ *Ibid.*, 450.

SCCT theory addresses three crisis types in which each type discusses to what extent an organization generates actions in response to a crisis (or what is generally called the SCCT attribution theory): *victim*, when an organization is also considered a victim of a crisis, which implies the weak attributions of crisis responsibility and mild reputational threat; *accident*, means that a crisis unintentionally resulted from organizational actions, and shows minimal attributions of crisis responsibility with moderate reputational threat to the organization; and *intentional* shows that the organization deliberately placed people at risk, leading to a severe reputational threat due to its intention of putting people in the crisis situation.

Throughout the crisis management process, communication is crucial to protecting organization reputation. Coombs¹⁴ proposes three phases of a crisis, namely precrisis, crisis event, and post crisis. The precrisis phase, focuses on locating and reducing risk. This phase can be broken down into three parts, signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation. The second phase is a crisis event, which begins with a triggering event signaling the start of the crisis. It demonstrates how an organization communicates during a crisis, which has a significant impact on a crisis's outcomes. The final phase, postcrisis, begins when a crisis has been resolved and is considered to be over. Post-crisis measures help to better prepare the organization for the next crisis and ensure stakeholders have a positive impression of the organization's crisis management efforts.

III. METHODOLOGY

III.A. Data Collection

In collecting data, CCS that were posted on Twitter were analysed to analyse the accelerating role of social media as a channel for world leaders to communicate with the public due to its accessibility, emphasising social media capacity to broadly disseminate information.¹⁵ Particularly, during COVID-19 crisis, Twitter has been elevated to a greater position as a strategic and cost-effective

¹⁴ Coombs, W T. "The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insight from Strategic Communication Research." *Business Horizons* 58 (2015): 141-148.

¹⁵ Gohar Feroz Khan, Ho Young Yoon, Jiyoung Kim, and Han Woo Park, "From E-Government to Social Government: Twitter Use by Korea's Central Government" *Online Information Review* (2014); Ussama Yaqub, Soon Ae Chun, Vijayalakshmi Atluri, and Jaideep Vaidya, "Analysis of Political Discourse on Twitter in The Context of The 2016 US Presidential Elections" *Government Information Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2017): 613-626.

channel of communication.¹⁶ We selected Twitter as one of many platforms as it has been widely used by politicians and governments with tweets commonly accentuating news coverage on other media platforms to convey their opinions or illuminate their policies.¹⁷ Twitter also offers opportunities for politicians to directly interact with the public.¹⁸

We accessed the verified Twitter accounts from of world leaders, Scott Morrison (PM of Australia), Justin Trudeau (PM of Canada), Narendra Modi (PM of India), Joko Widodo (the President of Indonesia), and Lee Hsien Loong (PM of Singapore) from February 1, 2020, to March 15, 2022. We selected the period following the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration that COVID-19 was a public health emergency of international concern.¹⁹ The date also marked the presence of global news coverage about the pandemic. We ended the data collection period at the point when multiple countries confirmed the end of their Zero-Covid policies or their attempts to substantially roll back public health and social measures.

All tweets were collected using a wide range of different keywords both in English and Indonesian. These search terms included COVID-19, crisis, assistance relief, cash transfer, compensation, relief fund, and so on. The selection of keywords was generated from our first round of pilot coding (1,200 tweets) from all Twitter accounts of the leaders in total of 17,059 tweets. A manual review process was undertaken to ensure that all tweets were specifically related to economic policy responses to COVID-19. We subsequently created exclusion criteria, namely, duplicate tweets, unoriginal tweets, and tweets that did not convey any CCS. The unit of analysis of this study was the individual tweet. We recorded outcome measures including names, tweets, number of likes, number of retweets, number of comments, and language used.

III.B. Coding Procedures

The coding procedure used both deductive and inductive approaches. We categorised the tweets based on SCCT-IRT theory, while at the same time identifying any new significant categories that did not fall under existing

¹⁶ Joanna Sleight, Julia Amann, M, Manuel Schneider, and Effy Vayena, "Qualitative Analysis of Visual Risk Communication on Twitter During the COVID-19 Pandemic" *BMC Public Health* (2021): 21,810

¹⁷ Aharoni, Noa, "Twitter Use by Three Political Leaders: An Exploratory Analysis" *Online Information Review* (2012); Sounman Hong, Haneul Choi, and Taek Kyu Kim, "Why Do Politicians Tweet? Extremists, Underdogs, and Opposing Parties as Political Tweeters" *Policy & Internet* 11, no. 3 (2019): 305-323; Jayeon Lee, and Weiai Xu, "The more attacks, the more retweets: Trump's and Clinton's agenda setting on Twitter," *Public Relations Review* 44, no. 2 (2018): 201-213.

¹⁸ Rebekah, Tromble, "Thanks for (Actually) Responding! How Citizen Demand Shapes Politicians' Interactive Practices on Twitter" *New Media & Society* 20, no. 2 (2018): 676-697.

¹⁹ WHO. "COVID 19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) Global Research and Innovation Forum: Towards a Research Roadmap." 2020. (accessed April 22, 2022).

theories. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1965), through an open coding process, new categories were added continuously until all potential strategies were covered. A tweet could be coded under different categories, as they were not mutually exclusive, for example they could be categorised into bolstering, praising, and rectification.

Two researchers coded 40 percent of the whole data in tandem. Where there was disagreement of the categorisation of the tweets, the disputes were discussed and reconciled. Afterwards, the researchers proceeded to code the tweets independently. To test intercoder reliability, Krippendorff's alpha was employed. Krippendorff's alpha is a statistical measure which quantifies the agreement achieved between or among coders when performing content analysis. We selected 30 percent of our independent coding via random sampling and calculated the Krippendorff's alpha for intercoder reliability. The range of our Krippendorff's alpha was 0.94 which demonstrates accurate intercoder agreement. The satisfactory alpha score reflects the validity of the coding process and strengthens confidence in the interpretations employed that emerged from the data.²⁰

Tweets were categorised under seven strategies and sub-strategies. Nevertheless, two strategies were excluded as none of the tweets portrayed any relevance. Out of the 526 tweets in our sample, about two third of them were double or triple coded as they illustrated more than one strategy or category. Multiple coding is normal as messages could contain different information and meanings which indicate the nature of communication.²¹ We grouped individual tweets that did not match existing categories then created new categories.

IV. FINDINGS

IV.A. Emergence of New Data

Our findings showed seven strategies and communication categories that were used by the five leaders, shown by examples in Table 2 below. Only 14 categories from five strategies were effectively employed by all leaders.

²⁰ Juliet M. Corbin, and Anselm Strauss, "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria" *Qualitative Sociology* 13, no. 1 (1990): 3-21.

²¹ D. Chandler, *Semiotics: the basics*. n.p.(Routledge, 2007).

Table 2.
Strategies and Categories of Crisis Communication Strategies

Strategy	Categories	Definition	Examples
Nonexistence strategies	Denial	Makes a statement that the crisis did not occur	N/A
	Clarification	Explain why there is no crisis	N/A
	Attacks	Confront those who incorrectly report nonexistent crisis occurred	N/A
	Intimidation	Threatens organizational power against someone	N/A
Distance strategies	Excuses	Minimize the organizations' responsibility by denying intention	"It is my appeal to my fellow Indians, Kindly contribute to the PM-CARES Fund. This Fund will also cater to similar distressing situations, if they occur in the times ahead. This link has all important details about the fund." - India
	Denial of violation	Blaming someone else for the crisis	N/A
	Justification	Minimize the damage by convincing the public the crisis was not serious	"We have faced the 2019-nCoV situation for about 2 weeks now. People are understandably anxious & fearful, but there is no need to panic — Singapore has ample supplies. Instead, let us remain united & resolute, stay calm & carry on with our lives." - Singapore
Information Provision	Public Information	Provides updated information to the public regarding the situation or policy dynamics	"Update for business owners: If your business has been hit hard by the pandemic, you can now access another loan through the Canada Emergency Business Account - this one up to \$20,000. That's on top of the \$40,000 already available. Click here to apply: https://t.co/FZqA5CXV58 "
	Public education campaign	Social marketing initiatives intended to educate and increase public awareness to accomplish specific objectives that support government's strategic plan	"At the Purwodadi Public Market, Grobogan Regency, at ten o'clock this morning, I handed over groceries and cash assistance to traders for their additional capital. Not to forget, I reminded them to be disciplined in carrying out health protocols. Don't forget to wear a mask."
Bolstering strategies	Political Positioning	An intention to build a positive image by asserting political stance or emphasizing individual personality	"Indonesia makes the pandemic a period of self-improvement by laying new foundations for stronger and sustainable growth. At the World Economic Forum last night, I made a statement that Indonesia must continue to reform its economic structure and improve the business climate."
	Transcending	Place act in a different context. the public is led away from the specifics of the crisis to a more abstract consideration of the crisis	"Since the pandemic entered our lives, we have a better understanding of the virus and its mutations. We have to continue fighting the virus and at the same time keep the economic momentum going that we have gathered."

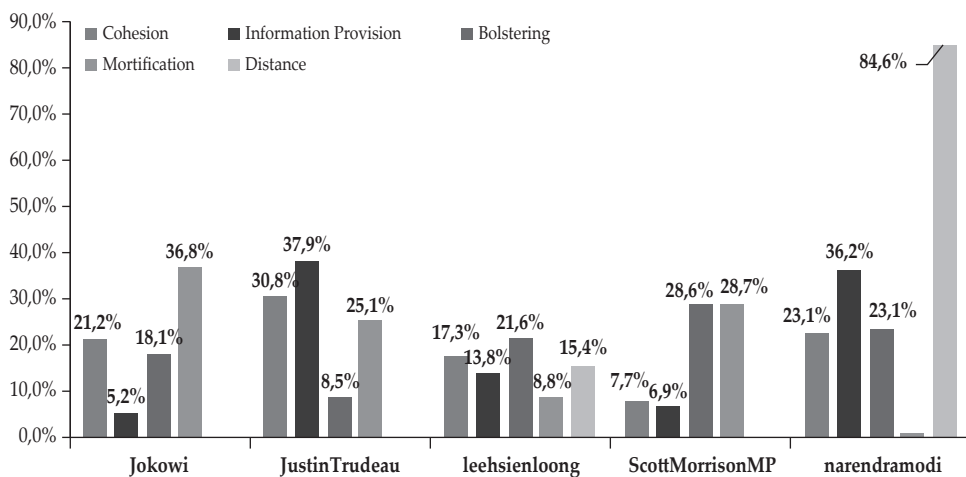
Table 2.
Strategies and Categories of Crisis Communication Strategies (Continued)

Strategy	Categories	Definition	Examples
	Morale Boosting	A desire to boost morale or spirit	"It's been a challenging time, but business owners and leaders across the country have really stepped up - and Pepe and Lou are perfect examples of that. I'm glad I could chat with them today and hear about what they've been through and what more we can do to help."
Cohesion	Partisanship	Creating party cooperation to tackle the crisis	"I invite all of you, taxpayers, not to be late. The taxes we pay are urgently needed to support economic recovery programs, increase people's purchasing power, and restore health such as vaccinations and social protection during this pandemic."
	Institutional cooperation	Promoting institutional cooperation, including cooperation with the federal government and different state governments	"During this pandemic, I ask the local governments to use their regional budgets to help people at the grassroots level who are affected by the pandemic."
	Cross border cooperation	Promoting cooperation between countries	"The ASEAN economy is only predicted to grow around 1% this year. Therefore, ASEAN countries need to work together to: first, break the chain of virus spread in each country, in the ASEAN region, and at the border."
	Rally-round-the-flag	Eliciting patriotism, societal cohesion and loyalty to the country/states to tackle the crisis	"The COVID-19 pandemic has not only brought public health problems but also had very broad economic implications. Because of that, I signed the Perppu (the Government Regulation) on State Financial Policy and Financial System Stability"
	Inclusion	Criticizing those who discriminated minorities; promoting integration and cooperation among different ethnic and social groups; and enhancing benefits for vulnerable groups	N/A
Mortification strategies	Remediation	Offer compensation to the victim	The Federal Government will continue to provide financial support to households and businesses impacted by the extended COVID-19 lockdown in Greater Sydney, to help them through this difficult time.
	Repentance	Ask for forgiveness	
	Rectification	Clearly show that mechanisms are in place to prevent a similar crisis from occurring again	"Tomorrow, I intend to share with you how we plan to keep COVID-19 under control, while progressively opening up again. Watch my speech live on my Facebook Page or on Mediacorp channels at 4pm on Mon, 31 May 2021."
Suffering strategy	N/A	Portrays the organization as a victim and draw sympathy from the public	N/A

IV.B. Distribution Strategies

The data in Figure 1 show the distribution of strategies used by the five study countries. Overall, the dominating communication strategies in the five countries include mortification, cohesion, and information provision, while distance strategies are only used significantly by PM of India. Information provision and cohesion are two new categories we identified in the political crisis. While a cohesion strategy addresses politicians' efforts to encourage unity, the flow of information either in the area of public health or economic policy delivered by politicians to citizens is called an information provision strategy. Specifically, our findings indicate the mortification strategy dominated Indonesia, whereas bolstering strategy was heavily employed in Australia. Information provision strategies predominate in India and Canada, while the PM of Singapore heavily relies on bolstering as a communication strategy.

Figure 1. Distribution of Communication Strategy, February 2020-March 2022



Category distributions are shown in Figure 2, which political positioning and morale boosting are equally employed by all five leaders. The excuses category was only used by the PM of Australia, as well as partisanship that was only utilised by the President of Indonesia. Singapore's main categories were justification and transcending, and Canada was very outstanding in using public information and a 'rally-round-the-flag' strategy. From all the countries in this study, the PM of India dominantly utilised distance strategies to become the top leader applying cross-border cooperation.

Figure 2. Categories Distribution of Communication Strategy, February 2020-March 2022

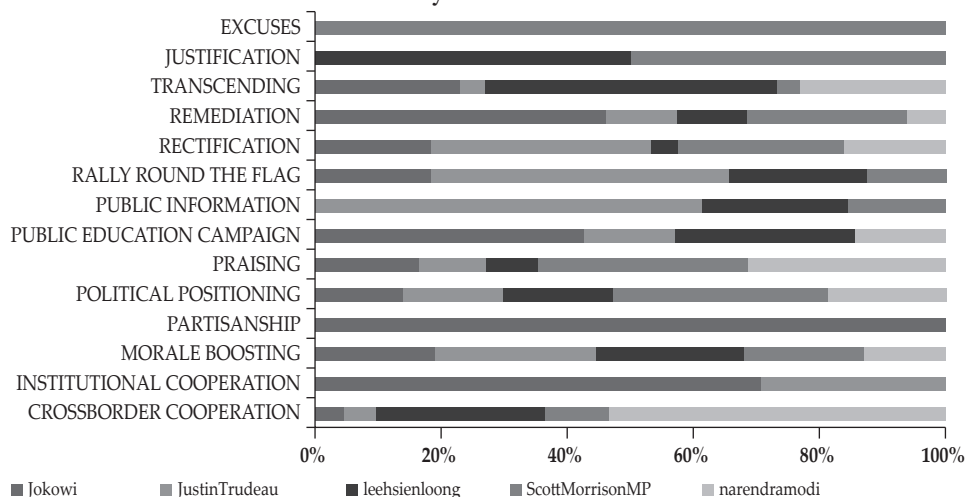


Table 3 below shows the quarterly trend of the communication strategies used by the five leaders of countries mapped every. At a glance, the table shows changes in the communication strategies of the five leaders, seen from the time COVID-19 attacked in February 2020 to March 2022. Bolstering strategies were the most widely used communication strategy in the first three months of the COVID-19 attack, especially in Singapore, Australia, and India. In the second and third quarter, the percentage dedicated to these original communication strategies decreased in each country, except for Indonesia. Furthermore, striking changes are also seen in the bolstering strategies of Singapore, and at the same time, the Canadian government was starting to look at responding to the COVID-19 with greater reliance on information provision strategies, although it still doesn't look significant. Changes in communication strategies were also found in the five countries before and during isolation of the Delta variant. The mortification strategy increases only in Australia, with consistent percentage in bolstering, while Information provision and bolstering started to increase in Canada. The PM of India moves away from cohesion strategies while reducing bolstering strategies before the Delta variant struck, overall relying less on communication strategies. As the conditions evolved to the pandemic-endemic transition, bolstering and mortification strategies applied in almost all five countries.

Table 3.
Distribution of Communication Strategies in 2020-2022 (within three months period)

Jokowi	Feb-Apr 2020	May-Jul 2020	Aug-Oct 2020	Nov-Dec 2020-Jan 2021	Feb- Apr 2021	May-Jul 2021	Aug-Oct 2021	Nov-Dec 2021-Jan 2022	Feb- Mar 2022	Total
Cohesion	3,2%	3,2%	0,8%	0,8%	6,5%	0,0%	1,6%	1,6%	0,0%	17,7%
Information Provision	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,8%	0,0%	0,8%	0,0%	0,8%	0,0%	2,4%
Bolstering	2,4%	3,2%	7,3%	3,2%	5,6%	1,6%	0,8%	4,8%	0,0%	29,0%
Mortification	4,8%	9,7%	12,1%	8,1%	0,8%	0,8%	2,4%	9,7%	2,4%	50,8%

Justin Trudeau	Feb-Apr 2020	May-Jul 2020	Aug-Oct 2020	Nov-Dec 2020-Jan 2021	Feb- Apr 2021	May-Jul 2021	Aug-Oct 2021	Nov-Dec 2021-Jan 2022	Feb- Mar 2022	Total
Cohesion	0,0%	0,0%	1,8%	7,9%	6,1%	2,6%	2,6%	6,1%	0,9%	28,1%
Information Provision	0,9%	0,0%	2,6%	2,6%	2,6%	0,0%	5,3%	5,3%	0,0%	19,3%
Bolstering	0,0%	0,0%	0,9%	2,6%	0,9%	0,0%	0,0%	8,8%	1,8%	14,9%
Mortification	0,0%	0,0%	1,8%	10,5%	7,0%	4,4%	8,8%	5,3%	0,0%	37,7%

Lee Hsien Loong	Feb-Apr 2020	May-Jul 2020	Aug-Oct 2020	Nov-Dec 2020-Jan 2021	Feb- Apr 2021	May-Jul 2021	Aug-Oct 2021	Nov-Dec 2021-Jan 2022	Feb- Mar 2022	Total
Cohesion	7,4%	3,7%	2,5%	2,5%	0,0%	2,5%	2,5%	1,2%	0,0%	22,2%
Distance	2,5%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	2,5%
Information Provision	2,5%	0,0%	1,2%	0,0%	0,0%	4,9%	1,2%	0,0%	0,0%	9,9%
Bolstering	13,6%	14,8%	1,2%	9,9%	1,2%	7,4%	2,5%	2,5%	0,0%	53,1%
Mortification	6,2%	4,9%	2,5%	0,0%	1,2%	2,5%	1,2%	0,0%	0,0%	18,5%

Scott Morrison MP	Feb-Apr 2020	May-Jul 2020	Aug-Oct 2020	Nov-Dec 2020-Jan 2021	Feb- Apr 2021	May-Jul 2021	Aug-Oct 2021	Nov-Dec 2021-Jan 2022	Feb- Mar 2022	Total
Cohesion	1,7%	3,4%	1,7%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	6,8%
Information Provision	1,7%	0,0%	1,7%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	3,4%
Bolstering	13,6%	12,7%	3,4%	2,5%	5,9%	5,1%	5,1%	0,0%	0,0%	48,3%
Mortification	12,7%	6,8%	11,0%	0,8%	1,7%	7,6%	0,0%	0,8%	0,0%	41,5%

Narendra Modi	Feb-Apr 2020	May-Jul 2020	Aug-Oct 2020	Nov-Dec 2020-Jan 2021	Feb- Apr 2021	May-Jul 2021	Aug-Oct 2021	Nov-Dec 2021-Jan 2022	Feb- Mar 2022	Total
Cohesion	7,8%	3,9%	2,9%	0,0%	5,8%	1,0%	1,9%	0,0%	0,0%	23,3%
Distance	10,7%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	10,7%
Bolstering	12,6%	9,7%	2,9%	8,7%	2,9%	0,0%	1,9%	3,9%	1,9%	44,7%
Information Provision	1,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,0%
Mortification	2,9%	7,8%	1,0%	1,9%	1,0%	1,0%	1,9%	1,9%	1,0%	20,4%

IV.C. Public Engagement with Leaders’ Communication Strategies

In this study, public engagement in content analysis is measured by the number of “favorites” and “retweets.” The study found that communication strategies with the highest level of engagement were mortification, followed by bolstering and cohesion. Conversely, information provision and distance strategies engaged the fewest members of the public. Using mortification strategies, President Jokowi’s public engagement stood as the highest and Canada’s public engagement was the higher for remediation. In bolstering strategies, the engagement created by PM Scott Morrison of Australia dominated the transcending category, and President Jokowi with political positioning and praising. Public engagement in cohesion strategies were dominated by PM Trudeau’s cross-border cooperation, as well as in information provision category. Finally, distance strategies in the justification category attracted public engagement in India higher than in Singapore.

Figure 3. Public Engagement of Commuhnication Strategies, February 2020-March 2022

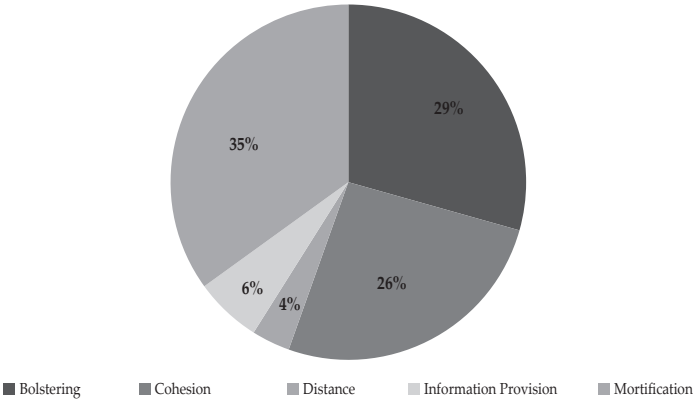


Figure 4. Public Engagement from Favorite Number, February 2020-March 2022

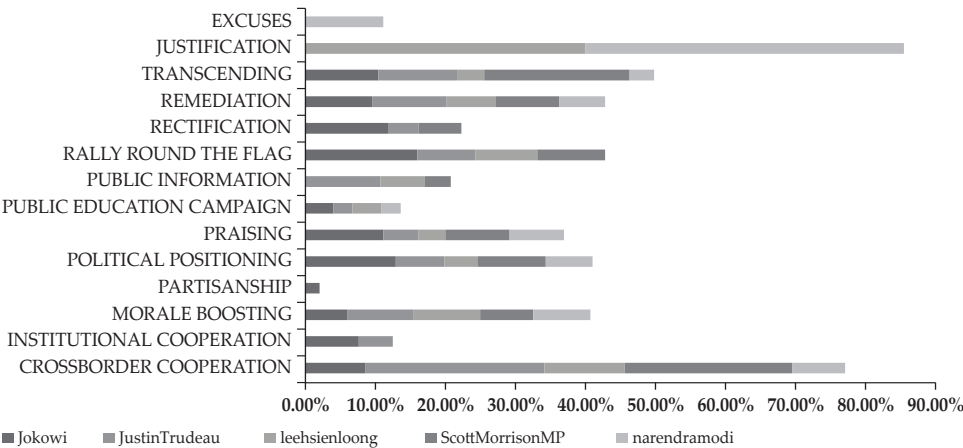
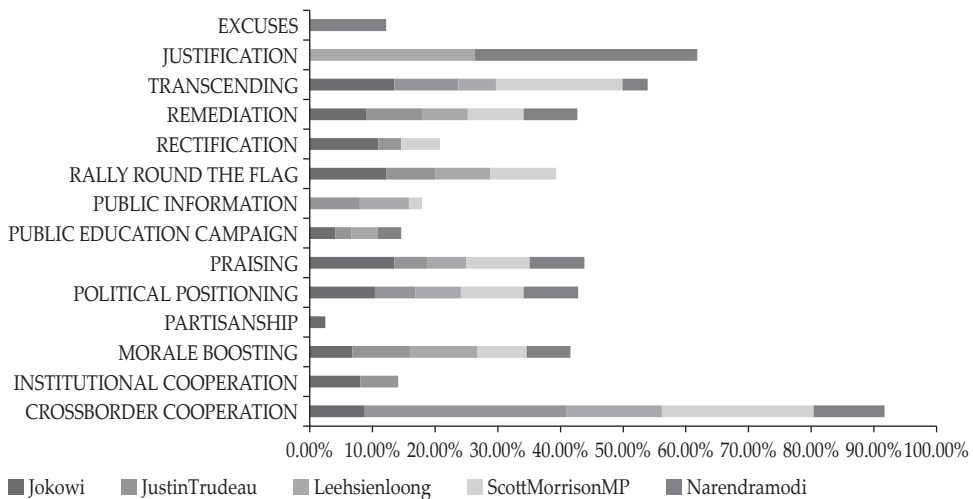


Figure 5. Public Engagement from Retweet Number, February 2020-March 2022

V. DISCUSSION

Coombs (2015) identified two broad strategies in crisis communication management. Information management involves the analysis and dissemination of knowledge related to a crisis, meaning management of perceptions of organizations in crisis.²² Managing perceptions is an integral part of any crisis response strategy and an interesting subset in crisis communication studies. This subset focuses on how organizations or individuals act after a crisis occurs to protect or repair their reputations. Coombs (2015) argues that a crisis response strategy is the “public face” of an organizational or individual response to crisis, and therefore heavily affects their reputations. A large stream in CCS studies propose that situational factors may influence the selection of crisis response strategies. The selection of the strategy organizations or individuals employ should be specifically tailored to circumstances surrounding the crisis.

V.A. Perceived Crisis Responsibility

According to SCCT’s types of crises²³ and attribution theory,²⁴ COVID-19 follows the category of victim cluster.²⁵ Considering that the government positions itself as the victim in the crisis, they may attempt to escape the

²² W. Timothy Coombs, “The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insight from Strategic Communication Research”

²³ Coombs and Holladay. “Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets” 165-186.

²⁴ W. Timothy Coombs, “Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory” *Corporate Reputation Review* 10, no. 3 (2007): 163-176.

²⁵ Yu Tian and J. Yang, “Deny or Bolster? A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19”

blame and reputational damage as they take on limited responsibility for the emergence of the pandemic. The fact that the pandemic is neither purely accidental nor intentional does not insulate the government from responsibility and/or possible reputational risk. The government has been facing substantial public pressure to manage the crisis and have taken on significant responsibility for addressing the crisis, irrespective of the nature of the crisis. However, the incompetence of the government's actions and communication during the crisis may have heightened panic among the population and caused severe deterioration of public health as well as the economy. Consequently, inadequate COVID-19 responses may have critically harmed the reputation of the government and eroded trust in the politicians.

This study illustrates that politicians display their attempt to respond to stakeholders and public expectations through their policies and political stances on economic issues even when they play the victim. The SCCT theory presumes that bolstering is used in culpable crises where responsibility can be directly attributed to organizations.²⁶ This study demonstrates contrasting findings of how politicians use substantial bolstering and mortification strategies to gain public approval. Bolstering messages are crucial to portray politicians' ability to manage crises hence creating positive images of them. While mortification strategies are aimed at corrective actions to repair damage as organizations admit their responsibility for crises mortification strategies are discussed in detail in the next section).²⁷

Under such a bolstering strategy, politicians have used varied approaches including morale boosting, praising, transcending, and political positioning. A bolstering strategy appears to be the most frequently used strategy by politicians, including the PMs of Australia, India, and Singapore. Politicians often invoke a morale boosting approach to raise public morale or spirit, e.g. *"The story of global revival will see India play a leading role. India is fighting a spirited battle against the virus. The focus is on improving people's health as well as the health of the economy"* (the PM of India), or, similarly, *"Our focus throughout this #coronavirus crisis continues to be on protecting lives and protecting livelihoods - that means keeping Australians in jobs and businesses in business so when this virus has passed, we can bounce back stronger on the other side"* (the PM of Australia). The study's findings indicate politicians regularly praise themselves and the government for their efforts in crisis response strategies, including praising the public, companies, and other non-state entities for their good works during crisis, e.g., *"Rightly said by Gourav*

²⁶ Coombs and Holladay. "Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets"

²⁷ Denise P Ferguson, J. D. Wallace, and Robert C. Chandler, Hierarchical Consistency of Strategies in Image Repair Theory: PR Practitioners' Perceptions of Effective and Preferred Crisis Communication Strategies" *Journal of Public Relations Research* 30, no. 5-6 (2018): 251-272.

Kanti Saba, a bright youngster from Tripura. He says it was local manufacturers and businesses that really helped us during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, we must go 'Vocal for Local' (the PM of India), or *"Met some female business leaders yesterday and today. Heard about how the pandemic has impacted them professionally and personally, and how they have adapted to the challenges. Keep up the good work!"* (The PM of Singapore). Politicians have emphasised bolstering strategies to counteract negative effects of the crisis by amplifying positive perceptions of themselves or the governmental organizations they lead. In this case, politicians have portrayed their positive attributes or the actions they have taken to eliminate the impact of the crisis. Arguably, praising is a meaningful response to promote better relationships and evoke sympathy.²⁸

Interestingly, politicians occasionally remind their constituents that the government is a victim too in their praising messages, such as, *"COVID-19 is also having an impact on the global economy. It's affecting supply chains, commodity prices, our oil and gas sector, tourism, and more. But with a strong balance sheet and a resilient economy - Canada is well positioned to deal with these challenges"* (the PM of Canada). While playing the victims, politicians may employ distance strategies to minimise institutions' responsibility for a crisis. For example, the PM of India engaged in an excuses approach by shifting the responsibility of generating COVID-19 relief funds to the public and private sector, yet masked such approach with bolstering and praising messaging, *"People from all walks of life expressed their desire to donate to India's war against COVID-19. Respecting that spirit, the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund has been constituted," "I would like to thank Shri Pradeep and Shri Pankaj Rathod of the Cello Group for contributing Rs. 3.5 crore to the PM-CARES fund. Such support from the world of commerce and industry is extremely valuable," and "The PM-CARES Fund accepts micro-donations too. It will strengthen disaster management capacities and encourage research on protecting citizens. Let us leave no stone unturned to make India healthier and more prosperous for our future generations."* The tweets illustrate how the PM of India praised the public or business owners who donated to the public fund and at the same time framed such action as an example of national heroism.

Previous studies have shown that negative events, in contrast to positive events, are more likely to instill psychological and emotional responses that enable people to easily remember and recall such negative events.²⁹ Drawing

²⁸ Coombs, "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis," 163-176; Wenlin Liu, Chih-Hui Lai, and Weiai Wayne Xu, "Tweeting about Emergency: A Semantic Network Analysis of Government Organizations' Social Media Messaging During Hurricane Harvey" *Public Relations Review* 44, no. 5 (2018): 807-819.

²⁹ Sang Yeal Lee, and Ji Young Lee, "Fixing The Barn Door before The Horse Bolts: Effects of Pre-crisis Engagement and Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication" *Public Relations Review* 47, no. 1 (2021): 101930; Shelley E Taylor, "Asymmetrical Effects of Positive and Negative Events: The Mobilization-Minimization Hypothesis" *Psychological Bulletin* 110, no. 1 (1991): 67.

on these studies, albeit the pandemic is typically seen as a negative event, it can also be seen as providing an opportunity for politicians to frame the event in different light or present themselves as capable leaders in managing the crisis, thereby increasing their images and reputations (Bromfield & McConnell, 2021). All politicians studied employed a transcending approach, some of whom asserting that the pandemic was a trajectory point to massively digitalise the economy, “COVID-19 has forced traditional businesses to come up with new ways of operating. Even Santa Claus faces this problem! But enterprising Santas have gone digital and turned to video conferencing to continue bringing joy to children” (the PM of Singapore), or to create a sustainable economy, “Pandemic marks a period of self-improvement by laying new foundations for stronger and sustainable growth” (the president of Indonesia).

The study also found that politicians frequently incorporate political positioning in their tweets by accentuating their political stances or by highlighting their political identities and party values, e.g. “No one should have to face this pandemic alone - not workers, not families, not business owners. That’s why we’ve stepped up to help” (the PM of Canada) or “Dear AMK voters, thank you for supporting me and my team all these years. Singapore is at a critical moment, fighting COVID-19. Please vote PAP, to secure our lives, our jobs, our future” (the PM of Singapore). Politicians often explicitly claim they advocate for small businesses and low wage workers in their tweets, e.g., “We’re committed to helping our dynamic small and medium businesses” (the PM of India), “Thank you Sue for taking the time to write to me. Small businesses, like yours, are the lifeblood of Australia. Our JobKeeper support is all about helping small businesses hit hard by this crisis get through to the other side so they can thrive as our economy recovers” (the PM of Australia). This favorable presentation refers to a desire of politicians to emphasise their competence, or point out their policy agendas and political ideologies, intends to create a positive approval rating. This strategy pursues attributions of worthiness and competency, as well as likability and public trust. This is in line with previous studies in the area of social media and political communication, which argue that social media is not narrowly used as a tool for democratic functions, but rather as an instrument for performative purpose.³⁰ As demonstrate by public engagement metrics, political positioning earns favorable responses compared to other approaches.

Overall, this study found that tweets can be multifaceted. While tweets can elucidate economic policy responses to the pandemic, they can also be used as image repair or trust building strategies for the politicians. A tweet from PM of

³⁰ Nic DePaula, Ersin Dincelli, and Teresa M. Harrison, “Toward a Typology of Government Social Media Communication: Democratic Goals, Symbolic Acts and Self-presentation,” *Government Information Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2018): 98-108.

Australia shows a combination of strategies, from political positioning, morale boosting, to cohesion, “*Our JobMaker plan is ambitious because it has to be. We’re going to get Australians back into jobs and restore the country’s finances. We’ve done it before and we’ll do it again, together.*” Meanwhile, the PMs of India and Canada employed both political positioning and remediation approaches in their tweets, “*Today @ RBI has taken giant steps to safeguard our economy from the impact of the Coronavirus. The announcements will improve liquidity, reduce cost of funds, help middle class and businesses.*” (the PM of India), and “*Around the world, the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve rapidly. I want you to know that we’re working around the clock & doing everything we can to support our economy & keep you safe. And yesterday, we announced additional measures we’re taking to do just that*” (the PM of Canada). These strategies may have been effective as they have highlighted politicians’ readiness to manage a crisis. Moreover, they are also helpful to alter public perception towards politicians. Previous studies have indicated that bolstering and mortification strategies are more positive in contrast to non-existence and distance strategies in averting reputational damage to institutions.³¹ Further politicians’ decisions to evoke emotions, such as expressing intentions, motives, or feelings, help them to appear more genuine and trustworthy. Emotional appeals have been proven to positively influence public response to institutional messaging in contrast to more rational appeals.³²

The findings of this study contradict SCCT’s proposition that asserts that there is low attribution of crisis responsibility to leaders. On the contrary, this study shows that politicians need to respond to the crises, even when their cause is beyond their control. Therefore, this study’s data did not fully align with the SCCT’s. In addition to that, it must be understood that the nature of COVID-19 is very complex and cannot be exclusively categorised into a single type of crisis. Consequently, a broader understanding of different types of crises in SCCT studies is necessary, given its inapplicability when applied in the context of COVID-19 or potential enormous future crises. Previous CCS studies have also largely focused on organizational perspectives while the issue of crisis communication is not exclusively experienced by organizations. As this study shows, world leaders engage in political crisis communication and this communication warrants more studies to better understand the strategies.

³¹ An-Sofie Claeys, Verolien Cauberghe, and Patrick Vyncke, “Restoring Reputations in Times of Crisis: An Experimental Study of The Situational Crisis Communication Theory and The Moderating Effects of Locus of Control,” *Public Relations Review* 36, no. 3 (2010): 256-262; Betty Kaman Lee, “Audience-oriented Approach to Crisis Communication: A Study of Hong Kong Consumers’ Evaluation of an Organizational Crisis,” *Communication Research* 31, no. 5 (2004): 600-618.

³² Toni GLA Van der Meer, and Joost WM Verhoeven, “Emotional Crisis Communication,” *Public Relations Review* 40, no. 3 (2014): 526-536.

V.B. The Dynamics of Political Communication and Three-stage Crisis Management

Regarding crisis phases, SCCT argues that a crisis can be divided into three different stages, pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis. In the pre-crisis phase, which occurred in the first months of 2020 or when the COVID-19 outbreak had not escalated to a global crisis, several politicians employed a distancing strategy, specifically putting out justification messages, “*There is no need to panic. We need to work together, take small yet important measures to ensure self-protection* (the PM of India)” or “*We have faced the 2019-nCoV situation for about 2 weeks now. People are understandably anxious & fearful, but there is no need to panic — Singapore has ample supplies*” (the PM of Singapore). This strategy not only downplayed the severity of the crisis (Zhao, Zhan, & Ma, 2020), but also aims to avoid mass panic. Meanwhile other politicians (the PM of Australia and the president of Indonesia), used heavy political positioning, morale boosting, as well as remediation and rectification strategy when the crisis was still in a premature stage.

Generally, all politicians heavily exerted cohesion strategies during precrisis by which they advocated institutional cooperation, elicited social inclusion, and stressed the urgency of protecting vulnerable groups or minority groups, e.g., “*To deal with COVID-19, we need everyone to do their part - this needs to be a Team Canada effort*” (the PM of Canada). Several politicians, such as the PM of Australia wrote a tweet that incorporates political positioning, morale boosting, and cohesion, e.g., “*Our new JobMaker plan outlines our way out of this crisis and the path for economic success over the next 3-5 years. We will get Australians back into jobs and restore our country’s finances. We have done it before and we will do it again, together.*” By definition, a cohesion strategy promotes unity and inclusion by advocating solidarity and cooperation. There is a need to cement solidarity, as earlier studies have presented that consensus is fragile,³³ and such cohesion during a crisis is often short-lived and social divides may rupture this national solidarity.³⁴ This fragility remains despite the fact that social coordination and cohesion are necessary to solidify public resilience.³⁵ The findings underscore interesting points. First, all politicians have focused on social cohesion aimed to embolden nationalism and national identity. Second, most of cohesion strategy tweets promoted cooperation with foreign governments (what is

³³ E Ntontis, and C Rocha. Solidarity. In: Jetten, Jolanda; Reicher, Stephen; Haslam, S. Alexander and Cruwys, Tegan eds. “Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19”, London: (Sage Publications Ltd, 2020): 102–106.

³⁴ James Hawdon and J Ryan, “Social Relations that Generate and Sustain Solidarity after a Mass Tragedy” *Social Forces* 89, no. 4 (2011): 1363–1384.

³⁵ Fanny Lalot. “The Social Cohesion Investment: Communities that Invested in Integration Programmes are Showing Greater Social Cohesion in The Midst of The COVID-19 Pandemic” (2021).

labeled as cross-border cooperation). As interconnection is rapidly increasing, both developed and emerging nations have felt the necessity to facilitate international cooperation to protect global health and economic growth.³⁶ Apart from avoiding further waves of the virus particularly in poor or developing countries, cooperation is also vital coordinating and ensuring the stability of global production and the global supply chain.³⁷

When the potential for a full-blown international crisis became clear from increased number of death cases and economic despair, all politicians started to engage in a mortification strategy. They employed a remediation and rectification approach by providing COVID-19 relief or indirect aid for victims (both individual workers and businesses), e.g. *“Our package also includes \$1 billion to support those sectors, regions and communities that have been greatly affected by the economic impacts of #coronavirus, including those heavily reliant on industries such as tourism, agriculture and education”* (the PM of Australia), and *“If you’re a company that’s already making medical supplies, we’ll help you scale up and increase your capacity. And if you’re a company that usually makes something else, we’ll help you buy new equipment so you can make things like masks, ventilators, and hand sanitizers”* (the PM of Canada). The destructive economic effects of the pandemic led to the distribution of substantial assistance from government institutions. As of 2020, Indonesia has allocated \$55.6 billion in relief packages.³⁸ Similarly, as of May 2021, Australia has committed to provide \$291 billion.³⁹ In the same year, the Singaporean government announced a fund totaling more than \$2.2 billion, while Canada had spent \$2.6 billion in the early of 2021.⁴⁰ Through the PMNRF Cares program, the Indian government raised \$164 million in 2021.⁴¹ The adoption of a mortification strategy may have prevented further damage to institutions’ reputations in handling the crisis.

Mortification is a rebuilding strategy where politicians resort to corrective action by specifically providing remediation and rectification strategies. While remediation emphasises substantive compensation, rectification addresses policies to prevent the same crisis from happening again. Both strategies

³⁶ Doyeon Lee, Yoseob Heo, and Keunhwan Kim. “A Strategy for International Cooperation in The COVID-19 Pandemic Era: Focusing on National Scientific Funding Data.” In *Healthcare*, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 204. Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2020.

³⁷ Gordon Brown, and Daniel Susskind. “International Cooperation During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 36, no. Supplement_1 (2020): S64-S76.

³⁸ Republic of Indonesia, Ministry of Finance Kemenkeu Tanggap COVID-19: Informasi Terkini, *Kementrian Keuangan Republik Indonesia*, <https://www.kemenkeu.go.id/covid19>

³⁹ Economic Response to COVID-19, *Treasury Gov*, <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus>.

⁴⁰ COVID-19: Financial support for people, businesses and organizations, *Government of Canada*, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/economic-response-plan.html>.

⁴¹ Income and Expenditure for Last Ten Years. *Prime Ministers National Relief Fund*. <https://pmnrf.gov.in/en/>.

require acceptance of responsibility of politicians. It is interesting to note that a mortification strategy can be employed without the need for politicians to admit culpability for their incompetence in handling a crisis at the beginning of the pandemic. Crisis communication studies have demonstrated that a mortification approach generates more a positive image of the institution, which is indicated by perception of better reputation thereof, as well as reduced anger and lesser negative comment (Chen, 2013; Coombs, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Dardis & Haigh, 2009). This is driven by the purposes of a mortification strategy for reducing offensiveness and restoring stability (Dardis & Haigh, 2009). The findings reveal that a mortification strategy attracts considerable public engagement (31.9 percent of favorite number) compared to other strategies. This study's findings are in line with those of Zhou & Lin (2017) and Low, Varughese, & Pang (2011) which demonstrate that crisis should be followed up by corrective actions as they can convince public of efficacy of an institution's response further promotional efforts.⁴²

When the COVID-19 devolved into a full-blown crisis and core negative effects of the crisis occurred repeatedly due to emergence of new variants of COVID-19, ample data shows that politicians applied three primary crisis communication strategies, mortification, bolstering, and cohesion. A bolstering strategy aims to reiterate positive attributes of a government, politicians, and the public, as well highlighting a government's capability in fighting back against the pandemic. Arguably, the combination of these three strategies may limit the public's blame on the politicians and further repair their tarnished images, as well as shifting negative emotions to positive feelings about the pandemic.

This study sheds new light on the dynamics of political communication prior, during and after a crisis, while CCS studies traditionally have only examined crisis communication during a crisis and the post-crisis stage. This exploratory study also presents unique insight by examining the dynamics of politicians' online crisis communications during this politicised pandemic.⁴³ This includes delving deeper into how they have created public personae during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath.

⁴² Zhou, Lijie, and Jae-Hwa Shin, "Does Stealing Thunder Always Work? A Content Analysis of Crisis Communication Practice Under Different Cultural Settings," *Public Relations Review* 43, no. 5 (2017): 1036-1047; Jeni Varughese, and A Pang, "Communication Crisis: How Culture Influences Image Repair in Western and Asian Government." *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 16 (2011): 218-242.

⁴³ Hart, and Soroka, "Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage," 679-697.

V.C. Discrepancies between Existing Theory and The Complexities of COVID-19

CCS has been widely applied in organizational,⁴⁴ corporate,⁴⁵ and health crises.⁴⁶ However, notably, little attention has been paid to the application of CCS that is specific to the political realm, albeit existing theories in CCS can operate in the realm of politics. As a result, the literature on CCS has inadequately explained political crisis communication. This study found politicians use strategic responses to defend their economic policies, bolster their competence, or consolidate political capital to support their leadership. As political communication is multifaceted, this study proposes broader strategies that extend the SCCT and IRT models.

First, this study found that world leaders perform their traditional communication functions by presenting information and public education campaigns. This provision of information can be regarded as governments' acts of transparency.^{47 48} Meanwhile, the public information functions as basic reports of government policy or economic conditions to the public, public education campaigns are aimed at educating the public about the economic policies or instigating the public's compliance with such policies, e.g., "*To learn more about the financial support we've just announced, click the link below. It's an important step forward for our agricultural sector - and we'll be right here with you as the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve*" (the PM of Canada). Several campaigns have also appeared in the shape of research driven information, such as, "*This @STcom article outlines three ways we can practice psychological defense in the fight against the coronavirus: on the frontline, in the business community & within ourselves*" (the PM of Singapore). The president of Indonesia and the PM of Canada applied a considerable volume of information, particularly during the crisis.

⁴⁴ Schoofs et al, "The Role of Empathy in Crisis Communication"; Xinyan Zhao, Mengqi Zhan, and Liang Ma, "How Publics React to Situational and Renewing Organizational Responses Across Crises: Examining SCCT and DOR in Social-Mediated Crises," *Public Relations Review* 46, no. 4 (2020): 101944.

⁴⁵ Huang, Lin and Su. "Crisis Communicative Strategies in Taiwan: Category, Continuum and Cultural Implication," 229-238; Joanne Chen Lyu, "A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies between Mainland China and Taiwan: The Melamine-Tainted Milk Powder Crisis in The Chinese Context," *Public Relations Review* 38, no. 5 (2012): 779-791; Liang Ma, "How to Turn Your Friends into Enemies: Causes and Outcomes of Customers' Sense of Betrayal in Crisis Communication," *Public Relations Review* 44, no. 3 (2018): 374-384.

⁴⁶ L Kwok, J Lee and S H. Han, "Crisis Communication on Social Media: WHat Types of COVID-19 Messages Get The Attention?," *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* (2021); Yu Tian and J. Yang, "Deny or Bolster? A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19," *Public Relations Review*

⁴⁷ María-Dolores Guillamón, Ana-María Ríos, Benedetta Gesuele, and Concetta Metallo, "Factors Influencing Social Media Use in Local Governments: The Case of Italy and Spain," *Government Information Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2016): 460-471.

⁴⁸ Ines Mergel, "A Framework for Interpreting Social Media Interactions in The Public Sector," *Government information quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2013): 327-334.

Second, aside from transcending, and praising, the data reveals that morale boosting and political positioning have emerged as new approaches under the umbrella of bolstering strategies. In general, a bolstering strategy highlights positive attributes of stakeholders (president/PMs, governments, non-state entities such as corporations, civil society groups, and the public) when coping with the crisis.⁴⁹ Specifically, the study found that overall, all world leaders have used heavy political positioning to build a positive image by asserting their political stances or emphasising individual personality, e.g., *“Thank you Sue for taking the time to write to me. Small businesses, like yours, are the lifeblood of Australia. Our JobKeeper support is all about helping small businesses hit hard by this crisis get through to the other side so they can thrive as our economy recovers”* (the PM of Australia), *“PM Lee: I am especially concerned about a specific group of lower wage workers. These are delivery workers who work with online platforms like Foodpanda, Grab & Deliveroo. They lack the basic job protection that most employees have”* (the PM of Singapore), and *“We’ve been working around the clock to make sure you have what you need to stay safe and healthy. Earlier today, we passed legislation to bring in urgent economic measures - and that legislation has now received Royal Assent. Help is on the way”* (PM of Canada). World leaders have also employed a morale boosting approach intended to galvanize the public’s morale or spirit, through which they often use symbolic presentations such as myths, shared values, or cultural identity, *“We have faith in India’s Shram Shakti. For our Shram Shakti, there is emphasis on: Re-skilling and up-skilling. Ensuring proper housing. Adequate monetary support. Better healthcare and educational facilities”* (the PM of India). Arguably, through political positioning and morale boosting, politicians can minimise potential threats to their reputations, as well as allow them to focus on the future.

Third, the findings reveal that a cohesion strategy is in line with the study of Tian and Yang. These scholars define a cohesion strategy as an intentional promotion of social cohesion, inclusion, and institutional cooperation among state and non-state entities to strengthen national unity and solidarity. It should also be noted that all politicians initiate and enhance cross-border cooperation by partnering in mutual economic recovery programs, e.g., *“The ASEAN economy is only predicted to grow around 1% this year. Therefore, ASEAN countries need to work together: first, break the chain of virus spread in each country, in the ASEAN region, and at the border”* (the president of Indonesia). We suggest this cross-border cooperation further advances a cohesion communication strategy, as Tian and Yang,⁵⁰ but did not discover this approach when analysing Trump or Cuomo’s various crisis communication efforts during this global pandemic.

⁴⁹ Coombs, “Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis”

⁵⁰ Yu Tian and J. Yang, ““Deny or Bolster? A Comparative Study of Crisis Communication Strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19”

Empirical findings reveal that a large portion of politicians' tweets had a presentational purpose when communicating with diverse stakeholders and the public on social media. This study contributes to the literature on CCS by examining political dynamics in the COVID-19, and how they determine politicians' crisis communication strategies. The emergence of new strategies and categories that deviate from SCCT and IRT model shows the complexity of political crisis communications.

V.D. Contextual Factors and Political Crisis Communication

In the context of developed and emerging economies, this study revealed that there are no substantial differences in terms of political communication strategies between countries with divergent GDPs or democracy indexes. The study further found that all politicians have heavily adopted mortification, bolstering, and cohesion strategies across all stages of this crisis. Although a small period that the PMs of India and Singapore justification messaging in their early crisis response strategies, or the PM India submitted excuse approach to shift their responsibility of handling the crisis, the communication strategies remained mostly consistent across the nations studied. If justification attracted low public engagement, excuse, in contrast, engaged the public to a greater degree.

Nevertheless, politicians notably have used different approaches and strategies, even within a single tweet. Politicians generally inform the public of their economic policies (remediation approach) while asserting political positioning messages. Such tweets portray their strong willingness to manage the crisis, and at the same time ensuring the public about their political standing in protecting businesses and low-income populations. Politicians also have tweeted that they present their policies to address GDP losses, essentially economic downturns, by forming strategic international cooperation. These particular tweets have attained substantial public engagement. The findings indicate an increase in public trust in the years 2020 and 21, particularly in Australia and Canada where politicians adopted significant bolstering, mortification, or cohesion strategies. This is despite of the fact that previously those two countries had experienced public distrust since 2017.⁵¹ Public trust plays a key role in a pandemic recovery, as government effectiveness is underpinned by public trust.⁵² The PM of Australia enjoyed impressive increased public trust as Australia was viewed by international audiences

⁵¹ Edelman Trust Barometer, "20th Annual Edelman Trust Barometer," (2020)

⁵² Jia Liu, Yasir Shahab, and Hafiz Hoque, "Government Response Measures and Public Trust during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Around the World," *British Journal of Management* 33, no. 2 (2022): 571-602.

to have successfully handled the pandemic, in contrast to other developed countries.⁵³ Public trust in Australia nearly doubled in the early stages of the pandemic from 29 to 54 percent,⁵⁴ although the number slightly declined in the months following, particularly during the surge of the Omicron variant.⁵⁵ A similar pattern also emerged in Canada, where the PM of Canada enjoyed increased public trust in the early phase of the pandemic, albeit the number slowly plummeted when the fatigue of the pandemic hit.⁵⁶

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There has been a little attention paid to political crisis communication in the area of CCS. By analysing the COVID-19 tweets of the PMs of Australia, Canada, India, and Singapore, as well as the president of Indonesia, this study explored differing politicians' crisis messaging over the long-term basis (through all stages of the crisis). We investigated the connection between crisis severity and political dynamics that have influenced how politicians interpret and correspond to the crisis. Drawing on the SCCT and IRT models, the study identified new categories of and approaches to political crisis communication and suggests broadening the crisis response strategy models in the realm of politics to capture this complexity.

From a theoretical point of view, our study advances SCCT and IRT models by applying them in the context of political communication, the COVID-19 pandemic as a lengthy crisis, and focused on individuals using social media. First, our findings indicate that during the precrisis phase, the PMs of India and Singapore exerted distance strategies, although they were immediately followed by more substantive strategies (such as mortification and cohesion strategies), while other politicians heavily employed cohesion strategies. When the crisis persisted until these countries began to enter post crisis, politicians combined these three strategies, mortification, bolstering, and cohesion strategy.

Second, aside from the mortification strategy which centered on government responsiveness to the pandemic, politicians notably have largely used a bolstering strategy which includes morale boosting, and political positioning approaches to gain public approval, or repair their reputations.

⁵³ Evans, M. "15 November 2021." Scott Morrison's Pandemic Popularity Boost has Vanished, along with Public Trust in Our Politicians. (retrieved April 22, 2022).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Murphy, K. "Guardian Essential Poll: Disillusion Growing Over Coalition Handling of Pandemic" (April 22, 2022).

⁵⁶ Rabson, M. "9 February 2022." Canadians Less Trusting of Governments as COVID Wears on for Second Year: Poll" (accessed April 22, 2022).

This study demonstrates that bolstering and mortification strategies have attained the highest public engagement metrics as shown by ‘favorite’ and retweet numbers. These engagement metrics implies an open channel through which meaningful and constructive communication between politicians and the public may emerge.⁵⁷ Third, new strategies specifically aimed at boosting solidarity and cooperation was also identified. We note that politicians form cross-border cooperation during crises which reflects their desire to redefine a crisis as fuel for growth and change using cohesion messaging.

Fourth, this study also took a more contextually sensitive approach to shed light on the array of political communication practices in countries with divergent economic development conditions and institutional characteristics. We found no difference in terms of political communication across those contextual differences (GDP or democracy index). However, our findings also indicate that the use of the combination of bolstering, mortification, and cohesion strategies may serve political purposes for politicians, i.e., to improve their images, reinforce their political stances, and breed public trust.

From a practical standpoint, our study demonstrates the importance for politicians to employ professional strategies to convey information and articulate their political stances and policy agendas. We believe professional political crisis messaging can help politicians to create a more positive image and reputation. We also advise politicians to create messaging that corresponds with emotional situations of the public. Politicians may use morale boosting or cohesion strategies to shift negative emotions and instill public spirit, unity, and optimism. Based on the findings, we argue symbolic gestures in morale boosting approach can be beneficial, particularly in countries with strong shared values and norms. Further, in the context of political positioning, politicians may employ more compassionate and empathetic messages to reduce the public’s anxiety and anger so they can effectively deliver their messages.

This study has several limitations. First, it only relies on Twitter collection of political messaging data. We suggest future studies to use a wide array of messaging sources such as Facebook, YouTube video, or press releases. Second, our analysis only centered on five politicians, albeit the selection of them was intentional to capture different contextual factors surrounding the crisis. Arguably, it may not fully capture the diversity of context and political dynamics which affects our study generalizability. It is recommended for future studies to attest our findings in other countries with context discrepancies. Third, our proxy for evaluating public responses and dialogic interaction

⁵⁷ Hyojung Park, Bryan H. Reber, and Myoung-Gi Chon, “Tweeting as Health Communication: Health Organizations’ Use of Twitter for Health Promotion and Public Engagement” *Journal of health communication* 21, no. 2 (2016): 188-198.

between politicians and public solely relied on retweets and ‘favorite’ numbers, future studies may examine more constructive proxies such as comments or even public opinion in the news media.

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