

Restorative Power of Empathetic Communication for Participatory Governance and Community Well-Being

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Our study unravels the interrelationship between empathetic communication, participatory governance, and community well-being during crises such as the pandemic. Existing research has solemnized the role of empathy in communication during an organizational crisis. However, it has a limited focus on a global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has altered people's behavior and expectations. We theorize that empathy in communication increases the effectiveness of messages communicated during unprecedented situations and invokes a sense of participation among people. We interviewed 60 service industry leaders from India, Nigeria, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. We complemented our interview data with another round of interviews with 10 young service industry professionals who worked as corporate communication practitioners. We aimed to understand how service industry professionals defined and used empathetic communication during global crises in a progressive social media landscape. The analysis unveils the power of empathy to balance emotional states, people's expectations during a crisis, participatory governance, and community well-being as the overall outcomes of a message delivered during crises or otherwise.

Keywords: empathetic communication, participatory governance, community well-being, framing theory, COVID-19 pandemic

In the past two years, economies worldwide have witnessed manifold transformations and threats imposed by the global pandemic (Ramakumar, 2020). Intermittent lockdowns, economic collapse

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(Sukharev, 2020), and social exclusion (Mogaji, 2020) are critical consequences that characterize this pandemic and other crises. Characteristically, crises have always warranted communication to manage ongoing situations (Denner, Viererbl, & Koch, 2019). There is an unsaid expectation from stakeholders and communities to obtain reliable and real-time information about the situation. The COVID-19 pandemic has not been exempted in this regard. The pandemic has created flow-on crises, affected the mental and physical health of people, and heightened emotional trauma and social anxieties among stakeholders (Macnamara, 2021). It has additionally cast responsibility on leaders across domains—including higher education, politics, the service industry, and others—to communicate with stakeholders.

Dinibutun (2020) defines leaders as social agents who inspire and influence others to move toward change. Leaders can capitalize on their and followers' potential based on the situation and circumstances. While using the given definition for this study, we identified leaders from different industries who inspired their stakeholders during the pandemic. We argue that these leaders holding positions of high responsibility in their respective organizations became empathetic voices for the stakeholders during the pandemic crisis. They could do so with the help of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and even WhatsApp (Meyer, 2020). These platforms were extensively used to streamline the process of global communication (Zemke, 2020) during the crisis.

Communication via social media platforms during the pandemic helped people exchange thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions. In addition, many leaders were also using these platforms to discuss work, manage conflicts, mitigate issues, and coordinate with stakeholders. However, the most critical use of social media communication was to successfully increase the motivation of both internal and external stakeholders while empathizing with them in the given circumstances. Empathizing includes more than delivering a quality message to stakeholders and attributes to listening and understanding willingly (Mogaji, Adamu, & Nguyen, 2021). Thus, advocating the need for understanding peoples' emotions and expectations along with conveying a quality message is imperative. At the root of empathy lies an individual's ability to understand, feel, and care about listening to others. These elements are helpful in successful communication. In medicine and nursing, empathy and empathetic communication are considered critical for patient communication (Haribhai-Thompson, McBride-Henry, Hales, & Rook, 2022).

Similarly, in any interactive process in which trust and relationship building are central, empathetic communication can lead to better outcomes (Fuller, Kamans, van Vuuren, Wolfensberger, & De Jong, 2021). A fundamental element of empathy in communication is recognizing and responding to various stakeholders' perspectives. Empathy can help develop a sense of responsibility toward each other in a crisis, such as the pandemic, and foster adaptability and the ability to care. Therefore, empathetic communication can be a cornerstone for us and for highly responsible leaders.

Previous studies on empathy and empathetic communication have focused on diagnosing the enablers and outcomes of empathetic communication during a crisis, particularly in an organizational crisis (De Waele, Schoofs, & Claeys, 2020). They discussed empathy as a multidimensional construct, a leadership trait often used by practitioners for centralized organizational crisis management (Schoofs, Fannes, & Claeys, 2022). However, studies exploring empathetic communication while assessing its interrelatedness with community well-being are limited, particularly those seeking beyond organizational goals and image repair. As a result, there

has been an overuse of either the image repair theory (Benoit, 1995) or the situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007) to discuss communication during a crisis. However, the theories are criticized for being stringent and complex in guiding leaders using communication for crisis management (Chon & Kim, 2022).

Therefore, considering empathy to be the most widely accepted yet subjective human skill for maintaining human relations, we explore how social media enables leaders to communicate with stakeholders using an empathetic communication approach during a crisis. We build on media framing theory, social exchange theory, and motivating language theory. Likewise, it extends beyond the traditionally used theories and explores the following research questions:

RQ1: How does empathetic communication relate to successful communication during a crisis?

RQ2: Which specific frames in messaging does empathetic communication entail?

RQ3: How is empathy communication critical for increasing the stakeholder's participation?

RQ4: Which auxiliary factors in empathetic communication can enable community well-being?

Literature Review

Empathy

According to Sofronieva (2012), empathy originates from the Greek word "empathia," meaning physical love or passion. It is the ability to reflect, understand the feelings and emotions of others, and put oneself into another person's place. Empathy, as a skill, helps behave appropriately in a given situation (Fitness & Curtis, 2005). Aydin (2021) explains three components of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and compassionate empathy. To better understand these components, we refer to Guttman and Laporte (2000), who define cognitive empathy as knowing how others feel and understanding their perspectives. Decety and Jackson (2004) express emotional empathy as the ability to understand the emotions of others and resonate. Compassionate empathy is the ability to reciprocate with sympathy and show empathetic concern for others. These three components are essential for demonstrating respect in human interactions and situations.

Theoretically, empathy has been much debated among scholars because it lacks a clear and agreed-upon definition (Coplan, 2011; Engelen & Röttger-Rössler, 2012). Despite the many disagreements, substantial studies regard empathy as a phenomenon. In a recent study, Eklund and Meranius (2021) establish that there can be a consensus while defining empathy. They suggest that an individual can be (i) an empathizer only when he/she (ii) understands, (iii) feels, and shares another person's world, with (iv) self-other differentiation. Though these four themes are derived with the help of a comprehensive literature review, the authors believe there can be additional elements of empathy, given its subjectivity. However, for our study, we used the four key themes suggested by the authors to assess the prosocial behaviors of the selected industry professionals. We do so because empathy is a critical construct for predicting prosocial behaviors, including the act of working for the well-being of others (Laghi, Lonigro, Pallini, & Baiocco, 2018). Wynn, Ziff, Snyder, Schmidt, and Hill (2022) use the empathy paths framework to discuss how empathy in

the classroom can be a sociological construct. Similarly, Chung, Im, and Kim (2021) explore the multidimensionality of empathy in volunteering. These studies advocate that empathy can predict prosocial behavior and increase social interactions.

Furthermore, empathy is widely conceptualized from two perspectives: cognitive empathy (an individual's intellectual ability to understand someone else's emotions) and affective empathy (an individual's more voluntary and internal capability to ascertain another person's emotional state). There is a divide between the two, as scholars have addressed them separately in previous studies (Yu & Chou, 2018) and have overlooked their interactive nature. Recent work suggests that cognitive empathy may facilitate greater emotional control and that affective empathy heightens emotional reactivity (Thompson, van Reekum, & Chakrabarti, 2021). However, we argue that both are equally important because empathy cannot be practiced as a coerced trait. It is a part of an individual's expressed behavior (Fuller et al., 2021) and is essential to demonstrate good communicative behavior. Therefore, we focus on empathetic communication and discuss the role of language in the following segment.

Empathy: A Motivating Language Theory Perspective

Prior work suggests that there are subscales that contribute to empathetic communication. One suggested scale is the language used in empathetic communication. Clear and motivational language is critical for showing an empathetic response. A leader who imbibes empathy as an essential trait of emotional intelligence can benefit from using motivational language (Raina, 2022). Therefore, we undertake the tenets of motivating language theory (MLT) conceptualized by Sullivan (1988) and argue that motivational language is a strategic means of effective empathetic communication. The MLT presents a linguistic framework for communication driven by direction-giving, sense-making, empathy, and meaning-making.

Mayfield, Mayfield, and Neck (2021) highlight the positive role of motivational language in an organizational setting. It has been discussed as a direction-giving language that responds to people's concerns. The literature has established MLT in discourses on leader-follower (Chen, Liang, Feng, & Zhang, 2023) and employer-employee (Men, Qin, and Jin, 2022). Some studies have explored the positive outcomes of motivational language on employees' self-efficacy, future directions, and employee citizenry (Gutierrez-Wirsching, Mayfield, Mayfield, & Wang, 2015). However, there is a gap in applying the theory to a broader community and its usage for persuasion. We extend this theory and argue that empathetic communication represents civility, concern, compassion, emotional understanding, and perspective-taking. We focus on the use of social media for empathetic communication.

The leaders used empathetic language during the pandemic to display their situation, humanity, and sensitivity toward the community. Simultaneously, they exercised the art of persuasion to calm amid panic through their posts, tweets, e-mails, and personal messages.

Empathetic Communication: A Framing Theory Perspective

Empathetic communication is built on the tenets of empathy and its implications for mass communication and public relations. Different scholars have noted the importance of empathy in

communication and have claimed that it is multidimensional. Hall and Schwartz (2019) theorize that empathy is divisible into different subscales. Empathy is essential in managing a crisis and its outcomes through empathetic communication. Hyland-Wood, Gardner, Leask, and Ecker (2021) propose using empathy as a frame to express support to people and influence actions to deal with a crisis that must also be considered in the context of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, many leaders across industries, political parties, and domains used empathetic messages to bond with the people. The messages were positioned using specific empathetic frames that targeted people at the receiving end. The empathetic structures used in their conversations have been believed to cause emotional engagement with people during the global health crisis. The emotional responses shared through messages, social media posts, telephonic conversations, tweets, images, and hashtags during the pandemic merited much attention and behavioral reactivity from the people (Zhao & Zhan, 2019). These specifically empathetic messages used the phenomenon of framing.

Framing is a common phenomenon used in media theories. A frame allows the message's sender to create a narrative from a selected perspective (Zhang & Trifiro, 2022). Similar to empathy, psychologically, a frame is defined as a cognitive structure of memory, while in sociology, frames are perceived realities of the world (Kuan, Hasan, Zawawi, & Abdullah, 2021). Nevertheless, framing theory has been prevalent in the communication sciences, particularly mass communication. However, scholars argue that the theory can be further developed and applied to other areas or contexts (Scheufele, 2004). Therefore, we found it meaningful to discuss and extend framing theory in the context of empathetic communication. Our study argues that highly empathetic communication is driven by altruistic motives, which focus on the challenges of people during a crisis. During the pandemic, the empathetic frames used in communication were able to reduce panic and create possible solutions.

The frames underscored the desirable consequences and compliance with recommended behaviors during the pandemic (Borah, Austin, & Yan, 2022). Moreover, empathetic communication motivated individuals to sympathize with each other and to take their civic responsibilities more sincerely during the crisis. In addition, we suggest that empathetic listening is critical, considering the complex nature of any crisis and its impact on different communities.

Community Participation and Governance: A Social Exchange Theory Perspective

Community participation and governance operate on the principle of participatory democracy. It advocates for the empowered role of citizens and other nonstate stakeholders in public decision making (Coghlan & Miller, 2014). Bussu, Bua, Dean, and Smith (2022) explain that studies have focused on participatory governance in the context of institutional changes, public services, and technological implications. In such studies, community participation is a mandatory outcome, and none discusses the possibility of promoting its voluntary nature in uncertain situations. However, in this study, we use participatory governance to extend community engagement to discuss the value of social exchange during a crisis. The literature is focused on social exchange theory as the theoretical base, as it evaluates potential gains and risks (involved in an exchange). To elaborate on this further, we use social exchange theory.

Communicating with empathy and mindfulness during a crisis is a social exchange between the people and the leaders as they share information. So far, the social exchange theory has been validated in the context of leadership and social behavior (Chen & Spriphon, 2022), sharing of verified information (Xia, Wu, & Zhou, 2021), online groups in health-care communities (Ren & Ma, 2021), and B2B crisis (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). However, there is a dearth of literature on how social exchange via external communication driven by empathy can enhance people's participation for the community's benefit, particularly while dealing with the consequences of a crisis like COVID-19, which widened economic, social, and digital disparities. Therefore, we use social exchange theory to discuss important concepts of civic voluntarism and explore the factors influencing participatory governance from the benefit and risk perspectives during a crisis.

Community Well-Being

The concept of community well-being has continued to evolve over time. It implies a state of well-being that involves a combination of social, political, environmental, cultural, and economic parameters of living. Community well-being is vital for building resilience and reassuring development. It creates a supportive culture in which people are empathetic toward one another. Several studies theorize community well-being as a behavioral or psychological construct (Kemp & Fisher, 2022). It has also been discussed as a theory of change, but only in the context of more explicitly focusing on mental well-being. Recent literature has skewed toward the health-care perspective, where the phenomenon of community well-being is examined during the pandemic.

Choi, Kim, and Lee (2020) labeled the implications of the pandemic on mental well-being as the second pandemic. Okabe-Miyamoto, Folk, Lyubomirsky, and Dunn (2021) explored well-being from a social context where the pandemic derailed people's lives by extending physical and social boundaries. Another study by Nurunnabi, Almusharraf, and Aldeghaither (2021) theorized about the challenges of well-being in higher education during the pandemic. Together, these studies have focused on only one dimension of well-being and are more relevant for counselors, experts, health-care professionals, or researchers who explore this domain.

Consequently, previous studies have overlooked community well-being as a holistic concept from the perspective of communication sciences. However, this study attempts to generate novel insights by discussing how empathetic communication influences community well-being. We explore how empathy can drive people's participation and lead to the well-being of a community during a crisis and beyond that.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach, guided by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). For this study, we needed to find individuals who held positions of high representation in their respective organizations and were engaged in sharing empathetic content during the pandemic. We approached such individuals across different platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Given our limitations as researchers, we focused on four countries—India (South Asia), Nigeria (sub-Saharan Africa), Mexico (Southern North America), and the United Kingdom (Western Europe)—for data collection. Each selected country had an

increasing scope of social media communication in innumerable ways. According to a survey published by Statista, the number of social media users in India is among the highest after China, followed by Nigeria and Mexico, which are where WhatsApp and Facebook are used extensively (Dixon, 2023). However, the number of users in the United Kingdom is comparatively lower than in other countries.

We interviewed 60 industry professionals (Table 1), whom we call "leaders" throughout the study, to explore and comprehend their individual experiences. These leaders are professionals who have extensive backgrounds working in various managerial roles and who are accountable for executing communication tasks sporadically. We then complemented the data by conducting additional interviews with 10 corporate communication practitioners (Table 2), who corroborated the insights of the previous interviews.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants.

CHARACTERISTICS	No. OF PARTICIPANTS (N = 60)
PILOT STUDY (N = 08)	India – 03 UK – 01 Nigeria – 02 Mexico – 02
MAIN STUDY (N = 52)	
Age:	
20–30	20
31–40	28
41–50	09
50–60	03
Gender:	
Male	41
Female	19
Industry:	
IT	25
Research & Consulting:	08
Academia	18
Freelancers	09
Work Experience:	
0–10	28
11–20	22
21–30	10
Country:	
India	24
UK	11
Nigeria	18
Mexico	07

Table 2. Characteristics of Participants (Additional Interviews).

CHARACTERISTICS	No. OF PARTICIPANTS (N = 10)
Age:	
20–30	04
31–40	06
Gender:	
Male	07
Female	03
Profession:	
Corporate Communication Practitioners	10
Work Experience:	
5–10	10
Country:	
India	10

Sampling and Participants' Recruitment

We used purposeful sampling to select the participants from our personal and professional database using the following criteria: participants needed to have (a) more than five years of experience; (b) a position of high responsibility, including managerial, administrative, or technical roles at strategic or operational levels; (c) a personal profile on either of the social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or any other; and (d) an active presence on their respective social media accounts, particularly during the pandemic. Our selection identified 71 potential participants whom we approached via e-mail and personalized messages on WhatsApp and other platforms. Eventually, we were able to interview 60 participants.

Data Collection

Before the online interview, each participant received an e-mail explaining the scope and objective of the study. In the same e-mail, we asked the participants to reflect on the following questions:

- Think about the recent communication you had with your stakeholder during the pandemic. To what extent does empathy play a role in that communication?
- When you think about the messages, pictures, or any other text you posted, re-shared, or tweeted on social media, what precisely can you identify as a display of empathy?

Interviews were conducted online between April and June 2021 using the Zoom application (Salmons, 2012), each lasting between 50 and 72 minutes. Additional interviews were conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

Initially, a pilot study with eight participants was conducted with the help of an interview guide (Appendix 1). The revised interview guide had four phases. Phase 1 focused on the icebreaking questions, encouraging the leaders to share their experiences of the changes caused by the pandemic while holding their formal positions with their respective institutions. The questions aligned with the dominant global issues faced by the community at large. The sentiments, logic, and critical factors behind the choice of an empathetic communication strategy drove phase 2. Follow-up questions were asked to divulge rich insights from the participants' responses. Phase 3 focused on empathy framing during both online and online communication. Finally, in phase 4, the emphasis was on understanding the potential impact of empathetic communication on the stakeholders and community.

The questions were driven by the theory-in-use (TIU) approach (Zeithaml, Jaworski, Kohli, Ulaga, & Zaltman, 2020). Argyris and Schön (1974) proposed TIU as an approach to infer from people's actions governed by real-life experiences. Similarly, we used the TIU approach to explore the mental models of leaders to generate new insights and theoretically advance the literature on empathetic communication. The TIU approach helped overcome the restrictions of force-fitting, a theory or framework for understanding the phenomenon of empathetic communication.

Data Analysis

We used a list of topics and the interview protocol to ensure sufficient responses during the online interviews. Although we also encouraged the participants to share their experiences openly, we did not steer them toward only giving theory-driven answers but listened to them actively (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We analyzed the data using NVivo and a structured coding process. The first two authors read the transcripts thoroughly, open-coded the data, and assigned labels to emerge concepts—specifically to highlight the aspects of empathy, empathetic communication, altruistic motives, participation, and community well-being. The other two authors also ensured intercoder reliability by coding randomly selected transcripts. During this phase, the authors contextualized and recontextualized the communication strategies used during the pandemic with existing reports, blogs, and academic literature. The authors analyzed the new categories and their relationship with the selected theories. Finally, selective coding was conducted to refine the codes and arrive at relevant themes (Table 3). The process continued until data saturation, as shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Coding Template for Identifying the Categories.

Focus Areas	Elements	Keywords	Categories
Best communication practices adopted during the Pandemic to handle the crisis.	Exploring alternatives Analyzing benefits Evaluating challenges Communicating possibilities	Constant communication, empathy, mindfulness, relationships	Leaders' vision, traits, and attitude played a key role in curating messages. The organizational culture and relationships were equally important in the communication process.

Stakeholder engagement and management during the crisis.	Building on the core values Seeking suggestions Promoting online communication Creating other channels of communication	Using social media, breaking barriers of hierarchy, encouraging participation, creating an open culture, giving them time to heal, providing resources	Building on stakeholders' experiences and enhancing engagement by involving them in planning and decision making. An open mindset and creating a culture of belongingness based on mutual respect and trust.
Framing and agenda setting to deal with the crisis	Leading by example Analyzing before communicating Avoiding fake news Optimizing all communication channels Using positive language	Involving the people, using all channels to communicate, selected responsible words, images, hashtags	Leaders tend to encourage stakeholders to empathize and understand the motives behind the message.
Mindfulness for leaders	Empathy and Compassion Seeking solutions Optimistic outlook Empathetic listening	Handling the situation and balancing the emotions, ensuring optimistic approach, agility, mental peace, work for all and take right initiatives	Leadership during a crisis demands a blend of knowledge and critical thinking. Mindfulness is a holistic approach optimal outcomes.
Community well-being as a collective responsibility.	Identifying issues Framing a holistic plan of action Strategizing for common good Being humanist	Emotional, mental, spiritual, financial, digital well-being, co-learning, and co-building	Leaders and people should embrace the changes and work toward the benefit of society. It is a mutual aid for all.

Table 4. Coding Table for Identifying Themes.

INITIAL THEMES	SUBTHEMES	MAIN THEMES
1. Relationship with stakeholders (n = 45)	Connections and	Motivation for Empathetic Communication
2. Previous networks (n = 23)	Networks	
3. Understanding each other (n = 20)		
4. Dependency (n = 28)	Trust	
5. Guidance and directions (n = 29)		
6. Transparency (n = 55)		

7. Prosocial motives (n = 39)	Selfless motives	
8. Selfless goals (n = 46)		
9. Social and moral obligations (n = 40)		
10. Positive message (n = 53)	Positive Frame	Empathetic Frames and Framing of Messages
11. Encouragement (n = 36)		
12. Giving hope (n = 43)		
13. Verified messages (n = 35)	Sense-making	
14. Clear message (n = 43)		
15. Revisiting posts and stories (n = 22)	Empathetic Listening	
16. Talking to people (n = 57)		
17. Inspiring words (n = 55)	Motivational Language	
18. Discussing possible solutions (n = 23)		
19. Giving good examples (n = 52)		
20. Online poles & webinars (n = 46)	Sharing information and seeking opinion	Participatory Governance
21. Collective decision making (n = 45)		
22. Co-creative activities (n = 23)		
23. Virtual events (n = 16)	Collaborative initiatives	
24. Supporting good initiatives (n = 17)		
25. Helping state actors (n = 25)		
26. Encouraging teamwork (n = 25)	Voluntarism	
27. Sensitizing on the current situation (n = 26)		
28. Moral grounds (n = 43)		
29. Digital citizenship (n = 34)		
30. Involvement of stakeholders (n = 45)	Engagement	
31. Mutual benefits (n = 38)		
32. Increasing online engagement (n = 28)	Collective responsibility	Empathetic Communication for Community well-being
33. Helping others (n = 36)		
34. Creating possible opportunities (n = 47)		
35. Economic contributions (n = 27)	Value building	
36. Encouraging online education (n = 55)		
37. Spreading a positive message (n = 28)		
38. Celebrating life (n = 40)		
39. Valuing interdependencies (n = 33)	Communication for change	
40. Self-reinforcement (n = 39)		

Results

Theme 1: Motivation for Empathetic Communication

Participants agreed that empathy is a critical factor in communication, particularly during the pandemic. Participants felt that their role as leaders or representative heads of respective organizations was not just operational but also emotional and empathetic. However, empathy in a communication process can only be practiced in the presence of these three factors: altruistic motives, relationships and connections, and trust.

Altruistic Motives

Participants expressed that altruism is driven by the desire and willingness to help others during challenging times. The leaders concurred that altruistic motives moved their messages during the pandemic. Their messages aimed to assist people in understanding the situation, learning to survive, keeping themselves motivated, and helping others in need. A participant (IT Professional-P5) quoted:

In times like these . . . I find that people become more empathetic. I felt the same, both personally and professionally. We ensured that the messages we shared either through e-mail or social media . . . were useful and hurt or offended them. Our motives were very humble. We wanted to help.

Relationships and Connections

Participants believed that personal connections and relationships were the two other determinants of empathy in an individual. They conveyed that because of the pandemic's political nature, valuing relationships, networks, and bonds with the people and the community widened their perspective and averted myopic understanding of the situation. It made them empathetic organically and motivated them to communicate and understand the situation of the people at the receiving end. A participant (Academician-P7) stated:

In any organization, bonding and relationships play a key role. The relationships that we have to make us more answerable . . . The same thing happened during the pandemic. Our students, faculty, staff, and even some board members shared their problems with us, which helped us understand what was happening to them. I would agree that I felt more empathetic because now we were so personally involved.

Trust

Participants unanimously agreed on the value of trust in driving empathy. They expressed that trust reduced interaction-related fears and invoked a sense of responsibility for one another. Sharing their own experiences, the participants agreed that they were mindful during the communication process, as they did not want to deceive stakeholders but wanted to encourage a collective feeling. As one participant (IT Professional-P11) said,

Because we knew that people trusted us, we became more cautious. As a representative body of knowledge, we respected peoples' trust and tried not to breach it. We shared all the information with full transparency. But were polite in our tone.

Therefore, we infer that the three elements mentioned above functioned on emotional values that sensitized the leaders to select a careful frame for their messages and convey them to the people. These elements were the usual boundaries that helped us determine how the leaders communicated during the pandemic. While altruistic motives made the leaders more attentive to the situation, relationships led to collective empathy development, and trust led to a transparent and open communication process.

Theme 2: Empathetic Frames and Framing of Messages

Participants noted that their communications had to be emphatic while recognizing the challenges for everyone. They added that they had to use specific empathetic frames for communication to influence the discourses around the pandemic and how people decided to deal with it. According to the participants, their frame selection had to be empathetic; otherwise, it would not have fulfilled their aim of connecting effectively with the people. The frames helped them socially construct the reality of the pandemic and share it with the people. They operationalized frames as words, texts, phrases, images, hashtags, and initiatives that were empathetic and motivational in the given situation. We narrowed the following frames, which used text and reasoning to operationalize the situation and correspond with clarity.

Mindfulness

Participants focused on mindfully framing the COVID-19 discourse on websites, such as Twitter, Facebook, etc., to reach people immediately. Their messages were constructed to confirm their presence on various social media platforms and in organizational-level communication arenas. All the messages, irrespective of the channel, focused on creating awareness and showcasing responsibility.

Concern and Care

The messages shared by the participants were driven by care and respect for the people. Many leaders confirm setting up teams and forming committees during this time to communicate with the people and tell them how much they are valued. A participant (IT Professional-P23) shared, "We would send a weekly wellness check e-mail to our employees to ensure they were doing okay."

Empathetic Listening

Participants felt that empathy and deep listening were critical to an empathetic communicator. They posited that one could respond better after listening to or gaining profound insight into the situation. Listening also involves keen observations, which could later be relayed in communication.

Humanistic Values

Participants shared that effective message framing was complex. It involved several reflections and self-reviews before sharing any information and made them realize that empathy could not be forced as a strategic tip for communication. It is the outcome of values and care for humankind. A participant (Academician-P9) mentioned, "We had our organization's 75th-anniversary celebrations, and to invoke the feeling of being together, we organized a virtual walkathon event. However, the message that we conveyed was self-love during challenging times."

Motivational Language

The wordings of messages shared on social media or otherwise were conveyed using motivational words and phrases to appeal to the people and encourage them during challenging times. A participant (Entrepreneur-P12) expressed,

I would earlier share messages or posts about best practices at our organization. During the pandemic, I realized that it was time to tone down. I particularly used words like us, together, collectively, one nation, global community . . . to ensure I could connect with the people.

Therefore, we concurred that with empathetic messages in a positive and encouraging tone, the participants could deliver a message of collectiveness and responsibility toward one another. Similarly, there was a display of care and concern through those messages.

Theme 3: Participatory Governance

Participants agreed that the participation and engagement of stakeholders are crucial during any crisis. They believe that stakeholders are representatives of the challenges in the respective communities and that they can identify possible solutions as well. However, the uniqueness of the pandemic, which caused social restrictions and isolation, demanded more. The pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of communities that were already struggling with different forms of inequality. The priorities differed for those individuals who had to transition from an offline mode of operation to an online mode without losing their jobs, homes, and families. Therefore, the participants contested their limited understanding of empathy. They suggested that empathetic communication during a crisis could no longer be limited to spreading positivity and encouraging people. It is something that calls for action.

"Communication for change" was the most commonly used phenomenon mentioned by most leaders interviewed. A participant (P5) explained, "Our message has to have an impact. The element of change is what I am talking about. Only when serious actions are being taken toward changing the people's situation will the people start engaging." In addition, the data informed us that during the pandemic, when the participants attempted to invite suggestions from people, conduct opinion polls, and involve the possible stakeholders in decision making, the stakeholders actively participated and took responsibility. The participants' insights help infer that empathy and empathetic communication serve long-term benefits. In

an organization, it encourages participatory governance and civic voluntarism. The participants leveraged this belief and attempted to use it by integrating both civic responsibility and collective benefit elements in their messages. They worked on solidarity, trust, and value for human emotions.

Theme 4: Empathetic Communication for Community Well-Being

Participants also indicated that empathetic communication manifests humanity in all spheres of living. The empathetically framed messages were classified based on whether they relate to the community, understand their challenges, alarm them of the consequences, extend possible help, and facilitate information sharing. During the pandemic, participants in their empathetic communication practice extensively used keywords such as care, respect, service, together, team, support, etc., hashtags, and positive images to convey positive sentiments. Most of these frames were used to promote people's collective interest in general. A participant (Academician-P18) said,

My support staff involved with manual jobs showed some resistance to the vaccination. There was a sense of risk and non-compliance. To address this issue, our team organized an initiative to personally call each of them and speak with their eldest offspring in the family . . . Well, I have to say it took us some time to convince them, but we were eventually successful. We then shared it on social media.

The participants' insights helped us conclude that empathetic communication could be informatively used to foster a collective worldview. During a crisis, it is critical to lay down the facts and target the right people to spread the word, which allows people to understand how their actions can benefit them and contribute to others. Therefore, it reinforces the idea of community well-being during unprecedented situations such as COVID-19. The participants believed that the pandemic created an obligation to reevaluate the understanding of community well-being and not visualize it as a mere outcome but as a collective goal for a better future.

Overall, the narratives shared by the participants gave an overview of how empathetically they used communication to manage the crisis internally and externally. We understood that these participants were highly cautious and mindful when communicating with people. Another significant finding was that participants' use of motivating language for communication influenced the psychological well-being of the people. It cultivated trust, openness, and a sense of belongingness among the people. They acknowledged that they first edged toward strengthening internal communication within their respective organizations. They believed it was imperative to understand the challenges of their teams already on edge. To limit the impact and consequences of the pandemic on the teams, the leaders organized virtual meetings at different levels. The sessions were meant to communicate and instill a sense of security in the employees. Each group was encouraged to share their issues and ideas about dealing with the challenges. The internal communication was empathetic and satisfied the employees' need for relatedness. The second step was communicating with external stakeholders. Participants used empathetic language to stand with the community and invoke a sense of collectiveness and self-efficacy in dealing with challenges.

The messages were factual and direction-giving to reduce uncertainties and risks. Therefore, we establish that empathetic communication psychologically impacts people, influences people's willingness to engage in a dialogue or initiative, and is particularly relevant in a crisis. People's engagement generates a sense of security and confidence that the people trust them and the organization. They are then motivated to employ more empathetic and participatory practices. In addition, the participants also argued that empathetic communication is effective irrespective of the medium. They suggested creating a balanced internal and external environment for communication driven by the principles of empathy and humanism.

Unlike the pandemic when communication was more reactive, they now believe in proactive, empathetic communication. They believe that kindness should be imbibed as a core value and that it should be organic. Through the data, we could infer that participants' use of empathetic communication has a more salient impact than just updating their employees or informing the community. Empathetic communication symbolizes high trust and engagement between leaders and people, further leading to empowered relationships and increasing participatory governance. Leaders and people then work toward common goals and align their words and actions. This benefits the overall community, both economically and socially. This is presented in Figure 1.

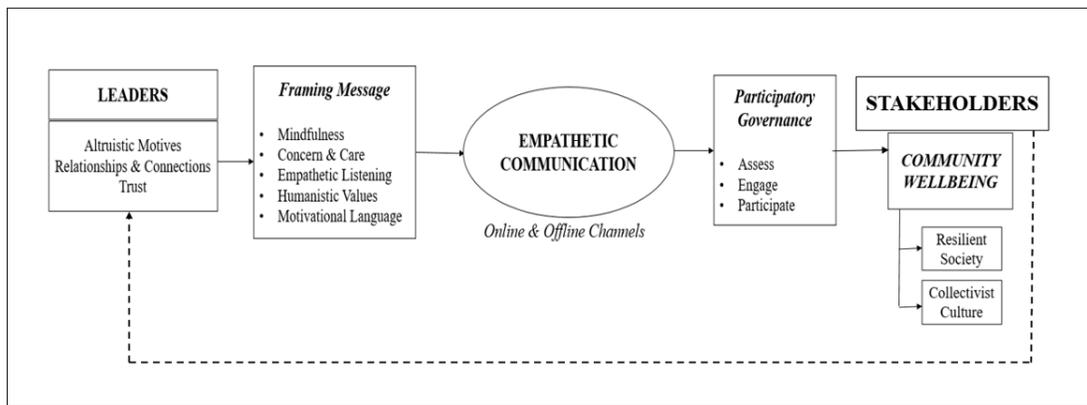


Figure 1. Empathetic communication for community well-being during a crisis.

Though the framework above is contextualized in the context of a crisis, we believe that even now, when the impact of the pandemic has lessened and work routines have been normalized, empathetic communication is still relevant during social media or face-to-face conversations. At present, different organizations have supporting teams that work with public relations, human resources, and communication departments to promote empathetic communication during both online and offline communication. They manage the current mode of communication by encouraging best practices and training leaders and employees in soft skills and humanistic values. The training does not necessarily involve teaching professional communication skills but urges empathetic engagement, civic responsibilities, and changing the trainees' mindset. Such training programs aim to prepare human capital for a resilient society and imbibe a collectivist culture that can deal with any crisis in the future.

Discussion

The thinking and practice of empathetic communication reinforce the relationship between the people amid the need for maintaining transparency, acknowledging the feelings of others, and dealing with a crisis like the pandemic. The scoping review and interviews that informed this study helped us identify the use of empathetic communication during the pandemic and reflect on the long-term outcomes. Whereas the narrative on stakeholder engagement and participation is increasingly powerful, and communication is accepted as an antidote to conflicting situations and decreasing proximity for various reasons, we see leaders who are holding positions of high responsibility in various industries becoming empathetic to such crises and, in many cases, acting as mentors or guardians to the stakeholders. The study confirms that empathetic communication determined by human emotions and proper time judgment helped leaders do so during the pandemic.

Empathy was not embedded everywhere, despite the many challenges that occurred during the pandemic. However, these leaders, driven by highly humane motives, saw the value of empathy and trust and confronted traditional communication norms. They extensively used social media to connect with stakeholders and maintain transparency. In the face of increasing challenges in the personal and professional lives of the stakeholders, who were employees, customers, partners, investors, or fellow citizens, most were vulnerable during the pandemic. At this time, the leaders, like many others, also realized that despite multiple sources of information, an empathetic approach to communication was most helpful.

Now, these experienced leaders are confident that empathy is the key that gives them access to their stakeholders. This strengthened their relationship and also increased stakeholders' participation. Stakeholders' participation is valuable and can inform better decisions directed at community well-being. However, community well-being was a long-term goal for many leaders we interviewed. Understanding how we build a resilient society and embed participatory culture within organizations and society remains challenging and may be maneuvered through empathy and empathetic communication. However, empathetic communication and participatory governance still suffer from miscommunication, fake news, and propagated information, creating turmoil during a crisis like the pandemic. To create a collaborative and humane environment, empathetic communication must be meaningfully anchored in organizations and society. It can entail a collective effort led by senior officials, policy makers (Ansell & Gash, 2008), stakeholders, and, most importantly, an individual self. By embedding empathy in the value system, we can bring mental and structural change to develop more humanistic systems and promote the community's well-being.

Contributions

This study contributes to the current academic and market research field. First, the active use of empathetic frames, particularly on social media, demonstrates the value of humanism and civic voluntarism during difficult situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study advances Weinstein and Ryan's (2010) idea of help via autonomous motivation and prosocial behavior. It encourages a balanced and empathetic approach while communicating with people.

Second, communication professionals, public relations managers, and administrative heads can benefit from the research and imbibe empathy as a common trait in their practices. In communication, they can become sensitized to how an empathetic structure, motivational language, and considerate content can increase engagement. In addition, empathetic communication can be a groundbreaking point for professionals and leaders to understand people's vulnerabilities and offer solutions accordingly (Fairhurst & Cannoughton, 2014).

Finally, while most empathy research focuses on its implications for health care and social services, less effort has been directed toward understanding how empathetic communication is a component of societal change. We contribute by undertaking empathetic communication to advocate moral responsibility and implicate societal changes leading to community well-being in the long run (Jain, Mogaji, Sharma, & Babbili, 2022; Mogaji, Jain, Maringe, & Hinson, 2022; Mogaji, Jain, Sharma, & Babbili, 2022).

Limitations

Our findings indicate that empathetic communication is most effective when reinforced by mindful individuals who amplify expectations. Drawing on literature from health care, crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, and social studies, our study's recommendations are informed by a guided analysis. Future research could benefit from systematic literature reviews to establish consensus and explore diverse normative contexts. Given the exploratory nature of our study, further research at the intersection of empathetic communication and its moderators is warranted, relying on insights shared by expert leaders. Despite acknowledged limitations, our study sheds light on empathetic communication, participatory governance, and community well-being, offering valuable insights applicable across industries. Future research could delve into factors influencing participatory governance, considering variables such as age, professionalism, self-efficacy, and cognitive goals. In summary, our study underscores the significance of empathetic communication in crises and community well-being, paving the way for continued exploration and alternative research approaches.

Conclusion

We defined empathetic communication and its role during a crisis by drawing on the lens of participatory governance and stakeholder engagement. Empathetic communication relies on internal motives and external situations. Enlisting a two-way empathetic communication process for crises like the pandemic is vital. The foundations of our proposed communication approach are altruistic motives, trust, and relationships. These are critical to practicing empathetic communication underpinned by transparency, concern, and engagement. However, we acknowledge that the presented findings rest on specific normative preferences and subjective lived realities of the individuals we interviewed; therefore, the results may be recontextualized.

By bridging perspectives from social exchange theory, motivating language theory, and framing theory, we provide insights informed by leaders who practice empathetic communication during a crisis and plan to continue the same in the future. The insights unravel the motivational value of empathetic communication in propelling community participation and the role of participatory governance in acting for

the community's well-being during uncertain times. We believe the study can benefit educators, scholars, communicators, managers, administrators, social media managers, and policy makers. Furthermore, the study helps individuals by providing educational value, creating a culture of collaboration and care, guiding further empirical investigation, and establishing empathy as a critical predictor for stakeholder relationships and engagement even during a crisis.

Community well-being, an outcome proposed in the study, is as much about practicing empathy and empathetic communication as it is about implementing public policies. Empathy framing can be a regular practice to shed light on the value of human emotions, compassion, and sense-making in communication. Furthermore, empathetic communication from the leaders' end can give the community a sense of direction and belongingness. However, effective empathetic communication in a crisis requires higher altruistic motives, mindfulness, societal obligations, and value for human lives and relationships grounded in strong motivational language and an urge for community well-being.

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