2021

Discourse of Renewal: A Qualitative Analysis of the University of Montana's COVID-19 Crisis Communication

Haley Renae Gabel

DISCOURSE OF RENEWAL: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
MONTANA'S COVID-19 CRISIS COMMUNICATION

By

HALEY RENAE GABEL

B.S., Minnesota State University of Moorhead, Moorhead, MN, 2016

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in Communication Studies

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

December 2021

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Joel Iverson, Chair
Communication Studies

Greg Larson
Communication Studies

Meg Ann Traci
School of Public and Community Health Sciences

Gabel, Haley, M.A., December 2021   *Communication Studies*

Discourse of Renewal: A Qualitative Analysis of the University of Montana's COVID-19 Crisis Communication

 Chairperson: Dr. Joel Iverson

  The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a public health crisis that has affected lives and impacted organizations across the world. The pandemic has interrupted student learning and threatened universities nationwide. Crises are trying times for organizations, and when faced with a crisis, an organization has an obligation to keep its members informed; therefore, it must carefully choose how to respond and communicate about the crisis. This study uses discourse of renewal theory as a lens to analyze the University of Montana's communication about COVID-19, studying 37 pages of university emails and documents on the university website. Results indicate that messages did not explicitly reflect renewal elements, but rather revealed themes that connect to features of renewal theory.

Acknowledgments

Undoubtedly, finishing the requirements for a master's degree is a task that cannot be accomplished alone. I have much gratitude for various people in my life who've offered expertise, moral support, and guidance throughout this journey.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Joel Iverson, for his insight and knowledge in crisis communication. He is a brilliant scholar and a great friend. I am eternally grateful for his advice, words of encouragement, and time spent outside the office dedicated to helping me accomplish this goal. I could never have done it without him. Likewise, I am thankful for my committee members, Dr. Greg Larson and Dr. Meg Ann Traci, for offering their time, expertise, and suggestions. It has been a pleasure to have them both on my committee.

Additionally, I am immensely grateful for my daughter, Violet, who is my greatest blessing. Her smile, laughter, and vivacious personality have helped me in more ways than I could ever explain, and her mere existence has given me more motivation to finish this degree. I also have much appreciation for various other family members and friends, whose moral support helped me through all my trials and tribulations the past few years. They've never doubted my ability to finish.

Lastly, I would like to thank my former fellow communication studies graduate students, especially Sabrina Singh, who have offered feedback and shared their wisdom along the way.

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to understand how universities are communicating about the COVID-19 pandemic to their communities. Crises can cause many struggles but also hold a potential site of growth for an organization. This paper uses the discourse of renewal theory as a lens to examine the University of Montana's public-facing communication of the COVID-19 crisis. This study of discourse of renewal analyzes documents sent by the University of Montana (UM) during the initial 8 months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US to help identify places where the university can grow in terms of its crisis communication and as an organization.

The data will seek to help answer the following research questions:

1. How does the University of Montana's COVID-19 crisis communication reflect the discourse of renewal and its four subcomponents?

2. Moving forward, what recommendations can be made for the University of Montana to engage in discourse of renewal when dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and future crises?

Rationale

In the last decade, the United States has battled a wide variety of public health crises, from opioid abuse and gun violence to the 2014 Flint water crisis. Unquestionably, however, one public health crisis has emerged to become the most memorable of all. As of August 21, 2021, COVID-19 had taken the lives of roughly 700,000 Americans; in the year 2020, it was the third leading cause of death in the United States (CDC, 2021d).

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven itself to be an unprecedented global crisis that has affected nearly every aspect of the world we live in, from how we work, to how we learn, to how

we travel, to even how we interact. Strict physical distancing measures have morphed our existence into a more virtual one, encouraging "tele-everything", including "telework, telemedicine, virtual schooling, e-commerce and more" (Anderson et al., 2021). National border shutdowns and state-to-state travel restrictions haven't just kept people from going on vacation; these shutdowns, restrictions, and quarantines have even kept loved ones apart (Fitzgerald, 2020). Not only has COVID-19 impacted our day-to-day life; its impacts have had consequences on businesses and have even disrupted world trade and movements (Hidalgo, 2020).

The socio-economic implications of COVD-19 are endless, affecting agriculture, manufacturing industry, finance industry, healthcare and pharmaceutical industry, food sector, family dynamics, and more (Nicola et al., 2020). The pandemic has also posed a major disruption to higher education. "The pandemic threatens to significantly alter nearly every aspect of college life, from admissions and enrollment to collegiate athletics. These concerns extend to the financial future of higher education institutions in a time of considerable financial instability, both in the form of unexpected costs and potential reductions in revenue" (Smalley, 2021, para. 1). Universities were not prepared for these increased costs, considering their budgets already fluctuate from year to year based on student enrollment. Many universities across the United States, including the University of Montana, were already struggling before the pandemic, and the increased costs associated with running a university during COVID-19 (i.e., online instruction and proper cleaning of facilities) puts many universities on an uncertain financial path. In spring, 2020 semester alone, officials estimated that coronavirus would cost Montana University Systems $18 million dollars before the end of the school year (Neuman, 2020).

Unfortunately, infectious diseases are a part of human history, and if history is any indicator, they are not going away anytime soon. A crisis such as a pandemic can have

devastating effects on students and greatly threaten a university's financial situation (Booker Jr, 2014). During outbreaks of infectious diseases, a university has a financial and organizational imperative to control the narrative regarding the outbreak on their college campus.

Universities have an imperative to control the narrative during a crisis for two reasons. First, in times of crisis, those connected to a university (students, faculty, staff) look to the university's administration for guidance about how to respond to the crisis. Second, by controlling the narrative, a university can potentially avoid bad press, which can tarnish the university's reputation.

Although it is difficult to prevent any emerging infectious disease from impacting an organization, we can change our responses to such crises as they emerge and create better responses to help support the members of an organization and the communities they serve. Colleges were hit especially hard by coronavirus and are eager to return to normal operations (Nietzel, 2021). However, students and faculty are hesitant to return to such operations when COVID-19 is still killing people across the world (Hartocollis, 2020; Lumpkin, 2020). By understanding how one university handled this crisis, it is possible to understand how other universities can handle these types of crises, which is vital considering that we may have more waves of COVID-19; furthermore, coronavirus likely won't be the last global pandemic that will threaten college campuses.

Literature Review

In order to understand how COVID-19 impacted college campuses across the United States, it is essential to know what the disease is and how it quickly became a crisis that has threatened public health and college institutions nationwide.

COVID-19

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus." (World Health Organization, n.d.). A "novel" disease is a new disease that has not previously been identified. The coronavirus disease, a name officially given by the WHO on February 11, 2020 is abbreviated "COVID-19"; CO' standing for 'corona,' 'VI' for 'virus,' and 'D' for disease (World Health Organization, n.d.). The WHO first became aware of the new virus in 2019, which is the reason for the "19" in the name.

Many different types of coronaviruses exist, such as ones that cause common colds, which typically include mild upper-respiratory symptoms (National Institute of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, 2021). Like other contagious respiratory infections, COVID-19 is mainly spread through exposure to respiratory droplets in the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes; however, it has a much higher mortality rate than other respiratory illnesses (Maragakis, 2021). When compared with influenza, for example, COVID-19 has a mortality rate approximately 10 times higher than most flu strains (Maragakis, 2021). Those most at risk for severe illness, including hospitalization or death, include people aged 65 or older, and those with underlying health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, chronic respiratory disease, overweight or obesity, pregnancy, cancer, other immunocompromising diseases, and more (CDC, 2021b).

Becoming a Crisis

When China first reported news of an outbreak of a "novel" dangerous virus on December 30th, 2019, it became clear that this disease had definite potential to impact the entire

world. Afterall, the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, a city with a population larger than 11

million and with one of the largest transportation hubs in China (Levenson, 2020).

At the time of the CDC's first update on the then-new coronavirus outbreak in January

2020, China had just 45 cases and two deaths. Two cases in Thailand and one in Japan were

directly linked to travel from Wuhan. That day, the CDC began screening passengers on direct

and connecting flights from Wuhan at New York, JFK, and San Francisco airports in the United

States; unfortunately, this action was too late.

Just weeks later, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the United States, on

January 21, 2020, and was linked to direct travel from Wuhan. In mid-February, 2020,

community transmission in the US was confirmed. By mid-March, all 50 states, the District of

Columbia, New York City, and four U.S. territories had reported cases of COVID-19 (CDC,

2020).

By the end of 2020, the United States surpassed 20 million infections and more than

346,000 deaths from COVID-19. Globally, cases rose to 83,832,334 and 1,824,590 deaths

(American Journal of Medical Care, 2021).

COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

With a global pandemic taking the lives of people around the world daily, the FDA began

to expedite clinical trials on developing vaccines to help protect people from the coronavirus.

(FDA, 2021a). Fortunately, in just a little under one year after COVID-19 was first detected, the

Pfizer/ BioNTech vaccine was approved via emergency authorization from the FDA on

December 11, 2020 for people aged 16 and older (FDA, 2021a). One week later, on December

18, Moderna received emergency use authorization (EUA) for its vaccine against the disease in

adults ages 18 and older (FDA, 2021a). The Johnson & Johnson vaccine received EUA on

February 27th, 2021, for indication in adults ages 18 and older (FDA, 2021a).

On May 10th, 2021, the FDA expanded its EAU for the Pfizer vaccine to include

adolescents aged 12-15 (FDA, 2021b). The Pfizer vaccine became the first to receive actual FDA

approval on August 23, 2021 (FDA, 2021c); just a couple months later, on October 29, 2021,

Pfizer received EUA for use in children ages 5-11 (FDA, 2021d).

On November 19, 2021, the FDA approved the use of booster shots for Americans 18 and

older after 6 months past receiving their second Pfizer or Moderna vaccine (CDC, 2021f). As of

December, 2021, there is no vaccine authorized for use in children under age 5.

Montana Bans Vaccine Requirements. While many corporate companies such as

Google, Facebook, United Airlines, and Walmart began requiring vaccines for employees to

return to work in-person, Montana businesses became unable to do so when Republican

Governor, Greg Gianforte, passed a state law banning vaccine mandates by employers (Samuels,

I., 2021).

The law, which took effect in the summer of 2021, states that vaccine requirements for

employees are considered discrimination and violate human rights. Montana House Bill 702

"prohibits an employer from refusing employment, barring a person from employment, or

discriminating in any term, condition, or privilege of employment based on vaccination status or

whether the person has an immunity passport" (NBC Montana, 2021). The exemption includes

long term care, and healthcare facilities where compliance would result in violtating regulations

or guidance set by Medicare or Medicaid services or the centers for disease control and

prevention. (Montana State News Bureau, 2021).

Such a law makes it difficult to control the spread of disease in an area where it's illegal for businesses to mandate vaccines for employees.

Amidst a global pandemic killing off people by the thousands and threatening lives of everyone in its path, universities have had to adapt to life in a pandemic. Because the illness is airborne, college campuses are a breeding ground for the virus. Socializing, dorm life, meeting or studying with friends, attending in-person classes or events, and use of public transportation are all activities that involve prolonged personal contact; these activities make college campuses a high-risk environment for spreading the virus (CDC, 2021e).

Impact of COVID-19 on College Campuses

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on colleges and universities across the United States. The pandemic has affected universities, as well as students, on many different levels. The crisis has impacted universities on a financial level and has also caused major disruption to student learning (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Following CDC recommendations on COVID-19 responses such as social distancing to reduce spread, college campuses across the United States have had to adapt to new ways of learning. As of September 9, 2020, only about four percent of colleges were conducting fully in-person and 23% primarily in-person instruction, with the remaining using hybrid models or teaching primarily or fully online (Walke, et al., 2020). University of Montana president, Seth Bodnar, noted that during Fall 2020 semester, roughly 4,000 of the university's courses were pushed online, hundreds of indoor classrooms were rearranged, and approximately 12 outdoor classrooms were set up on the Missoula campus.

The abrupt switch away from traditional learning to online has led to student concern over the quality of remote instruction, as well as increased anxiety about their progress in their education (Hawley, et. al., 2021). In one survey, 20% of students reported that the pandemic impacted their ability to graduate on time (Polikoff, et al., 2020).

In addition to education concerns, students have struggled with their mental health, safety, finances, and relationships during the pandemic (Hawley, et. al., 2021). The coronavirus outbreak has led to increased rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among college students across the United States (Wang, et al., 2020).

Furthermore, international students were affected by travel restrictions, both in terms of being unable to return to their home countries or being in their home countries at the time restrictions were placed, making them unable to return to campus (Martel, 2020). In addition to travel-related stress, shutting down campuses and moving to online has further challenged international students, because many of them rely heavily on campus facilities for support; the added stress of being unable to freely travel to see family further complicates their situation (Sahu, 2020).

Aside from the pandemic's effects on students themselves, the outbreak has also made a significant financial impact on universities. For starters, fall 2020 post-secondary enrollments in the United States overall saw a 2.5% drop compared to 2019 (Sedmak, 2020). Undergraduate enrollment alone decreased over 3.6%, or over 560,200 students, compared to 2019 (Sedmak, 2020). The University of Montana itself saw a 4.5% enrollment drop in Fall 2020. Dave Kuntz, UM director of strategic communications, attributed this decrease directly to the pandemic. The restriction of international students further contributes to declining enrollments (Cardoza, 2020).

In addition to enrollment declines, universities have faced financial hardship due to reduced state funding, as some states begin to cut higher education funding (Whitford, 2021). The pandemic also created unexpected costs. One survey found that 62% of business officers reported that their institution had spent under two million dollars in "unanticipated budget expenses related to COVID-19" (Inside Higher Education, & Gallup, 2020). About 23% noted spending between two and five million dollars, and 18% said they spent over five million dollars. The greatest expenses included disinfecting and cleaning campus facilities, instituting remote instruction, and COVID testing and contact tracing.

COVID-19 has affected universities on many different levels, affecting both the students and the universities themselves. The pandemic has forced college institutions across the United States to have to face this crisis and learn how to share essential information about their crisis response to their audiences.

Crisis and Crisis Communication

Communication scholars have placed great emphasis in the study of crisis communication, seeking to understand and explain how crises impact organizations and how organizations respond to and communicate about them.

A crisis, as defined by Seeger and colleagues (1998), is "a specific, unexpected, and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals" (p. 233). A crisis has three characteristics that differentiate it from other negative experiences: (1) surprise, (2) threat, and (3) short response time (Hermann, 1963). These three characteristics are what brings a mere "troubling event" to a "level of crisis" (Ulmer et al., 2015, p. 6).

As further explained by Coombs (2007), the uncertainty and unpredictability of crises, as well as the threats created by them, prompt quick responses from organizations and can have the potential to create great harm, thus impacting the post-crisis outcomes of the organization. An organizational crisis evokes "unwanted visibility on the organization and is likely to endanger health or environment, or seriously impact reputation or ability to do business" (Jacques, 2014, p. 10).

According to Ulmer and colleagues (2015), crises are commonly divided into two categories: intentional and unintentional. Intentional crises are purposely initiated with an attempt to harm an organization; some examples include terrorism, workplace violence, and sabotage. Unintentional crises, however, are "unforeseeable or unavoidable" (Ulmer, et al., 2015, p. 12). Natural disasters, disease outbreaks, unforeseeable technical interactions, product failure, and downturns in the economy are five types of unintentional crises.

Crisis Communication Theories: Corporate Apologia, Image Repair Theory, & Situational Crisis

Crisis threatens public safety, economic loss, and reputation loss. Crisis communication is a broad range of research that explores the organization-stakeholder relationship, studying the organization's communication before, during, and after a crisis. Researchers have developed a variety of crisis communication theories to help understand and manage these unpleasant events.

Corporate apologia, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory are three theoretical approaches to managing organizational crises. These theories argue that organizations that utilize effective crisis communication can succeed in protecting and repairing their image before, during, and after a crisis.

Corporate apologia focuses on managing the threat created by an attack on an organization, featuring defensive communication strategies used with the intention of apologizing for wrongdoing (Hearit, 2006). Image repair theory builds upon corporate apologia; it contains a list of communication strategies aimed at taking responsibility for actions of wrongdoing, with a goal of repairing the organization's reputation (Benoit, 1997). Situational crisis communication theory "evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level" (Coombs, 2012, p. 138).

As Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015) go on to explain, the previous three communication strategies focus on one aspect: managing the threat to the organization's image during the crisis. While these theories are commonly used crisis communication theories, they have some limitations.

These theories are limited by focusing on the crisis response stage rather than the post-crisis stage. Renewal theory shifts the focus to a more future-based approach and addresses the post-crisis stage, focusing on how the organization will rebuild after the crisis. As Ulmer and colleagues (2015) argue, "reputation and image are important organizational concepts, but they do not always play a central role in resolving organizational crises" and "rebuilding, learning, and opportunity" can be more important (p. 29).

Furthermore, as Xu (2018) argues, focusing on only reputation has another downfall; an organization only focused on image restoration in the aftermath of a crisis can create the appearance that it only cares about its own success and shows little concern for its stakeholders or the community it serves. Studying a crisis from a renewal standpoint is a much more effective organizational communication strategy (Ulmer et al., 2015). Renewal theory is beneficial to an

organization, because it creates a focus for organizations to strive for in the aftermath of crises, while also increasing stakeholder confidence. To expand, "what makes renewal responses so effective is they mobilize the support of stakeholders and give these groups a vision to follow to overcome the crisis" (Ulmer et al., 2015, p. 31). Afterall, as Ulmer and colleagues (2015) note, narratives of "blame, culpability, image, or reputation", are never dominant themes that arise after the crisis (p. 31).

In fact, not only do crisis responses emphasizing threat and reputation lack those qualities of providing a vision and supporting stakeholders; focusing on threat can actually lengthen the life cycle of the crisis (Ulmer, et al., 2015). Organizations that see crises only as threats, rather than potential opportunities, are likely to communicate with defensive or manipulative strategies, which can intensify the crisis (Nathan, 2000). Recognizing threats, while simultaneously recognizing opportunity for renewal, manifests into an organizational approach that includes rhetorical sensitivity, ethical communication, organizational learning, and a focus on the future (Ulmer, et al., 2015).

Image repair theory, corporate apologia, and situational crisis communication are not entirely inappropriate theories for studying crisis, as crises can cause great harm to an organization's reputation. However, although crises can threaten an organization's image, they can also create opportunities for organizational change, opening the potential for renewal and growth in the post-crisis phase, as detailed in the discourse of renewal theory.

Discourse of Renewal Theory

The discourse of renewal theory (DRT) describes how crises create important opportunities for organizational growth, transformation, and renewal. DRT focuses on crisis

communication that emphasizes "learning, growth, ethical communication, transformation, and opportunity" (Heath, 2013).

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) were the first scholars to study crises as opportunities for renewal. This changed the way scholars think about, and study, crisis response, focusing on the effectiveness of crisis communication, rather than the failures of it. Their initial research was advanced, and in the next few years, more research emerged that examined crisis response in terms of effective communication and renewal.

In 2001, Ulmer studied Malden Mills' CEO's post-crisis communication after a fire destroyed the plant. Rather than focusing on fault, blame, and saving the reputation of the company, Aaron Feuerstein communicated about values and stressed his appreciation for, and dedication to, his employees and the community. One year later, Ulmer and Seeger then compared the crisis response of Mr. Feurstein to that of CEO Milt Cole after the 1998 Cole Hardwoods fire. They found that both CEOs cared deeply about their employees and the communities they served, made it clear in their responses, and stressed a commitment to rebuilding. Themes of "strong commitment to stakeholders, an immediate and unequivocal commitment to rebuild, and crisis as an opportunity for renewal" much contrasted to previous crisis communication that stressed issues of blame or image (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 1).

Following those initial ideas of positive change resulting from crisis, scholars continued to develop and define their idea of renewal, learning how renewal rhetoric can increase support from stakeholders and the general public (Seeger, et al., 2003; Ulmer et al., 2006; Ulmer, et al. 2007).

While continuing to study crisis as opportunity, the scholars found four features of DRT that effectively aid in organizational rebuilding: provisional communication arising from necessity, prospective communication envisioning a sounder future because of the crisis, optimism about the organization's ability to respond and improve as a result of the crisis, and leader-based communication, as opposed to traditional spokesperson communication (Ulmer et al., 2007). They found these elements can effectively guide an organization's crisis response, helping it communicate in a way that increases the likelihood of renewal after a crisis.

Through a variety of case studies, the scholars refined these ideas to propose four key theoretical components of DRT: organizational learning, ethical communication, prospective vs. retrospective vision, and organizational rhetoric.

Organizational Learning

As previously mentioned, crises create important opportunities for growth and learning. Because crises are organizational failures, organizations must learn from the crisis in order to emerge stronger and to be able to better prepare for potential future crises (Simon & Pauchant, 2000). In organizational learning theory, Huber (1991) detailed a synthesis of processes and kinds of organizational learning. Learning involves four basic processes: 1) acquisition of knowledge; 2) distribution of information among various sources; 3) interpretation of information when commonly understood interpretations are available; and 4) storing knowledge for future use, in organizational memory. Organizational learning encompasses learning from failure, vicarious learning, organizational memory, and unlearning.

Learning From Failure. As Bazerman and Watkins (2004) argue, learning from failure is a vital component of organizational learning; if an organization fails to learn from failure, the

organization can be put in a devastating and vulnerable position to re-experience future crises. "Simply experiencing a negative event is not sufficient for learning...learning requires individuals to change their beliefs and attitudes so that, in turn, their behaviors are altered" (Ulmer et al., 2015, p. 186). This change in attitudes, values, and beliefs can allow for positive organizational change (Fuller et al., 2019).

An organization should communicate learning as soon as it can after the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2015). Both internal and external communication about learning should take place (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020). Internal communication involves making organizational change based on "correcting ineffective practices that could have led to the crisis" and communicating about those changes throughout the organization (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020, p. 167). Once internal communication is accomplished, external communication should take place; this involves informing stakeholders, the public, and communities the organization serves about how the organization has learned from the crisis. When stakeholders see an organization talk about learning, it heightens their confidence that the organization has settled the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2015).

Vicarious Learning. While learning can occur because of direct experience, learning can also stem indirectly, or vicariously, such as observation. Not only should organizations aim to learn from their own failure; they should also learn from failures of similar organizations, as doing so can help organizations avoid crises (Fuller, et al., 2019). Examining both good and bad crisis responses from other organizations allows organizations to engage in vicarious learning, which can help leaders avoid making the same mistakes as other organizations in their industries (Ulmer, et al., 2015).

Organizational Memory. When organizations learn from their own mistakes, as well as the failures of others', they must retain the knowledge they gained through a process called organizational memory; this helps prevent crisis from recurring, as "learning is of little use if the knowledge is not retained" (Ulmer, et al., 2015, p. 190). Organizations must continuously retain and process information through organizational memory. One way organizations can ensure learning is retained is to regularly talk about operations and lessons learned (Novak & Sellnow, 2009).

Unlearning. Aside from learning from failure, vicarious learning, and retaining the lessons learned, organizational learning can also stem from a process of unlearning (Ulmer, et al., 2015). This involves an organization unlearning bad habits or practices. For example, past strategies may not be appropriate for a current situation, in which case, the old strategy must be forgotten. Unlearning can be a vital tool in effective crisis management.

Organizational Learning in Deepwater Horizon Spill. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon Spill, Ulmer and Pyle (2021) use DRT to examine the communication of personal information officers (PIOs), or organizational spokespersons, during the crisis. They found multiple themes consistent with organizational learning. One example is that the organization had no crisis communication plan in place, and there were many ineffective practices identified that lead to troubles in the crisis response. PIOs even admitted that their formal communication training was limited. They admitted that their lack in effective crisis planning caused them to have a more reactive response, rather than proactive. They noted their reactive response as being one of the biggest failures in their crisis response and communicated about their efforts to be better prepared going forward, recognizing the benefit it would have on their stakeholders, as

well as future PIOs, noting "proactive stance and engagement is vital to building trust with stakeholders and working toward renewal" (Ulmer & Pyle, 2021, p. 47).

Furthermore, the PIOs exemplified willingness to unlearn in the way they changed public meetings. Initially, meetings were held between locals and the media. Locals were desperate for information, concerned about their families, homes, futures, etc. These anxieties lead to out-lashes and bashing. Recognizing the ineffectiveness of the meetings, members changed the meetings to be more informal, encouraging open dialogue and exchange of ideas. The attendees, which included locals and community members, said that they felt much more heard, and were also able to get more information, than they had in the previous setting. This willingness to unlearn led to stakeholder approval. Consistent with organizational learning, the PIOs identified, and admitted to, their mistakes and oversights, giving them the opportunity to unlearn ineffective practices, and to learn from their mistakes.

In sum, organizational learning is a process that involves prompt internal and external communication. When organizations are able to see failures as opportunities, learn from their own failures and those of other organizations, retain the wisdom gained through the learning process, and unlearn bad habits, they are more likely to experience renewal after a crisis.

Aside from organizational learning, ethical communication is the second essential element of discourse of renewal.

Ethical Communication

Organizations must practice ethical communication before, during, and after a crisis (Ulmer et al., 2015). Ethical crisis communication constitutes three main areas: strong

organizational values, positive stakeholder relationships, and providing significant choice for stakeholders.

Organizational values. Ethical communication requires an organization to determine what values should guide its crisis response; after all, "crises do not build character; they expose the character of the organization" (Ulmer et al., 2015, p. 29). As such, organizations that already practice ethical values such as honesty, trust, accountability, and responsibility before a crisis are more likely to create renewal post-crisis.

Anderson and Guo (2020) discuss the important role leaders play in this process, arguing that ethical communication in DRT stems from leaders "who set positive tones for post crisis communication and model ethical behavior including caring for employees, engaging the community, and designing organizational change for a better future after crises" (p. 215).

Stakeholder Relationships. Aside from instituting strong organizational values, it's also important for organizations to have stakeholder support. Ulmer and colleagues (2007) stress the importance of investing in stakeholder relationships at all times, even before a crisis occurs. Building strong, positive relationships with stakeholders helps organizations to respond to a crisis in a provisional, rather than strategic, manner. A provisional response is one that is authentic and realistic, rather than dishonest or manipulative (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020). A provisional focus derived from ethics is more inspiring to stakeholders, thus leading to increased stakeholder support. A provisional response is more effective than a strategic one, because "instead of developing responses designed to achieve some strategic outcome such as protecting the organization's image or escaping blame, renewal discourse is a more natural and immediate response to an event" (p. 131).

Provisional communication stems from a leader's character and is often built over time (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020). Honest and ethical leaders that have already established trust from stakeholders are more likely to succeed in renewal when faced with a crisis. If a leader has already-established trust and support from stakeholders, he or she will be able to communicate positively from values that are already grounded in ethics, rather than having to strategize with tactics focused on blame or responsibility. In ethical communication, being honest involves admitting uncertainty, telling stakeholders what you do not know, and communicating about what you do know (Ulmer & Pyle, 2021). An ethical leader is able to communicate authentically about the crisis in provisional communication, allowing them to engage in significant choice, which is another component of ethical communication.

Significant Choice. An organization should give stakeholders the opportunity to make significant choices (Ulmer et al., 2015). Significant choice entails "communicating the essential information about what is best for the stakeholders, while never manipulating information" (Ulmer et al., 2015, p. 231). Nilsen (1974) explains that humans must receive honest and unbiased communication in order to make rational decisions, and that dishonest or unclear communication can rob stakeholders of their ability to make rational, informed decisions. Giving stakeholders the opportunity to make significant choices increases the organization's likelihood of renewal following a crisis (Ulmer, et al., 2015).

Ethical Communication in the Deepwater Horizon Spill. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon Spill, there was evidence of failure to provide significant choice, which led to increased frustration from reporters. The PIOs reported difficulty with getting messages out in a timely manner. A delay in crisis messaging leads to a decrease in significant choice, which can interfere with stakeholders' ability to make sense of the crisis and their understanding of how the

organization is recovering. This shows how important ethical communication, which includes values such as timeliness of messaging, is to effective crisis communication.

Aside from examples where the PIOs negligence affected them, evidence of effective ethical communication was also prevalent in their communication during the oil spill (Ulmer & Pyle, 2021). Specifically, their response focused on meeting stakeholder needs and focusing on what's best for them. The aforementioned example of reforming the meetings to suit stakeholder needs is one such example that shows how their commitment to stakeholders and upholding values was effective in gaining stakeholder support.

In sum, ethical communication includes a provisional response that is leader-centric, stems from good character, and focuses on what's best for stakeholders and the community (Ulmer et al., 2007).

Prospective vs. Retrospective Vision

In addition to providing stakeholders with honest, ethical communication, effective communication should also be forward-thinking, which includes having a prospective focus (Ulmer et al., 2015).

Ulmer and Sellnow (2020) define prospective vision as "forward-looking communication that includes what the organization has learned through the crisis, it emphasizes ethical communication, and the communication has an optimistic quality" (p. 168). It encompasses both organizational learning and ethical communication.

As explained by Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007), most post-crisis theories, such as image restoration, are concerned with what *has* happened. These theories tend to focus more on the past, looking back on the crisis to try and pinpoint what went wrong, or who was to blame, in

attempts to deflect responsibility, hoping this will help repair the organization's reputation. A mindset that focuses on the past has a retrospective focus; however, renewal discourse takes a more future-oriented, or prospective, approach with a goal of rebuilding, rather than dwelling on the past (Ulmer et al., 2015). Rather than having a retrospective focus, DRT is a more forward-thinking orientation.

Instead of emphasizing communication focused on blame and denial, DRT moves past a retrospective focus to a more prospective one, highlighting how the organization will grow after the crisis. DRT "seeks to go beyond the parameters of image restoration to address the communication exigencies associated with rebuilding, recovery and revitalization" (Seeger & Padgett, 2010, p. 132).

This future-oriented approach makes DRT a more ethical, aspirational, and normative crisis communication strategy when compared to traditional ones, because it allows organizations to focus on correction rather than fault (Ulmer, 2012). Organizations that have created renewal after a crisis focus on building in the future, which also involves being optimistic; maintaining a prospective focus requires organizations to communicate optimism.

As Ulmer and colleagues (2015) note, "the discourse of renewal is inherently an optimistic form of communication and focuses on the ability of the organization to reconstitute itself by capitalizing on the opportunities embedded in a crisis" (p. 218). Organizations are more resilient to a crisis when their leaders remain positive and focus on the potential opportunity for renewal, rather than engaging in pessimistic discourse that dwells on potential threats created by the crisis.

Prospective Vision in the Deepwater Horizon Spill. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon Spill, Ulmer and Pyle (2021) found that PIOs had a difficult time maintaining focus on the future, because they didn't have a crisis communication plan in place. They PIOs admitted that their lack of planning caused them to have a more reactive response.

Although the PIOs had difficulty having a proactive response, they did report some evidence of successful prospective vision, mentioning that they succeeded in staying optimistic and focusing on renewal, rather than blame. They acknowledged the potential level of damage that could be created by the spill and were honest about it to their stakeholders, while also showing them how they were preparing and planning for future disasters. Members also made contingency plans for future scenarios.

In sum, DRT takes on a prospective, or forward-thinking, focus to crisis communication. Prospective communication ties directly into the third component of DRT, effective organizational rhetoric.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Cheney and Lair (2005) define organizational rhetoric as "drawing attention to issues and concerns in contemporary organizational life with a focus on issues of persuasion and identification" (p. 75). The goal of effective organizational rhetoric is to keep stakeholders, as well as the general public, informed about the organization's crisis response and help them make better sense of the crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020). When stakeholders feel aligned with the organization's efforts, it can lead to increased support from stakeholders, making them more likely to stay with the organization (Ulmer, et al., 2015). Leaders play an important role in this process.

As Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, (2007) note, because organizational leaders are in the spotlight and act as representatives for the organization, they play a powerful role in effective organizational rhetoric. Leaders are credible, "instrumental forces for overcoming crisis" (p. 131); therefore, communication about the organization's crisis response should be delivered by the leaders.

Ethical communication should take place both internally and externally. Internally, members or an organization should engage in free flow of ideas and sharing of information (Ulmer, et al., 2021). Externally, organizations need to do more than simply communicate information with stakeholders; they should also aim to inspire them. Leaders should inspire stakeholders and motivate them to stand by the organization through the crisis and provide them with a vision for rebuilding after the crisis (Ulmer, et al., 2015). By communicating hope and a commitment to stakeholders, leaders engage in effective organizational rhetoric, which increases an organization's likelihood for renewal.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric in the Deepwater Horizon Spill. During the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, PIOs reported that they had excellent internal communication, mentioning having a "one-team mentality" (Ulmer & Pyle, 2021). They described their internal dialogue as being open, honest, and professional, and productive. Externally, the PIOs were able to provide stakeholders with their vision for the future by informing them of hope for the future, detailing plans they had made for future operations and in case of other crises.

In summary, the discourse of renewal is a crisis communication theory that offers means to analyze organizational learning, effective crisis communication, prospective vision, and effective organizational rhetoric. Specifically, in the case of the University of Montana, analyzing the university's communication with stakeholders through a renewal lens will help to

assess the university's crisis communication efforts, while helping to offer suggestions for improving future crisis communication. I accomplished this through exploration of following research questions:

1. How does the University of Montana's COVID-19 crisis communication reflect the discourse of renewal and its four subcomponents?

2. Moving forward, what recommendations can be made for the University of Montana to engage in discourse of renewal when dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and future crises?

Methods

This project was conducted using a qualitative thematic analysis. The research question was answered through analyzing communication materials per the four components of the discourse of renewal theory. Key communication components from the perspective of discourse of renewal theory were examined.

Data Collection

The data for this study includes emails sent by the University of Montana, as well as documents posted on the university's website, between May, 2021 and October, 2021 that pertain to COVID-19. At the time of analysis, this range of dates was chosen to analyze the most recent months of communication about the pandemic.

In order to analyze emails specific to the pandemic, emails were examined using a University of Montana student email account. Emails were filtered according to the dates included in the timeline and were searched using keywords "COVID-19," "coronavirus," "covid," and "pandemic." The emails were then separated into their own folder. Since this

project studies the university's response to the more general population it serves (students, faculty, community, etc.), all emails that were specific to certain groups (i.e., graduate students) were then deleted from the folder and not included in the analysis.

Next, the university's website contains a section where all relevant COVID-19 information is updated, titled "Coronavirus Information." This webpage contains different tabs, such as "COVID Operations Plan, Vaccine Information, Mask Policy, and FAQs." Within the coronavirus information webpage, there is a specific section, titled "Coronavirus Information." This subsection contains the university's communication materials specific to its pandemic response; therefore, this specific webpage was the one used for this analysis. Within the coronavirus information section, messages from the university that pertain to COVID-19 are listed in sequential order, starting with January, 2021. There are separate folders for communication sent during Spring, Summer, and Fall of 2020; however, after fall, 2020 semester, the university quit organizing the communication within each specific semester, and began listing each communication in consecutive order by date sent.

Data Analysis

The discourse of renewal theory was used as a lens to help answer the research questions, with a goal of understanding what lessons can be gained from the University of Montana's crisis response. The discourse of renewal theory was selected due to the university's responsibility of communicating to its audiences during such a pivotal moment of uncertainty. The university's students, community, faculty, and staff rely on the university to provide them with reliable and honest information, and to help guide them through the crisis. This situation is not a matter of simply deflecting blame and protecting reputation. The pandemic is still ongoing; therefore, the university has an obligation and duty to continue to evolve and make appropriate choices, in

order to suit itself as an organization, as well as its students, faculty, staff, and community that support it.

Specifically, the data was examined using a thematic analysis involving two different coding processes: open coding and axial coding. Coding allows a researcher to explore how data relates to a theory. Coding through a lens of renewal theory helped develop themes consistent with the theory's four characteristics.

First, the data was analyzed to identify patterns of meaning within the messages. Open coding of the data allowed for the development of initial themes. Manual, hand-written notes of the documents were taken (Charmaz, 2006). Open coding helped to identify initial elements that fit within the recommendations of DRT.

After open coding, axial coding of the data took place. Axial coding helps a researcher to refine and narrow categories (Tracy, 2013). In axial coding, codes that resemble one another were merged to one category. In the process of axial coding, each theme was analyzed for messages that reflected each of the four components of discourse of renewal theory: organizational learning, ethical communication, prospective vision, effective organizational rhetoric.

Coding allowed for the development of themes that connect to renewal discourse. The themes were then used to help determine when the university's communication was either consistent with the theory, or in opposition to the theory's four components. Communication identified as being out of line with DRT's recommendations can be used as a lesson for the university's future, as well as for other organizations in future crises.

Specifically, the data was analyzed according to the theory's four elements: organizational learning, ethical communication, prospective focus, and effective organizational rhetoric. First, evidence of organizational learning could include changes the university has made to policies throughout the time-period analyzed. Ineffective practices identified and changed would exemplify unlearning, for example. Second, ethical communication from the university would include messages that are honest, open, and stress the institution's responsibility during the pandemic. Regarding the pandemic, ethical messages could include being honest about the threat posed by the virus, responding in a timely fashion, and providing a goal to help protect the safety of students, faculty, and staff. Afterall, the university has an obligation to help protect the people it serves, especially during a public health crisis; therefore, it should communicate that commitment to its people. Third, when coding to help identify messages and language consistent with prospective focus, the analysis coded for future-based language. Messages that mention the university's goals and provide the reader with hope and an insight into what the university hopes to look like after the pandemic will fit within the element of prospective vision. Finally, examples of effective organizational rhetoric within the university's crisis response would include messages that are inspirational and optimistic in nature. Providing the stakeholders with a vision encourages them to stick with the organization.

Findings

Analysis of messages from the University of Montana reveals the ways a renewing response to crisis requires organizational learning, ethical communication, prospective focus, and effective organizational rhetoric, as detailed in the discourse of renewal theory.

Studying the University of Montana's "Coronavirus Information" page, and using key words to search through email communications sent between May and October, 2021, resulted in

a total of 37 pages worth of data communicating about COVID-19. The 37 pages of data

revealing recent communication were analyzed in order to answer the following research

questions:

1. How does the University of Montana's COVID-19 crisis communication reflect the

   discourse of renewal and its four subcomponents?

2. Moving forward, what recommendations can be made for the University of Montana to

   engage in discourse of renewal when dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and future crises?

The analysis revealed one significant argument: While discourse of renewal theory has

four distinct categories, some overlap exists between them. This analysis brought to light the

notion that messaging is not always easily categorized by renewal.

First, categories are not discreet. A message can justifiably fit with more than one

component of renewal theory. For example, Seth Bodnar states, "At the heart of our mission here

at UM is an ethic of service, an abiding respect for others and a commitment to the common

good." This quote provides one example of how messaging can connect with multiple notions of

renewal theory. This message stems directly from a leader, provides an optimistic outlook and

vision, and represents the university's ethics; these features overlap and tie into different renewal

elements.

Second, much of the COVID-19 messaging did not contain a specific component of DRT

but gave a message of overall renewal. As a result, rather than coding for specific components, I

analyzed the messages for themes. The themes were then studied for elements of the four

components and reflect the notion that renewal rhetoric can represent multiple categories. Each

of the themes identified through this analysis connects with multiple notions of renewal theory.

Three primary themes emerged from this qualitative analysis: stressing COVID-19 vaccination, collective action, and adapting through the pandemic.

Research question 1: How did the University of Montana communicate within 4 elements of renewal?

The themes that emerged from the analysis show consistent attempts at engaging in renewal theory. Within each theme, multiple elements of renewal theory are present. Although the components of DRT did now show up explicitly in the messages, they do represent the four separate elements of renewal theory through each identified theme.

Theme 1: Vaccinations as a Path to Renewal

Encouraging and promoting COVID-19 vaccines was the first primary theme revealed. The university promoted, and encouraged, the COVID-19 vaccine throughout the entire period analyzed; messages stressed the importance of vaccination on a consistent basis. All messages regarding vaccines cite reliable sources, such as the WHO and CDC, to provide science-based facts and distribute up-to-date information on the vaccine. Communication was timely; messages were sent or posted each time the CDC updated guidelines for vaccinated individuals.

Not only did the university consistently provide up-to-date facts on the vaccine; it went a step further to encourage vaccination by incentivizing it for students. One email sent on May 10th is titled "earn a gift for getting a vaccine," using the headliner "pump up your immunity; pump up your wallet." Through June 14th, UM rewarded students with $20 in Town Pump gift cards for receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. The email goes on to state, "The COVID Response Team continues to explore creative ways to incentivize vaccination for students." This

messaging shows renewal, because the university is trying to incentivize vaccinations in hope of

overcoming the pandemic and moving forward with renewal.

Messages continued to encourage vaccination as the analysis progressed; further emails

read "need more reasons to get the COVID-19 vaccine? Read on:," and "Once you are fully

vaccinated, you can start doing more." A July email reminds the reader that "there is still time to

vaccinate before fall classes." When encouraging students to get vaccinated, messages state facts

such as "The COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective," "Once you are fully vaccinated, you

can start doing more," and "Vaccines offer a safter way to build protection (versus simply

recovering from COVID-19." Furthermore, the messages consistently remind campus members

that vaccines are free at the Curry Health Center on campus.

Again, these messages encompass the theme and connect to the general notion of

renewal. The university is using vaccination as a tool in hopes of achieving renewal and

overcoming the crisis. Incentivizing and promoting vaccination against COVID-19 alludes to an

overall approach of renewal.

It is also important to recognize how the university is responding within the constraints of

the law. Because of Montana House Bill 702 banning vaccine requirements for employers, the

university cannot mandate the vaccines. Although unable to legally require the vaccine, the

university remains determined to convince members to get vaccinated anyway. This approach to

promoting, encouraging, and incentivizing the vaccines show how the university is acting as

safety as it can within the legal constraints created by the governor.

UM's communication consistently stresses the importance of vaccination throughout the

entire timeframe studied. Occurrences of vaccination change emerged throughout the entire

analysis, with a steady stream of consistent messages pertaining to the value of getting

vaccinated. This theme connects with all components of renewal theory: organizational learning,

ethical communication, prospective vision, and effective organizational rhetoric.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning requires an organization to acquire and interpret information, to

store it through memory, and to distribute it to stakeholders. Part of responding to the crisis

required UM to study evolving information regarding the pandemic and vaccine information.

Because the vaccines were made available to the public after a short period of research,

vaccine rollout came with a lot of misinformation and hesitancy. Deception and rumors

regarding the COVID-19 vaccine ingredients, safety, and side effects circled the internet.

Various myths had to be addressed and debunked by the CDC: the vaccines contain microchips;

the vaccines make a human sick with COVID-19; covid vaccinations alter a person's DNA

(CDC, 2021g).

The university had to interpret vaccine information.; in this process, it ultimately made

the decision to support and motivate its members to get vaccinated against the coronavirus,

offering reminders and eventually adding incentives to vaccinate demonstrates learning. Sorting

through evolving data and taking vaccine encouragement and incentivization into its crisis

strategy is representative of organizational learning. The university consistently emphasized

vaccination as the best way to prevent COVID-19 and decrease likelihood of severe illness or

death, using messages such as, "The science behind the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines is

clear: Individuals are at a far lower risk of developing severe complications, being hospitalized

or succumbing to the coronavirus if vaccinated." Not only does this rhetorical strategy represent

organizational learning; it also connects with another component of discourse of renewal theory: ethical communication.

Ethical Communication

Evidence of ethical communication can be found through multiple points identified within the primary theme of vaccine encouragement and promotion. Seth Bodnar, UM President, hints at vaccines being an ethical choice when he states,

> "Of course, the way out of this pandemic is widespread vaccination, and there is no question that the best course of action is for all members of the UM family to get vaccinated now. The science is clear: The COVID vaccine is safe, it's effective, and it's the way to defeat this pandemic. So if you haven't yet rolled up your sleeve and done your part, please do so now. And if you know people who still haven't been vaccinated, talk to them about it. Encourage them to take this simple step to protect themselves and our community. Yes, getting vaccinated is a personal decision, but it's a decision that benefits us all, and it's a tangible act of service to our community in a time of need."

Furthermore, ethical communication represents an organization's values and requires crisis communication to be honest, ethical, and clear. The university made the communication choice to motivate its members to get vaccinated against COVID-19. This decision represents UM's organizational values, as being open, honest, and clear can illustrate value positions within an organization.

Messages encouraging vaccination provide clear, honest, up-to-date, and reliable information. The university backed-up communication regarding vaccine information by citing reliable sources, such as the CDC, WHO, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). New information provided direct links for the reader; for example, a link is provided when an August 27, 2021 update informs that "the FDA approved the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine" for ages 16 and older. The link directs the reader to the FDA's website, which provides more information on vaccine ingredients, the agency's process for evaluating and reviewing safety of

products, clinical trials on the Pfizer vaccine, effectiveness on the vaccine, and more. This update was sent the same week the FDA approved the Pfizer vaccine, and demonstrates just one example of how UM's crisis communication was timely.

Not only did UM advocate for widespread COVID-19 vaccination among the campus community; its messaging is honest in admitting that the vaccines are not entirely foolproof. One message explains that, particularly regarding the Delta variant, vaccinated individuals can still contract, and spread, COVID-19. These "breakthrough infections" (cases where a fully-vaccinated individual contracts the disease the vaccine was designed to prevent) also mean that vaccinated people can asymptomatically spread the disease. The COVID-19 vaccines are not 100% effective at preventing infection; however, the university addresses the positive facts, again stressing importance of getting vaccinated: vaccinated individuals with breakthrough infections have far less chances of severe disease, hospitalization, or death.

Not only was vaccine information reliable and up to date; it was clear. The university not only provides direct information and links here to go to find out more; it clearly states where individuals can go to get vaccinated. Messages mention several different places offering vaccinations: Curry Health Center on campus, Missoula Health Department, Southgate Mall, and various mobile clinics around town. The messages provide phone numbers, hours, and links to these various sites, making it very simple for someone to schedule their vaccination or to learn more information.

The first theme reflects multiple elements of ethical communication; the university shows attempts at communicating ethically by providing reliable, clear, honest, and up-to-date information. In addition to connecting with organizational learning and ethical communication, the vaccine promotion theme also connects with the component of prospective vision.

Prospective Vision

Messages encompassing the theme of vaccine incentivization are geared towards the future, providing an optimistic outlook of the community coming together to overcome the pandemic. The idea of prospective vision is alluded to, while not necessarily overt, with the first theme.

The university consistently encourages people to get vaccinated throughout its messaging, referring to COVID-19 vaccines as vital tools to help slow the spread of coronavirus and create a better situation for everyone. One message notes that "vaccination is the fastest way through this pandemic." Another email insists that widespread vaccination is "the best way to defeat this pandemic."

Such messages provide a prospective vision because by getting vaccinated, individuals are doing their part to "defeat" and "get through" the pandemic. The theme provides hope that widespread vaccination can change the current state of the pandemic. However, messages did not provide a future vision imagining a COVID-free campus. Rather, the messaging emphasized vaccination as a pathway to a better future.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Communication and conduct during a crisis represent an organization's future commitment to values and community. The University of Montana integrated COVID-19 vaccination into its rhetorical approach by promoting the vaccine throughout the entire time period of this analysis. Encouraging precautionary measures, such as vaccinations, that are proven to help prevent the spread of illness and protect the population. Furthermore, taking vaccine promotion into its rhetorical approach shows that the university is committed to ensuring

the health and safety of the community. Within effective organizational rhetoric, making

decisions that are in-line with stakeholder goals can help increase stakeholder support.

Furthermore, effective organizational rhetoric can involve messages that are inspirational

and optimistic in nature. Two previous messages that connect with prospective vision also tie

into effective organizational rhetoric, providing further instances of how messages can fit with

more than one renewal component: "vaccination is the fastest way through this pandemic," and

encouraging that vaccination is "the best way to defeat this pandemic." These messages provide

an optimistic vision for the audience, inspiring university members to get vaccinated.

In addition to these specific messages containing optimism, the overall tone within this

theme was optimistic in nature; it focused on the positive outcomes of vaccination rather than the

negative messages related to people not vaccinating.

Overall, within the theme of vaccine encouragement, the University of Montana showed

evidence of engaging in each of the four components of discourse of renewal theory. Renewal

theory argues the importance of keeping the public informed about the organization's efforts

during the crisis. The university made clear its efforts to get people vaccinated and remained

optimistic and inspirational in its messages to encourage vaccination. In renewal rhetoric, when

stakeholders feel aligned with the organization's efforts, it can lead to increased support from

stakeholders, making them more likely to stay with the organization.

Theme 2: Collective action

The second main theme revealed that connects to renewal theory was collective action.

UM's communication stresses that everyone has a "collective responsibility to one another," and

overall, a total of 50 words and quotes provided evidence of collective action. Messages use

"we" language to emphasize shared interests and goals in terms of working together to mitigate the spread of COVID and overcome the crisis. The word "together" alone was used 9 times, suggesting and encouraging collective action.

One such message reads, "now that we've come together, we want to stay together." This suggests that the university is considering there to be a conjoint effort between the organization and its stakeholders. It implies that, not only has there been established collaboration among university members; it encourages the campus to continue collective action to overcome the crisis. The message also reminds the reader of the importance of continued collaboration to prevent going back to the way things were in earlier stages of the pandemic, when shutdowns and cancelled classes disrupted the campus.

UM President, Seth Bodnar, further encourages group action when he states, "I implore all of us to come together to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in our community." In this message, the president is pushing for change by urging the campus community to act together to slow the spread of coronavirus.

In Seth Bodnar's September 2021 email, he coins the University's 2021 Homecoming theme as "The Heart of a Grizzly," calling it a "fitting call to action" as the campus comes together for homecoming week. The president goes on to state, "Despite the challenges we face, I have great confidence in our diverse community of Grizzlies to demonstrate 'The Heart of a Grizzly' and act in solidarity to protect our community." This statement from the president further emphasizes unitedness and collaboration that constitutes collective action; it also suggests that the president wants to set a positive example for the community. In addition, this statement provides further evidence of how messaging can overlap with multiple components of renewal theory, as further detailed throughout discussion of theme one.

In all, these messages that constitute the theme of collective action relate to the general notion of renewal theory. If members of the community continue to act in unity, it will increase the chances of slowing the spread of the virus and achieving renewal; therefore, using a collection action approach shows how the university is attempting to engage in renewal theory.

Collective action can be an important strategy to aid in overcoming a crisis. Specific to public health outbreaks such as COVID-19, collective action can be a vital tool in reducing the spread of disease. Mitigation efforts such as mask wearing, hand washing, and social distancing require joint effort to make an impact. The University of Montana consistently urges, and stresses the importance of, collective action in its messages throughout the entire analysis.

The theme of collective action ties separately into the renewal components of ethical communication, prospective vision, and effective organizational rhetoric. No evidence of organizational learning was found within this theme.

Ethical Communication

While messaging that compromises the theme of collective action does not explicitly reflect ethics, the overall theme emphasizes values, which can be ethical.

When UM President, Seth Bodnar, urges the campus to come together during homecoming week, his message demonstrates values when he states, "Despite the challenges we face, I have great confidence in our diverse community of Grizzlies to demonstrate "The Heart of a Grizzly" and act in solidarity to protect our community."

By encouraging university members to work together to practice mitigation strategies such as handwashing, mask wearing, and getting vaccinated, the university is encouraging behavior that reflects core values. While not explicitly representing ethics, the messages within

this theme allude to values of being together and emphasize the difference that collaborative efforts can make towards improving the current condition and achieving renewal.

Prospective Vision

A collective action discourse demonstrates comradery among group members; in turn, it can inspire stakeholders and create a prospective vision that looks past the crisis.

By demonstrating collective action, the university is inherently constructing the idea that members have shared goals and interests in terms of overcoming the COVID-19 crisis. This acknowledgment crafts a prospective vision: collective action to mitigate the spread of coronavirus will create opportunity to move forward after the crisis. Messaging consistently encourages collective efforts. During Fall, 2021 semester, when cases in Missoula County began to rise again, university messages remained focused on the future. When discussing the disturbing trend, the university urges members to work together to reverse the trend, stating "we also believe we can contribute to that outcome" by continuing collaborative efforts.

While not entirely overt, messages within the collective action discourse offer a compelling, prospective outlook focused on moving forward together to overcome the crisis. A collective action discourse can help to inspire stakeholders, as renewal theory asserts that, when stakeholders feel aligned with the organization, it boosts their confidence in the organization and increases likelihood for support.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

The University of Montana constructed an inspirational narrative of community engagement through the theme of collective action. In regard to effective organizational rhetoric,

an organization can engage in renewal by cocreating meaning between itself and its stakeholders. In doing so, an organization can construct realities of optimism and commitment.

Furthermore, details of effective organizational rhetoric in renewal theory discuss how organizations can become models in their industry through the narratives they create in their crisis response. UM President Seth Bodnar illustrates this when he states, "I have great confidence in our diverse community of Grizzlies to demonstrate "The Heart of a Grizzly" and act in solidarity to protect our community." This message not only encourages collective action amongst university members; it inspires the campus to act as influencers in the community by demonstrating comradery during a time of tension.

In summary, the theme of collective action connects with the component of effective organizational rhetoric. By cocreating meaning between the university and the campus community and encouraging collective action, the theme provides an inspirational narrative that connects to effective organizational rhetoric.

Overall, the second theme, *collective action*, exemplifies three elements of renewal theory: ethical communication, prospective vision, and effective organizational rhetoric. Additionally, this theme exemplifies how messages can connect with various renewal components, as seen through Seth Bodnar's inspirational words of encouragement during UM's "Heart of a Grizzly" homecoming theme.

Theme 3: Adapting Through the Pandemic

Aside from urging collective action, the University of Montana represents self-reflexivity and adaptation throughout the analysis. One action that represents how the university continued to adapt can be seen in the original establishment of the UM's Covid Response Team. In

February 2021, the university initiated and assigned a particular group of individuals to study the current COVID-19 trends and meet on a consistent basis to assess the information and make decisions. UM's covid response team is responsible for monitoring trends and new data and for recommending changes or enhancements to university policies. The team consists of professionals from a wide variety of fields that all play important roles in managing a health crisis: risk management, human resources, health, epidemiology, student success, and more.

Although the response team was initiated prior to the timeline studied in this analysis, the decision to assign a specific group to the important task of crisis management demonstrates how the university remained adaptable during the ever-changing pandemic. After more than one year of managing the COVID-19 crisis, UM recognized the need to formulate a distinguished task force to study and address the crisis. Furthermore, it's important to introduce and explain the response team, as the group was the primary messenger throughout this analysis.

During the timeframe analyzed, mask mandates and recommendations on campus were updated or changed three different times. These shifts constitute and continue the third theme discussed here.

Not only did UM change its mask recommendations and policies in response to shifts in the COVID-19 situation; it made these decisions based on facts and statistics regarding the pandemic and communicated this to its audience.

In mid-May 2021, Missoula County changed the mask mandate to a recommendation. In response, UM changed its campus mask mandate to a recommendation, while suggesting that unvaccinated individuals continue to mask. In this communication, the university mentions that

those decisions were based upon factors of low case rates in Missoula and a high vaccination rate in Missoula County.

Unfortunately, by July, the COVID-19 situation in Missoula County began to drastically change. The university's response to this shift in cases states, "The Missoula City-County Health Department has reported increased COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations in our county, including the presence of the Delta variant, and is encouraging indoor mask use for all." Cases in the county began to rise; in response to the uptick in cases, and with a new variant of the disease spreading, the university changed its mask recommendation on campus to suggest masks for everyone, regardless of vaccination status.

Throughout the summer, cases in Missoula County, and around the nation, continued to rise. On September 17th, UM's COVID response team responded, stating, "Over the course of this past week, Missoula County surpassed previous records for COVID-19 hospitalizations, total daily new cases and average daily new COVID-19 cases." This message informed campus members that on September 20th, the mask recommendation would change to a requirement for all indoor spaces on campus.

As crises are unpredictable, it is important for organizations to continuously process new information and remain self-aware and adaptable. Discourse of renewal theory recommends that organizations remain open to change and new ideas during a crisis, as doing so can increase stakeholder support and help increase confidence in the organization's ability to handle a future crisis.

The University of Montana must continuously take in new information, process it, and determine actions based on current case trends. Messages throughout the time frame analyzed

consistently provide evidence of how the university continuously adapts throughout the pandemic to make decisions that are in the best interest of the campus community, as well as the general public.

Just as the first two themes discussed connect with multiple features of renewal, the third theme, *adapting through the pandemic*, also ties with multiple renewal elements: organizational learning and ethical communication.

Organizational Learning

One example of organizational learning is that the university formed a specific covid response team in the first place. Although the group was created in February 2021, and not within the timeframe analyzed, it's important to recognize how this adaptation represents one way the university engaged in organizational learning. The university initiated and assigned a particular group of individuals from various fields to assess the evolving COVID-19 situation. The response team was not instituted until more than one year after the pandemic began. This demonstrates how the university recognized the need for designing a specific team to handle the evolving pandemic; therefore, the mere creation of the covid response team reflects how the university represented learning.

Furthermore, after the response team began, the team continued to meet on a consistent basis throughout the analysis. Assigning a group to repeatedly address the evolving pandemic information allows for continuous organizational learning, as renewal theory argues that organizational change can happen when organizations consistently take in new information, process it, and evolve based on learned information.

Evidence of organizational learning can be further exemplified through how the university continued to evolve and change policies throughout the analysis. During the five-month period analyzed, mask mandates and recommendations for campus were updated or changed three different times.

Not only did UM change campus masking recommendations in response to shifts in the COVID-19 situation; it made these decisions based on facts and statistics regarding the pandemic and communicated this to its audience.

In mid-May, Missoula County changed the county-wide mask mandate to a recommendation. In response, UM changed its campus mask mandate to a recommendation, while suggesting that unvaccinated individuals still continue to mask. In this communication, the university mentions how those decisions were based upon current factors of low case rates, and high vaccination rates, in Missoula County; however, by July, COVID cases again rose in the county. As such, the university began to recommend masks for everyone, regardless of vaccination status. As cases continued to rise, on September 20th, the mask recommendation was changed to a requirement for all indoor spaces on campus.

The University of Montana continuously had to take in new information, process it, and determine actions based on current case trends in the community. A September 17th email explains that "The COVID Response Team continues to assess daily the COVID-19 landscape in Missoula and on campus, as well as the emerging science regarding the COVID-19 Delta variant." This message assures the reader that UM's COVID Response Team is closely monitoring the ever-changing pandemic situation, and that the university is, in turn, making informed decisions based on the emerging data.

The process of seeking, analyzing, processing, and relaying new information represents one way the university utilized organizational memory, which is one component of organizational learning. Furthermore, the university showing willingness and ability to adapt in response to shifts in the current pandemic trends is representative of unlearning; old guidance on masking was updated based on what emerging data was showing and suggesting.

Ethical Communication

By processing information and adapting mask recommendations through organizational learning, the university communicated ethically about those changes. In order to achieve a renewing response through ethical communication, an organization must communicate its values by being honest and open.

Within the theme of adaptation, the University of Montana exemplified ethical communication by being honest and open with members regarding the changing pandemic. The university based current masking recommendations around current trends in the pandemic and admits multiple times that the COVID-19 situation on campus, and in the community, has changed.

One such example states, "One key component in COVID-19 case management that is substantially different than last year is the average number of close contacts reported during case investigation." This message demonstrates openness; the organization is willing to admit that the pandemic looks worse than it did the previous year, citing an increase in case numbers. The email goes on to explain that the average number of close contacts per person increased from 5-7 people to 20-30 people. A separate email states, "Unfortunately, the COVID-19 situation in

Missoula County has rapidly changed since the beginning of the school year," noting that

Missoula County hospitalizations and cases reached an all-time pandemic high.

Admitting that the current circumstances have changed represents the university's ability

to be open and honest when communicating with its members. Furthermore, using reliable

evidence and statistics to explain why the university made those decisions further demonstrates

ethical communication.

In summary, the third theme connects to two of the four renewal components:

organizational learning and ethical communication. No evidence of prospective vision or

effective organizational rhetoric was alluded to within this theme.

Overall, themes that emerged from the analysis show consistent attempts at engaging in

renewal theory. Although the components of DRT did not always show up explicitly in the

messages, messages do connect with separate elements of renewal theory through each identified

theme.

Research Question 2: Moving forward, what recommendations can be made for the University

of Montana to engage in discourse of renewal post-COVID-19 crisis?

There were many ways the university's messaging about the COVID-19 pandemic

reflected a discourse of renewal through connecting with each of the four components; however,

this analysis provides some recommendations for how it could improve further crisis

communication to better engage in renewal theory.

The most prevalent component revealed throughout the themes was ethical

communication; it was demonstrated within each of the 3 themes. The remaining components all

tied for occurrences within the themes; organizational learning, prospective vision, and effective

organizational rhetoric were each addressed within two of the three themes. While the first theme

of vaccine incentivization addressed all four components of renewal theory, the remaining two

themes did not demonstrate all components. The second theme demonstrated three of the four

elements of renewal, while the third theme demonstrated the least number of components, with

only two of the four.

Ethical Communication

Overall, the most prevalent component of renewal theory revealed through the themes

was ethical communication. Each of the three themes connected with ethical communication,

although there was stronger evidence in the first and third theme than there was in the second

theme.

To summarize, within the first theme of vaccine incentivization, the university

exemplified ethical communication in multiple ways. It showed strong evidence of ethical

communication by providing up-to-date, reliable, clear and honest information regarding the

COVID-19 vaccines. Messaging encouraging COVID-19 vaccines were backed by science-based

evidence and provided sources for the data from websites such as the WHO and CDC. Aside

from demonstrating ethical behavior by giving trustworthy information in its attempts to

encourage vaccination, the university's messaging was clear. Information provided made it easy

for campus members to understand resources helpful to finding out more information or where to

go to schedule an appointment to get vaccinated. Furthermore, the university was honest in

admitting the weaknesses of the vaccines.

There were also indications of ethical communication revealed through the second theme

of collective action. The theme of collective action emphasizes the importance of acting together

during the pandemic and urges campus members to act in solidarity to move forward in hopes of

overcoming the crisis. These messages suggest values of being together for the common good;

the action of acting in unity can be ethical in nature. Although messages within this theme didn't

explicitly communicate ethics, the overall theme of encouraging practicing collective action

alludes to behavior that can be ethical.

Much like the first theme, the third theme of adaptation proves strong evidence of how

the university communicated ethically about the COVID-19 pandemic to its audience. Messages

within this theme more explicitly indicated ethics, as was the case in the first theme of vaccine

incentivization. While navigating through the evolving pandemic, the university made informed

choices about changes to policies and recommendations. Throughout its communication

regarding these changes, the university remained honest and open, admitting multiple times that

the current COVID-19 situation had changed. Messaging specifically states that the current

situation is different than last years, which changes the essence of crisis management. As a crisis

evolves, remaining self-reflexive allows for an organization to participate in organizational

renewal; moreover, when the organization is able to communicate openly and honestly about its

modifications in its crisis response, the organization practices ethical communication.

Ethical communication is one component of renewal theory, and its implications have a

substantial impact on an organization's ability to overcome a crisis and gain trust from

stakeholders. During crises, which are times of great uncertainty, communicating ethically

requires that an organization remains honest and open, and that information provided is clear and

unbiased. Doing so can increase stakeholder confidence, trust, and support. Public health crises

can be terrifyingly unpredictable; in these situations where the community's safety is at risk,

members of an organization rely heavily on receiving information that is ethical. The University

of Montana provided strong evidence of engaging in ethical communication throughout this
analysis.

      Values: Commitment to Health and Safety. Another finding that deserves attention
was the overall allusion of being committed to the health and safety of the community. The
university's messages demonstrate its dedication to the safety of not only the immediate campus,
but to the Missoula community, local health offices, and the greater healthcare system and
general population.

      The university does have an obligation to keep its community safe; however, messages
succeeded in consistently communicating that the university is committed to ensuring the health
and safety of its community. Messages urge readers to "take it seriously" to "protect yourself"
and "protect others." The university consistently sent out reminders to wear masks, imploring
campus members to "do their part."

      Multiple messages also recognize the strain the pandemic is placing on the healthcare
system and address the importance of protecting the local hospitals and clinics, as well as the
greater healthcare system, from further strain. For example, when UM made the decision to
expand its mask requirement to all indoor spaces on campus, its communication states, "as result
of this troubling data, and to protect our local hospitals and clinics from further strain..." A
separate email acknowledges the pandemic is "placing great strain on our health care system and
threatening our hospitals' ability to care for patients, including those with non-COVID-related
illnesses or injuries."

      These messages showcase the university's inherent value systems by reflecting how the
university cares about people and systems outside of its own immediate campus and community.

Remaining committed to stakeholders is at the forefront of renewal theory recommendations, and acknowledging how a crisis can affect the greater population, as well as the healthcare system, speaks to the university's organizational values. Having inherently strong organizational values to help guide a crisis response can increase an organization's ability to engage in ethical communication, as an organization grounded in ethics can more easily respond with moral principles and ideas.

Organizational Learning

Two of the three identified in this analysis connected to the renewal component of organizational learning.

To summarize, within theme one, *vaccinations as a path to renewal*, the University of Montana emphasized vaccination as the best way to prevent COVID-19 and progress towards renewal. The university represented organizational learning through how it continued to study evolving vaccine data and took vaccine emphasis into its rhetorical strategy.

In theme three, *adapting through the pandemic* the university represented learning through a continuous process of interpreting new information, processing it, and evolving based on learned information. Furthermore, the university's messages within this theme indirectly represented the learning process by discussing how COVID response team is closely monitoring the changing trends and making decisions based upon newly acquired information.

Within the legal constraints, the University of Montana did effectively engage in learning overall. While the university's messages didn't explicitly detail the process of learning, messages did articulate learning through their meaning. Although the university didn't particularly frame its messages in terms of learning, learning was reflected in the messages.

University messages could more clearly represent organizational learning by explicitly describing the learning process. Merely mentioning the word "learning" would provide more concrete depictions of learning. For example, messages could have addressed the misinformation about vaccines and how studying vaccine information led to the approach of promoting vaccines. In the third theme, messages could articulate that "learned" information influenced modifications in the crisis response.

Prospective vision

Themes one and two connected with the element of prospective vision. In the first theme, the university encourages vaccination, providing messages of optimism that vaccines will help to "defeat" and "get through" the pandemic. This theme represents a future-based orientation that represents prospective vision.

In theme two, messages were not entirely overt, but provided a compelling, prospective outlook focused on moving forward together to overcome the crisis.

Overall, university messages connected with prospective vision by placing strong emphasis on optimism and moving forward. Two of the three themes provided compelling and optimistic narratives. The university's messages did not reflect on the past and remained focused on the future; however, messages did not provide a vision of what a renewed University of Montana would look like once overcoming the crisis.

While prospective vision in renewal rhetoric should be future-oriented and optimistic in nature, this component also argues that organizations should provide stakeholders with a renewed vision of how it will rebuild and grow from the crisis. Therefore, a suggestion within

this component is for messages to address an overall ambition and design for the university after the pandemic.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Theme one and theme two connected with the renewal component of effective organizational rhetoric. Within theme one, the university showed care for the community by taking vaccination into its rhetorical approach and made it clear to the audience that vaccinations are a part of its crisis response, while setting a tone that was inspirational and optimistic in nature. In theme two, the university constructed a reality of optimism by encouraging collective action and inspiring the campus community to set a good example for the community.

While the university strongly represented some notions of effective organizational rhetoric, I found this component more difficult to evaluate than the other three renewal components. Effective organizational rhetoric can be used to judge whether an organization achieved renewal; therefore, this renewal component seems most effectively evaluated by the overall outcome of a crisis. Evaluating overall effectiveness of the communication would be more easily assessed after the crisis; examining how confident messages made members feel during the pandemic, as well as evaluating university members' satisfaction in UM's crisis response after the pandemic, would make effective organizational rhetoric easier to evaluate.

Although university messages connected to some suggestions for engaging in effective rhetoric (keeping the public informed about the response, remaining optimistic, and responding in line with stakeholder needs), it's difficult to gauge whether the communication was effective overall, since the crisis is still ongoing.

Overall, the University of Montana engaged in renewal theory in various ways throughout this analysis, and messages provide suggestions for improving its crisis response. In addition, there is one significant finding that represents how the university messages opposed renewal theory recommendations.

Suggestion: Leader-Based Communication

A large area of attention is the fact that the university's messaging was lacking in terms of being leader-based. Renewal relies heavily on the leader, and the theory discerns that leaders play an important role in setting the climate before, during, and after the crisis.

Discourse of renewal is inherently a leader-based communication strategy, arguing that leaders are an instrumental force in encouraging renewal, as an organization's leader is in the spotlight, embodies the organization, and best represents its organizational values. Furthermore, leaders can effectively demonstrate prospective vision by setting optimistic tones throughout an organization's crisis response. Because their distinguished role places them in the public eye, they also play a powerful role in effective organizational rhetoric and setting the tone before, during, and after a crisis. As such, the organization's most senior member should be the primary source of communication.

While the university engaged in renewal theory in many aspects, little communication was leader-based. Through all the messages analyzed, only one message came from Seth Bodnar, the university president. This message was sent on September 23rd, toward the end of the five-month analysis. Instead of stemming from a leader, most of the messages came from the university's COVID Response Team.

A lack of leader autonomy is in opposition to DRT assumptions. A university leader, such as the president, was not the main messenger during the crisis within the timeframe studied. Although UM did still provide evidence of engaging in renewal theory through the four components, leader-based communication is at the forefront of renewal theory recommendations; therefore, more communication coming from university leaders, such as the president, would strengthen the university's attempts at engaging in renewal theory during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

This analysis offers several insights and provides multiple suggestions for further research. There are a couple of limitations to this study that can provide some suggestions for further research: small sample size and limited access to data.

Firstly, this analysis contained a small sample size, both in terms of timeline and the organization studied. This examination of the University of Montana's communication about the COVID-19 crisis only looked at five months' worth of the continuously ongoing pandemic. Furthermore, this study only looked at communication from one college regarding the pandemic. A broader sample examining more than one university (urban vs rural vs suburban campus; Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) vs. Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), etc.) could potentially bring out more nuances.

Secondly, I had limited access to data for which to conduct my research. I only had access to a student email account; therefore, the only emails I could analyze were ones sent to specifically students. UM faculty and staff members may have received more information, or

perhaps more nuanced messages. Furthermore, the only further data I could analyze was university-issued documents that were posted on UM's public website.

Although this project provided a good view of how the University of Montana's crisis communication coincided with renewal theory, perhaps a larger data set could provide an even broader, more in-depth picture of the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future Research Directions

Overall, each element of DRT has been found within the data analyzed, although limited in relation to collective action and adaptation, so future research should look for the themes in other organizational discourse. Since this project was conducted during an ongoing pandemic, perhaps other lengthy crises could be examined for the presence of renewal discourse and examine how it changes over time.

Further, the limitations discussed above provide some direction for further research regarding universities and renewal messaging pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. When considering this study's limited sample size, the first recommendation for further research would be to include a larger sample size, both in terms of the timeline and number of colleges examined. Five months is only a small fraction of the length of the ongoing pandemic; perhaps an expanded timeline could provide a more in-depth overview of how the University of Montana's communication regarding COVID-19 was in line with recommendations put forth by renewal theory.

Aside from examining a lengthened timeframe, it would be useful to research communication from multiple colleges/universities. Including more schools into future analysis could provide insight into how different colleges responded to the pandemic with renewal

messages. One might find distinctions between universities of conflicting geographics, cultures, or ethnicities. For example, communication may be different among rural vs. urban colleges; comparing messages from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) vs. Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs) may yield important distinctions about how different colleges communicate about crises.

The second suggestion for training consideration is to expand to analyze more than just university-issued documents. Speaking to administrators, for example, while simultaneously analyzing public documents, could help to identify possible gaps that may exist between administrators' intentions and the documents released to the institution's community. In addition, one could consider student thoughts and intentions. Identifying these possible gaps could provide insight into if stakeholder needs are being met. Furthermore, broadening the data set could also allow the researcher to see the gaps between the communication conceptualization vs the implementation of the university's communication plan.

Conclusion

Overall, this research project analyzes how the University of Montana's messages about the COVID-19 crisis communicated within the four elements of renewal theory and offers suggestions for how the university can improve its future crisis communication to better reflect the discourse of renewal theory. By applying discourse of renewal theory to that communication, three themes emerged. First, the vaccine was presented as a path to recovery and included all four elements of DRT. Second, collective action was emphasized but only with three of the four components, missing only organizational learning. Finally, adapting through the pandemic focuses on learning and ethics as the two elements of DRT. The presence of renewal discourse during the ongoing pandemic is of interest and encourages more work in this area.

The analysis reveals that messages are not always easily categorized by renewal. While messages do not always explicitly represent renewal components, their meaning can connect with elements of renewal. Ultimately, the themes developed through the university's messaging implied attempts at engaging in renewal theory, and the communication provided some recommendations for improving its future crisis communication. Messages did not overtly categorize renewal, but instead constituted themes that spoke to renewal elements. While the university represented strong evidence of renewal messages, it could improve future crisis communication by producing more leader-based communication, providing more distinct illustrations of the organizational learning process, and providing a clear vision of rebuilding and revitalizing after the crisis.

Surely, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the only health risk that is going to hit universities (i.e., the meningitis issue at Princeton). As such, universities need to be prepared to communicate about crises on their campus. More overt communication of the four elements of DRT should be considered within each theme of the messaging. Messages such as this should be tested with audiences to better evaluate this recommendation.

For renewal, DRT needs further development in order to provide directions for organizations to engage in effective rhetoric possibly during a crisis in order to establish the directions for renewal. Additionally, DRT in this sense should be evaluated as part of the best practices (Seeger, 2006). While the best practices discuss open and consistent communication, they are broad, varied, and not explicit. DRT can offer direction for communicating about the future after the crisis and how to improve during the crisis.

COVID-19 has produced a significant crisis for the University of Montana as well as many other organizations. Communication from the university did engage in renewal while

attempting to remain open and improve through the time studied. Using notions of renewal as

learning, ethical communication and a prospective vision has been utilized by the university.

This research suggests that while they provide strong messages of a future, the application of

DRT could improve their communication as well.

References

Anderson, L. B., & Guo, J. (2020). Paradoxical timeliness in wells fargo's crisis discourse:

Expanding the discourse of renewal theory. *International Journal of Business*

Communication, 57(2), 212-226.

Anderson, J., Rainie, L., & Vogels, E. A. (2021, February 18). *Experts Say the 'New Normal' in*

2025 Will Be Far More Tech-Driven, Presenting More Big Challenges. Pew Research

Center.   https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/02/18/experts-say-the-new-normal-in-

2025-will-be-far-more-tech-driven-presenting-more-big-challenges/

American Journal of Medical Care (2021, January 1). *A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in*

2020. https://www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020.

Bazerman, M. H., & Watkins, M. D. (2004). *Predictable surprises.* Boston: Harvard Business

School Press.

Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations*

Review, 23(2), 177-186.

Booker Jr, L. (2014). Crisis management: Changing times for colleges. *The Journal of College*

*Admissions, *(222), 16.

Cardoza, K. (2020, December 2). Enrollment By International Students In U.S. Colleges

Plummets. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2020/12/02/912669406/enrollment-by-

international-students-in-u-s-colleges-plummets

CDC COVID-19 Response Team, CDC COVID-19 Response Team, CDC COVID-19 Response

Team, Bialek, S., Bowen, V., Chow, N., ... & Wen, J. (2020). Geographic differences in

COVID-19 cases, deaths, and incidence—United States, February 12–April 7, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, *69*(15), 465-471.

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC]. (2021a, February 5). *Community, Work, and School*. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021b, March 29). *People with Certain Medical Conditions.* https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2021c, April 16). *COVID Data Tracker Weekly Review*. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2021d, April 23). *COVID Mortality Overview.* https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/mortality-overview.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021e, April 19). *Considerations for Institutions of Higher Education*. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021f, November 19). *CDC Expands Eligibility for COVID-19 Booster Shots to All Adults.* https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s1119-booster-shots.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021g, December 15). *Myths and Facts about COVID-19 Vaccines.* https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/facts.html

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications.

Cheney, G., & Lair, D. J. (2005). Theorizing about rhetoric and organizations: Classical, interpretive, and critical aspects. *Engaging organizational communication theory & research: Multiple perspectives.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate reputation review, 10*(3), 163-175.

Coombs, W. T. (2012). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding.* Sage Publications.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2005). An exploratory study of stakeholder emotions: Affect and crises. *The effect of affect in organizational settings*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Fitzgerald, H. (2020, March 15). What Does "Social Distance" Mean Within a Family? *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/03/what-does-social-distance-mean-within-a-family/608044/

Fuller, R. P., Ulmer, R. R., McNatt, A., & Ruiz, J. B. (2019). Extending discourse of renewal to preparedness: Construct and scale development of readiness for renewal. *Management Communication Quarterly, 33*(2), 272-301.

García, E., & Weiss, E. (2020, September 10). COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and

    U.S. education policy: Lessons from pre-pandemic research to inform relief, recovery,

    and rebuilding. *Economic Policy Institute.*

Hartocollis, A. (2020, July 3). Colleges Face Rising Revolt by Professors. *The New York Times.*

    https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/coronavirus-college-professors.html

Hawley, S. R., Thrivikraman, J. K., Noveck, N., Romain, T. S., Ludy, M. J., Barnhart, L., ... &

    Tucker, R. M. (2021). Concerns of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic:

    Thematic perspectives from the United States, Asia, and Europe. *Journal of Applied*

    Learning and Teaching, 4(1).

Heath, R. L. (2013). *Encyclopedia of public relations* (2nd edition ed.). Sage Publications.

Hearit, K. M. (2006). *Crisis management by apology: Corporate responses to allegations of*

    wrongdoing. Routledge.

Hermann, C. F. (1963). Some Consequences of Crisis Which Limit the Viability of

    Organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8. 61-82

Hidalgo, C. A. (2020, November 6). *How COVID-19 has affected trade, in 8 charts*. World

    Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/11/how-covid-19-has-

    reshuffled-international-trade/

Huber, G. P. (1991). Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the

    literatures. *Organization science*, *2*(1), 88-115. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2.1.88

Inside Higher Education, & Gallup. (2020). *2020 Survey of College and University Business*

    Officers (pp. 1–26).

Jaques, T. (2014). *Issue and crisis management*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Levenson, M. (2020, January 23). Scale of China's Wuhan Shutdown Is Believed to Be Without

   Precedent. *The New York Times.*

   https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/asia/coronavirus-quarantines-history.html.

Lumpkin, L. (2020, September 13). Unable to return to pre-pandemic normal,

   immunocompromised students find one another online. *The Washington Post.*

   https://www.washingtonpostf.com/road-to-recovery/unable-to-return-to-pre-pandemic-

   normal-immunocompromised-students-find-each-other-online/2020/09/13/66a9f16a-

   eeb8-11ea-ab4e-581edb849379_story.html

Maragakis, L., M.D. (2021, July 29). *COVID-19 vs. the Flu.* Johns Hopkins Medicine.

   https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-

   diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-disease-2019-vs-the-flu

Martel, M. (2020). *COVID-19 effects on US higher education campuses*. From Emergency

   Response to Planning for Future Student Mobility. https://cbie.ca/wp-

   content/uploads/2020/04/IIE-COVID%E2%80%9019-Effects-on-US-Higher-Education-

   Campuses.pdf

Montana State News Bureau. (2021, Dec 2). *MT hospital association: State's ban on vax

   mandates is now the law of the land*. Montana Right Now.

   https://www.montanarightnow.com/news/state/mt-hospital-association-states-ban-on-

   vax-mandates-is-now-the-law-of-the-land/article_83b03829-5d53-512b-9ba8-

   b2c894253923.html

Nathan, M. (2000). The paradoxical nature of crisis. *Review of Business*.

NBC Montana. (2021, November 16). *Gianforte: Vaccine mandates illegal in Montana.* https://nbcmontana.com/news/coronavirus/gianforte-vaccine-mandates-illegal-in-montana

Nicola, M., Alsafi, Z., Sohrabi, C., Kerwan, A., Al-Jabir, A., Iosifidis, C., . . . Agha, R. (2020). The socio-economic implications of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19): A review. *International Journal of Surgery (London, England), 78*, 185-193. doi:10.1016/j.ijsu.2020.04.018

Nietzel, M. T. (2021, March 4). Scores Of Colleges Announce Plans For Near-Normal Fall Semesters. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltnietzel/2021/03/04/scores-of-colleges-announce-pl

Nilsen, T. R. (1974). *Ethics of speech communication* (2. ed. ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Neuman, M. (2020, March 24). Coronavirus to cost Montana universities millions in losses, extra costs. *Missoulian*. https://missoulian.com/news/local/coronavirus-to-cost-montana-universities-millions-in-losses-extra-costs/article_93af0d49-1144-5395-93c8-c2d085e4c0cf.html

Novak, J. M., & Sellnow, T. L. (2009). Reducing organizational risk through participatory communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *37*(4), 349-373.

Polikoff, M., Silver, D., & Korn, S. (2020, August 4). *What's the Likely Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Ed?* Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/08/04/analysis-data-national-survey-impact-pandemic-higher-ed-opinion

Littlefield, R.S., Reierson, J., Cowden, K., Stowman, S. & Feather, C.L. (2009, September 15), A Case Study of the Red Lake, Minnesota, School Shooting: Intercultural Learning in the Renewal Process. *Communication, Culture & Critique, 2*(3), 361-383. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01043.x

Sahu, P. (2020, April 4) Closure of Universities Due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff. *Cureus Journal of Medical Science 12(*4): e7541. doi:10.7759/cureus.7541

Samuels, I. (2021, August 20). *Montana only state to ban vaccine requirements for employees.* AP News. https://apnews.com/article/business-health-coronavirus-pandemic-montana-8c47ca9308494b678f41f41764094800

Sedmak, T. (2020, December 17). *Fall 2020 College Enrollment Declines 2.5%: Nearly Twice the Rate of Decline of Fall 2019*. National Student Clearinghouse. https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/fall-2020-college-enrollment-declines-2-5-nearly-twice-the-rate-of-decline-of-fall-2019/.

Seeger, M. W. (2006). Best practices in crisis communication: An expert panel process. *Journal of applied communication research*, *34*(3), 232-244.

Seeger, M., & Griffin Padgett, D. (2010). From Image Restoration to Renewal: Approaches to Understanding Postcrisis Communication. *Review of Communication, 10*(2), 127–141.

Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. (1998) Communication, Organization, and Crisis. A*nnals of the International Communication Association, 21*(1), 231-276.

Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (2003). *Communication and organizational crisis.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Seeger, M., & Ulmer, R. (2002). A post-crisis discourse of renewal: The cases of malden mills and cole hardwoods. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 30*(2), 126-142. doi:10.1080/00909880216578

Simon, L., & Pauchant, T. C. (2000). Developing the three levels of learning in crisis management: A case study of the hagersville tire fire. *Review of Business, 21*(3), 6.

Smalley, A. (2021, March 22). Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). *National Conference of State Legislatures.* https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/higher-education-responses-to-coronavirus-covid-19.aspx

Tracy, S. J. (2013). Qualitative research methods. Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell.

Ulmer, R. R. (2001). Effective Crisis Management through Established Stakeholder Relationships: Malden Mills as a Case Study. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *14*(4), 590–615.

Ulmer, R. R. (2012). Increasing the impact of thought leadership in crisis communication. *Management Communication Quarterly, 26*(4), 523-542.

Ulmer, R. R., Seeger, M. W., & Sellnow, T. L. (2007). Post-crisis communication and renewal: Expanding the parameters of post-crisis discourse. *Public Relations Review, 33*(2), 130-134).

Ulmer, R. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (2020). Discourse of renewal: Understanding the theory's implications for the field of crisis communication. *Crisis Communication.*

Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2015). *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving From Crisis to Opportunity.* Sage Publications.

Ulmer, R. R., & Pyle, A. S. (2021b). Finding renewal in the midst of disaster: The case of the deepwater horizon oil spill. *Public Relations Review.*

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2021, March 26). *Coronaviruses*. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/coronaviruses.

U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2021a, December 15). *COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions.* https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/covid-19-frequently-asked-questions#:~:text=On%20December%2011%2C%202020,)%20of%20a%20vaccine.

U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2021b, May 10). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Update: FDA Authorizes Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine for Emergency Use in Adolescents in Another Important Action in Fight Against Pandemic.* https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-authorizes-pfizer-biontech-covid-19-vaccine-emergency-use

U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2021c, August 23. *FDA Approves First COVID-19 Vaccine.* https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-approves-first-covid-19-vaccine

U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2021d, October 29). *FDA Authorizes Pfizer-BioNTech*

    COVID-19 Vaccine for Emergency Use in Children 5 through 11 Years of Age.

    https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-authorizes-pfizer-biontech-

    covid-19-vaccine-emergency-use-children-5-through-11-years-age

Walke, H., Honein, M., & Redfield, R. (2020, September 29). *Preventing and Responding to*

    COVID-19 on College Campuses. Journal of the American Medical Association.

    American Medical Association.

    https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2771319.

Wang, X., Hegde, S., Son, C., Keller, B., Smith, A., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Investigating

    mental health of US college students during the COVID-19 pandemic: cross-sectional

    survey study. *Journal of medical Internet research*, *22(*9), e22817.

Whitford, E. (2021, February 18). *Where states are boosting or slashing higher ed funding amid*

    the pandemic. PBS. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/where-states-are-boosting-

    or-slashing-higher-ed-funding-amid-the-pandemic.

World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Coronavirus*. https://www.who.int/health-

    topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

Xu, S. (2018). Discourse of renewal: Developing multiple-item measurement and analyzing

    effects on relationships. *Public Relations Review, 44*(1).