

THESIS

COMMUNICATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF A K-12 SCHOOL
DISTRICT WEBSITE AND TWITTER ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF A K-12 SCHOOL DISTRICT WEBSITE AND TWITTER ACCOUNT

The COVID-19 pandemic was not a linear crisis, and this thesis seeks to explore the potential for liminal spaces throughout crisis cycles by analyzing a public K-12 school district's communication of the COVID-19 pandemic across their website and Twitter account. Using thematic iterative analysis, this research specifically explores the moments when the school district was still in crisis but also attempting to return to a state of normalcy. The analysis and findings yield practical recommendations for organizations that must balance stakeholder tensions, especially during repetitive crises.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW	4
Situational Crisis Communication Theory.....	4
Crisis Cycles.....	6
Pre-Crisis.....	7
During Crisis.....	8
Post-Crisis: Resolution and Recovery.....	9
Post-Crisis: Learning.....	11
Dialectical Tensions and Crisis.....	12
Crisis Communication in the Online Environment.....	14
Case: Poudre School District.....	17
A Timeline of COVID’s Impact on Larimer County and PSD.....	19
Objects of Study.....	25
Research Questions.....	27
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY.....	28
Data Collection and Analysis: Thematic Iterative Analysis.....	28
Qualitative Quality.....	33
CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS: STAKEHOLDERS AND THEMES.....	36
Stakeholders.....	36
The Collective Audience.....	37
Caregivers as Stakeholder.....	38
Students as Stakeholder.....	39
Faculty and Staff as Stakeholder.....	41
Primary Themes.....	44
Communicating Commitments as Primary Theme.....	44
The Commitment to COVID-19 Safety.....	45
The Commitment to Continuing Education.....	49
The Commitment to Privacy.....	52
Reducing Uncertainty Through Transparent Communication as Primary Theme.....	55
Shared Responsibility as Primary Theme.....	59
Empathy as Primary Theme.....	63
CHAPTER 5 – FINDINGS: DIALECTICAL TENSIONS AND STAGE OF CRISIS.....	68
Dialectical Tensions.....	68
Stability and Change.....	69
Disclosure and Privacy.....	76
Defining the Stage of Crisis.....	79
CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION.....	85
Theoretical Contributions.....	91
Practical Recommendations.....	92

Limitations.....	97
Areas for Future Research.....	98
REFERENCES.....	101

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis was not linear. The pandemic did not have simple start and end phases; instead, the COVID-19 crisis was a repetitive series of cycles in which, as one cycle ended, a second cycle began, leading to tensions and uncertainties. Traditionally, crises are understood to move through four distinct phases: (1) pre-crisis, before the moment(s) of crisis occur, (b) during-crisis, where the crisis is actively taking place, (c) post-crisis: resolution, where the moment(s) of crisis are over and it is possible for initial repairs to begin, and (d) post-crisis: learning, where folks who experienced the crisis learn from the crisis to better prepare for the future (Wooten & James, 2008). With COVID, however, once one moment of crisis ended, the moment did not shift immediately and smoothly to the next phase; from pre-crisis to during-crisis, and from during-crisis to post-crisis; rather, phases of crises overlapped. Such overlap is particularly relevant to health-related crises when information and variants of diseases change rapidly.

Below, I define the spaces between stages of crises cycles. Previous literature has not thoroughly addressed the moments between stages of crises, or the implications of crisis stages fluctuating between pre-crisis, during-crisis, and back again prior to moving into a post-crisis stage. The addition of between-stages spaces addresses the brief moments in time where a crisis is not fully in the pre-crisis stage, nor is it fully in the during-crisis stage. The between-stages spaces hold the possibility for crises to fluctuate.

The Coronavirus pandemic serves as an apt case study for studying these in-between stages because it disrupted daily life with new policies and practices emerging as the virus, and our ability to manage it, evolved. As crises evolve, organizations' strategies for handling the

crisis should change to best respond to the new phases of the crisis (Coombs, 2006; Maier et al., 2021; Sultana, 2021). In most literature scholars engage in learning based on what occurs during the stages of crisis, however there is untapped potential in exploring the possibility of learning from the between-stage spaces, as well. An exploration of between-stage spaces provides opportunities to learn and better prepare for future crises (Coombs, 2006). Should a crisis not easily fit into one stage or the other at a particular moment in time, learning from the between-stage spaces may be beneficial to prepare for the next, similar, crisis. The need for adaptation is particularly acute for the education system. K-12 education experienced significant disruption as the cycles shifted during the COVID pandemic, and understanding communication in these spaces can benefit the K-12 educational institutions that may experience crisis like COVID-19 in the future.

To help organizations best respond to moments that require a high degree of adaptation, this thesis uses thematic and iterative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2003; Tracy, 2021) to study the website and Twitter account of Poudre School District (PSD), a public K-12 school district, across the fall 2021 and spring 2022 semesters. I took an iterative approach to the literature to understand what stakeholders existed for PSD, how PSD varied their messaging during the COVID-19 crisis on Twitter and the district website across time, what dialectical tensions emerged during the pandemic, and how PSD identified the stages of the crisis cycle that PSD was in during the dates of analysis. Texts from the PSD Twitter account and the district website were analyzed to understand the changes in PSD's crisis communication strategy between August 2021 and March 2022.

This thesis provides an overview of how a school district during the COVID-19 pandemic communicates to four distinct stakeholders throughout the stages of the pandemic.

Chapter one of this thesis provides an overview of existent literature, looking specifically at the stages of crisis communication, stakeholder theory and the relevance of stakeholders during moments of crisis, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis. Then, I will turn my attention to the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the case. Finally, I present my analysis, the implications for the extant literature, practical implications based on my findings, and research limitations. The findings of this thesis reveal that disruption became the “new normal” while the school district continued to operate during the pandemic. Also, the findings demonstrate the possibility of crisis stages blurring together to create a liminal space. To better communicate during moments of crisis, as well as learn from past crises, it may be necessary to acknowledge that a crisis stage does not have to exist entirely in a pre-, during-, or post- stage at all, and instead can move fluidly between the stages. Therefore, this case study explains the implications for the between-stages spaces of a health-related crisis such as COVID-19. Future scholarship can then fill the gaps discussing in-between spaces of crisis cycle models.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis is, “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). Stakeholders are folks who have an interest in a subject, or in the case of crisis communication, who have an interest in the organization experiencing the crisis (McGrawth & Whitty, 2017). Perception refers to the physical realization, seeing, or noting an upcoming hazard and outrage, while stakeholders weigh the degree of acceptable risk (Malecki et al., 2021). Below, I explore the main pieces of relevant literature in more detail, specifically (a) Situational Crisis Communication Theory, (b) Crisis Cycles and the stages of (1) Pre-Crisis, (2) During-Crisis, (3) Post-Crisis: Resolution and Recovery, and (4) Post-Crisis: Learning, as well as literature on (c) dialectical tensions, and (d) crisis communication in an online environment. Once I have laid the groundwork of the literature, I will move in to describing the case that I analyzed for this thesis. Below I will start with an overview of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Stakeholders play a significant role in determining the reputation of an organization post-crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). As changes in public relationships and advances in social media make stakeholders more assertive in requesting and expecting to receive updates quickly (Marynissen & Laudner, 2020; Marynissen et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016), communicating frequently and clearly with such groups serves a crucial strategy for crisis management.

During crisis, stakeholders are often impacted and, in response, attempt to attribute responsibility for who or what caused the crisis (Lee & Lee, 2021; Mason, 2016; Coombs, 2004;

Coombs, 2007). Such attributions can evoke an emotional response from the stakeholders towards the organization, such as sympathy or anger, depending on who they assign responsibility to (Coombs, 2007). Stakeholders' emotions can inspire the organization that experiences the adverse event to act to protect their relationship with stakeholders (Weiner, 2006; Coombs, 2007). Related to stakeholders, responsible leadership is encouraged to communicate with stakeholders as a best practice (Boiral et al., 2021). Specifically, stakeholders should feel listened to and encouraged to reflect on their experiences and emotions (Boiral et al., 2021).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) explains this process of attribution of responsibility and “[predicts] the reputational threat presented by a crisis” and offers “crisis response strategies... to protect reputational assets” (Coombs, 2007, p. 166), one of which is for an organization to express empathy towards their stakeholders (Schoofs et al., 2019). SCCT categorizes crisis responses based on the crisis type to best understand the reputational impact on the organization (Coombs, 2007). According to SCCT, different types of crises should be managed differently, have different stakeholders who are responsible for the crisis, and feature different parties who may have been at fault for the crisis. SCCT identifies three types of crises: (a) victim, when the organization and stakeholders are at the mercy of the crisis and neither stakeholder nor organization has high crisis responsibility, (b) accident, where the organization is unintentionally at fault for the crisis that hurt stakeholders and the organization has some crisis responsibility, and (c) preventable, where the organization actively, knowingly, or purposefully is at fault for the crisis that hurt stakeholders and the organization has high crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Being able to identify the crisis type is critical to organizations determining how best to respond to the crisis.

In a victim crisis, although the organization is also a victim, organizations still face a potential reputational threat if previous crises exist within the organization (Coombs, 2007). An accidental crisis poses a higher potential for reputational threat, however, the possibility is not as high as a preventable crisis, where the organization's actions knowingly led to the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Natural disasters, such as pandemics, start as a victim crisis (Coombs, 2015), but COVID-19, the case studied here, fluctuated between a victim crisis—because it was a natural disaster—and an accident crisis—because stakeholders at various points in time may have claimed that an organization was handling a situation inappropriately (Coombs, 2015). In the context of a victim crisis, the organization may remind stakeholders that the crisis negatively impacted them, too, to increase empathy (Coombs, 2006), but in an accident crisis, stakeholders may be more determined to place blame on the organization itself (Coombs, 2015). As crises evolve and threats change over time, stakeholders and organizations must respond to multiple stages of a crisis and address multiple attributions of responsibility for the crisis simultaneously. There are multiple stages that a crisis can be in within a crisis cycle, and I overview those stages of the crisis cycle below.

Crisis Cycles

Crises are not static; like diseases, crises have complex moving parts that differ on a case-by-case basis and include stages, or phases, of prognosis (Fink, 1986). Subsequently, crisis management models often focus on the stages of crisis as it evolves over time. (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Wooten & James, 2008; Grissom & Condon, 2020). Contemporary theory tends to delineate pre-crisis, during-crisis, post-crisis: resolution and recovery, and post-crisis: learning. However, those are not exhaustive stages of when crises take place, as crises do not move directly and smoothly from one stage to another.

Understanding the different stages of crisis is important because different events occur in each stage of a crisis, which informs the future stages. Crises occur in cycles. If something goes wrong in an organization's management of a crisis, and the organization can identify where in the crisis cycle that wrongdoing occurred, they can learn from that moment and better prepare to manage future crises (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Wooten & James, 2008; Grissom & Condon, 2020).

First is the early stage of the crisis, or the pre-crisis stage, where an organization can look for crises and prepare for them, should they arise. Next is the during-crisis moment, where the crisis is in full swing and strongly impacts a community (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008). Finally, the post-crisis stage involves two parts, the first part, called resolution and recovery, is when impacted stakeholders begin recovering from the crisis that occurred, and the second part, called learning, is when the stakeholders learn from the crisis to better prepare for crises in the future (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008). Below I provide more detail on each of the crisis stages generally as well as a discussion of crisis in the context of education.

Pre-Crisis

The pre-crisis stage of crisis management broadly consists of a warning stage, if one exists. Crises are easiest to manage during this phase, especially if an organization can pick up on early warnings before the crisis accelerates (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Best practices for this stage of crisis are pre-planning for any potential crises or events that occur, beginning and continuing with open and honest communication throughout potential uncertainties (Steelman, 2013). During this pre-crisis stage, organizations look for any potential signs of weakness, and organizational leaders engage in signal detection to identify warning

signs (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008; Grissom & Condon, 2020). As a result of an event occurring, organizational leaders will engage in sense-making and perspective-taking to understand how that event arose, what the event means, and how organizational leaders should react (Wooten & James, 2008). Education scholars called this crisis phase the mitigation and prevention stage (Grissom & Condon, 2021). During this stage, educational leaders ask, “What are our blind spots?” and, “How might our existing processes and policies contribute to turning threats into crises?” (Grissom & Condon, 2021, pp. 316-317). In addition, educators attempt to determine how they can improve their crisis signal detection strategies and responses (Wooten & James, 2008; Grissom & Condon, 2020).

At this point, organizational leaders try to prepare for and prevent the crisis (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992) and consider the circumstances of distinct stakeholder groups so that they can express empathy for them within the organization and respond to the wide variety of needs (Wooten & James, 2008). Stakeholders are generally relevant to this pre-crisis stage because proactive engagement with stakeholders in the pre-crisis stage prevent an adverse event from derailing into a crisis and help an organization improve its response efficacy in the case of a crisis (Lee & Lee, 2021). The information that stakeholders share play a vital role in the perception of a potential threat, or a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2010). Stakeholders’ roles are critical in the pre-crisis stage, because as stakeholders share certain information, they call attention to potential crises, which inform the type of responses an organization has to a potential crisis, as well as how the organization prepares for that crisis (Lee & Lee, 2021).

During Crisis

The during-crisis stage includes the beginning and the early escalation of that crisis. The during-crisis phase happens in response to a triggering event or the initial onset of a crisis (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008). During that early escalation, organization members attempt to understand the crisis and limit the crisis' damage (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992).

Once the crisis has begun, the organization no longer has the chance to train or prepare for the moment (Grissom & Condon, 2021); it has arrived. At this stage, leaders must make decisions under pressure to reduce the negative impact the crises make on the public while recognizing that they cannot prevent crises entirely (Wooten & James, 2008; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Some best practices for this stage include working alongside the public and the community as if the relationship was a credible partnership akin to that with a business, organization, or individual (Steelman, 2012).

During a crisis, organizational leaders ideally possess a bank of information about what processes should be followed in case of a crisis. Organizational members can then fall back on those predetermined processes to ensure that they and their departments can work with each other successfully (Wooten & James, 2008). In practice, this looks like the nursing staff at a school coordinating with teachers and front-desk staff in a predetermined and specific manner to communicate when a student is sick. Alternatively, it may look like a school district transportation administrator systematically checking in on various athletic departments to notify them of a bus crash involving student-athletes (Wooten & James, 2008). So long as organizational leaders and members know who or where to turn to in the case of a crisis, communication can continue to run smoothly.

Post-Crisis: Resolution and Recovery

The third stage of the crisis cycle focuses on resolution and recovery (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008). This phase consists of promoting organizational resiliency, engaging in initial cleanup and early healing, addressing any impacts the crisis has on the organization, and recovering what the organization lost throughout the crisis. During this phase, organizational leaders develop short- and long-term means of recovering from the crisis and implement the recovery plans after leaders test them as a proper practice (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Eventually, organizations attempt to return to “business as usual” once this stage is complete. However, not all do, as some organizations prefer to let the crisis be a catalyst for organizational change (Wooten & James, 2008). During this point, organizations work on regaining the trust of stakeholders, especially if the stakeholders believe that the organization is the cause of the crisis; if an organization’s words, actions, and responses are consistent, stakeholders are often more forgiving of its leaders (Wooten & James, 2008).

During this phase, educational organizations assess a school’s or a district’s response to a crisis while still accommodating the needs of stakeholders—such as students, parents, faculty, staff, or others—and external contextual factors that relate to the school and the nearby community (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Educators have two primary priorities in this stage: monitoring community needs and continuous communication of the school’s response to those needs. For example, after a school shooting, the organization might focus on communicating support to students and promoting recovery by discussing the positives of returning to a “new normal” (Grissom & Condon, 2021, p. 240). Such messaging highlights the communicative component of crisis management. Without proper guidance from the educational organization, stakeholders whom the crisis impacts do not know how to return to a new normal, especially not

before the next crisis arrives. The return to predictable routines and regular activities reduces uncertainty and security for organizational members (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

Post-Crisis: Learning

The learning phase is when organizations learn from a crisis that took place in the past to reassess how to improve in the case of future crises (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). Responsible organizational management can use early signal detection to anticipate, avoid, and sometimes even prevent crises. Therefore, organizations do what they can to prepare for the unpredictable and continue their crisis preparation after the recovery phase (Wooten & James, 2008; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Unfortunately, organizations rarely learn and reflect after the crisis, despite it being a good practice (Wooten & James, 2008; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992).

Learning and reassessing are a painful process because it involves revisiting and understanding the crisis, which can reopen emotional and painful wounds. The learning and reassessing process is described as “accept[ing] anxiety without succumbing to dread” (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992, p. 139). Though humans often try to reduce anxiety, long-term success requires societies to become comfortable with anxiety and learn how to work around it (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Maslow, 1971).

In an ideal situation, during the learning phase, educational organizations intentionally learn from an organization’s crisis experience through data and feedback that organizational leaders gather at previous stages of the crisis (Grissom & Condon, 2021). The information that the organization learns can take many forms. Some of these forms include understanding what causes or worsens a crisis, what other strategies the organization could take to minimize or prevent the crisis, the proper handling of the crisis management plan, and the degree of success organizations have responding to and recovering from the crisis (Fener & Cevik, 2015; Howat et

al., 2012; Grissom & Condon, 2021). Next, I will describe what dialectical tensions are and how they relate to crisis communication.

Dialectical Tensions and Crisis

Just as the crisis' context should be considered, so should the moments of tension which arise as a result of crises when folks have to balance the needs of themselves, the organization(s) that they are a part of, and that organization's stakeholders (McGuire et al., 2020). One dialectical tension that is of particular concern during the COVID-19 pandemic is privacy and disclosure because of the nature of sharing or not sharing health information (Hong & Cho, 2021) because the sharer of information must then trust that the person with whom they are sharing information will not continue to share that information with others (Hong & Cho, 2023). Disclosure and privacy, however, are not the only dialectical tensions common to crisis moments.

Uncertain situations such as crises can spark multiple emotions, goals, and reactions simultaneously. Utilizing a dialectical tensions framework can help to label and understand those conflicting meanings and better develop messages that help stakeholders understand and navigate those tensions. Many of the tensions can also overlap, such as the stability and change tension, the new and old tension, and the certainty and uncertainty tension (Baxter, 1994; Kerdchoochuen, 2011; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). The tensions also have potential to work off each other. For example, with the stability and change tension, as an organization experiences more change, they could incorporate more stability, or change what stability looks like for the organization (Lin et al., 2020). That same example also serves as a bit of a paradox, because although both stability and change can lead to the other, it is difficult for an organization to balance both simultaneously (Lin et al., 2020). Another similar example is that as uncertainty

increases, organizations may have to face that uncertainty even without being as informed as they ideally would like to be. In some cases, organizations may have to admit to being uncertain, and communicate such uncertainty to their stakeholders so their stakeholders are not surprised by the uncertainty should it continue (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817).

Dialectical tensions are opposing, or contradictory forces that people experience in their relationships (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Such tensions can also appear during moments of crisis when stakeholders experience different or contradicting goals. Dialectical tensions can occur within individuals, groups, organizations, or society as daily life pulls interactants in different, sometimes conflicting, directions. In response, interactants selectively resist, succumbed to, or balance these tensions (Prentice & Kramer, 2006). Tensions show up not only in action but in communication. Baxter and Sharpe (2015) highlight these communicative tensions as dialectical, meaning there may be more than two opposing points of view. Multiple tensions may exist simultaneously and must be balanced, which has potential to please one stakeholder, while disappointing another (Baxter & Sharpe, 2015).

Two broad approaches exist in dialectical research. The first approach defines dialectical tensions as oppositions that are situated *outside of* communication, where communication is an afterthought to the tension as well as a tool with which the tension is managed (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). The second approach envisions dialectical tensions as competing discourses and argues that through communicating about the competing discourses, the competing discourses are managed (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). In that second approach, the very act of communicating about the contradictions allows for a clarification of what the contradictions are, how to manage them, and the meaning behind them (Baxter & Scharp, 2015).

For example, an educational organization may be both uncertain and certain about the decision to return to in-person learning after a period of remote education. The educational organization may be certain about their wish to prioritize in-person education, but they may also be uncertain about when it will be safe to transition from remote to in-person education. Here, the organization must communicate about uncertainty and certainty simultaneously, creating a dialectical tension. In other words, though organizations can manage tensions by communicating *about* the tension, *how* the organization communicates about the tensions *could also be the tension* (Baxter & Sharpe, 2015).

Examining dialectical tensions can provide insight into organizations' relationship with stakeholders during a crisis and their communication choices (Haarstad & Littlefield, 2015; Littlefield et al., 2012). Acknowledging the communicative component of the underlying tensions can help organizational leaders balance their response among stakeholders (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Further complicating matters, however, tensions can arise within and across different stakeholder groups (Coombs, 2007), and multiple dialectical tensions can be communicated about and overlap at the same time. To explore these competing needs, scholars should explore situation-specific processes to understand how organizations can manage tensions across stakeholders and contexts (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Because this thesis focuses on online crisis communication, next I will explain how crisis communication appears in online spaces.

Crisis Communication in the Online Environment

One important site for understanding how organizations manage tensions over time and across stakeholders is online communication. Websites are artifacts that are manufactured, designed, and produced within a specific social and organizational context (Ankersen, 2018), and they can act as a means of discourse that communicates organizational change (Lemke,

1999; Jones et al., 2004). In moments of crisis, organizations need to tell their “side of the story” (Combs, 2015, p. 106), and they are often less hesitant to discuss crises on their websites than on their social media pages, partially because websites provide unlimited amount of space for discussion (Coombs, 2015). Whenever organizations do not communicate about a crisis on their website, stakeholders may wonder why or assume the organization cares little about it (Coombs, 2015; Agnes, 2012).

In contrast, news media often do not tell an organization’s side of the story, even when reporting about that organization’s experience during a crisis (Coombs, 2015; Holladay, 2009). By telling their “side of the story” (Combs, 2015, p. 106) directly on their website, organizations can craft messages specifically to their stakeholders, which provides the organization the chance to protect their reputation. Still, little scholarship has explored the topic although parents, faculty, and staff recognize the importance of being able to access information on school websites (Navin & Attwel, 2020; Hestand, 2015; Tavas & Bilač, 2011; Unal, 2008).

In addition to websites, stakeholders increasingly rely on social media for information seeking during moments of crisis, and this was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic (Neely et al., 2021). Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit and schools had to switch to remote instruction, some school districts communicated to stakeholders via social media platforms such as Twitter (Michaela et al., 2022). Twitter, now named X after a rebrand following Elon Musk’s purchase of the platform (Ivanova 2023), is an online microblogging platform that allows users to post in 280 characters or less.¹ Twitter users can “follow” accounts of other users and get alerts whenever the accounts that they “follow” make a post or a Tweet (Britannica, 2022).

¹ At the start of this thesis, and throughout the data collection and analysis process, Twitter was still called Twitter. Therefore, I will continue to refer to it as Twitter throughout the entirety of this thesis.

According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2021, approximately 23% of U.S. adults said that they used Twitter (Dinesh & Odabas, 2023). Social media users will seek information during a moment of crisis, regardless of what type of crisis is occurring (Austin, 2012; Payne et al., 2018), and Twitter has been used as a platform for information seeking and clarification of information during moments of crisis (Heverin & Zach, 2012), which, during moments of crisis, may lead to a relative increase of content on Twitter (Stieglitz & Kruger, 2013).

Twitter users engage with social media during various stages of a crisis in different ways, and Twitter is an apt tool for stakeholders of a crisis to receive up-to-the-minute information about the crisis itself (Gioltzidou et al., 2018; Kongthong, 2012). Before the crisis event, social media, such as Twitter, can be used to warn stakeholders about impending crises, identify crises, and other similar activities (Michaela et al., 2022; Houston et al., 2014). During the crisis event, social media may provide stakeholders with updates or news on the crisis and further information about the crisis (Michaela et al., 2022; Houston et al., 2014). After the crisis event, users may dialogue about what caused the crisis and the broader implications of the crisis event (Michaela et al., 2022; Houston et al., 2014), contributing to the public learning phase.

Crises in an educational setting are no exception. Analyzing Twitter communication of educational organizations provide helpful insights into COVID-19 communication for those organizations. Even though Twitter allows users to engage with other users' content, school districts' use of Twitter is frequently unidirectional, where the district communicates to stakeholders, but stakeholders do not communicate to the district (Kimmons, 2019).

Throughout this thesis, I used the literature to identify what stakeholders the case most frequently communicates to via online channels during the COVID-19 crisis. Stakeholders are defined as folks who have a vested interest in the organization (McGrawth & Whitty, 2017). I

also investigated the different themes of communication that the case used during the COVID-19 crisis to inform and explain the situation as well as attribute responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Then, I use the literature to back up my analysis of the dialectical tensions, or the contradicting and conflicting concepts that folks can experience in crisis just like they can in their relationships (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Finally, I sought to define the stage of the crisis, pre-crisis, during-crisis, post-crisis: resolution and recovery or post-crisis: learning, that the case was in during the chosen dates of analysis based on the crisis cycle ((Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Wooten & James, 2008; Grissom & Condon, 2020).). The next section provides an overview of the specific case that I use for this thesis.

Case: Poudre School District

Because this thesis focuses on a single school district during a specific period, it relies on a case study. Case studies can help answer explanatory or “how” questions and allow the researchers to unpack “complex social phenomena” and discern the “holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 1994, p. 3). In this way, case studies can act as a narrative and allow for the real-life re-telling of groups of stories as they are relevant to current research (Longhofer et al., 2017). When choosing an analysis case, scholars should select a significant case or a case of public interest (Yin, 1997); given the vast impact that COVID-19 has on the public, particularly on those involved in the public United States K-12 education system, the pandemic represents an important example of a crisis.

The Poudre School District (PSD) offers an appropriate case to study this cyclical crisis. PSD is in Larimer County across the Front Range in Colorado and is the ninth-largest district in Colorado. During the 2020 – 2021 school year, 29,418 students were enrolled from early childhood through 12th grade, and PSD employed 2,124 certified staff, 1,461 classified staff, 167

administrators, and 1,590 teachers. Teachers have an average of 12.5 years of teaching experience.

Approximately 2.8% of the student population self-identifies or family members identify the student as Asian, 1.2% as Black/African American, 19.2% as Hispanic/Latino, 0.5% as Native American/Alaskan Native, 72.2% as white, and 4.1% as other (PSD, 2022). This racial makeup is significantly less diverse than national averages, with people of color making up a smaller percentage of the population. In addition, a little over 26% of students at PSD qualify for a free/reduced lunch participation program, which is also considerably less than the national average of 52.3% (NCES, 2020). Nine percent of students are in special education and 5.7% of students are English language learners, with both figures again coming under national averages (NCES, 2020; PSD, 2022).

While PSD serves a whiter and wealthier population compared to the national average, the school is relatively underfunded in terms of per-pupil spending. PSD states that had there not been funding challenges due to the Coronavirus pandemic, their per-pupil revenue would have gone up to \$8,913.59 for the 2020 – 2021 school year. However, because of the pandemic, the per-pupil revenue remained at \$7,658.27 for the 2020-2021 school year (PSD, 2022). Compared to the national average of \$12,624 per pupil and the Colorado average of \$11,500, PSD's per-pupil spending was on the low end of a scale that ranges from \$7,478 (Utah) to \$25,520 (New York) (Hanson, 2022).

Larimer County represents a relatively purple district. As of March, 2022, 25.1% of folks registered to vote are Republicans, 26.2% are Democrats, 46.3% are unaffiliated, and 1.7% of voters are a different political affiliation (“Voter Registration Counts by Party,” 2022). Such

ideological diversity in the face of an intensely polarized issue, such as the COVID-19 pandemic response, can provide important insight for communicating crises across political divides.

The political affiliation of stakeholders impacts how stakeholders respond to COVID-19 policy (Singer, 2022; Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022). Folks in the United States who identify as left-leaning on the political spectrum are generally more inclined to follow COVID-19 guidelines than their more right-aligned peers (Block et al., 2022). At the height of the pandemic, social media and news outlets became more polarized (Jiang et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021), and these controversies spill over into the educational setting as schools grappled with policies related to vaccination and public safety (Zhongming et al., 2022). As political parties took hold of school district boards of education, partisanship impacted K-12 district decisions to re-open (Hartney & Finger, 2022). Coupled with increased polarization about educational curriculum (Journell, 2022), educators often faced a deeply polarized public when communicating about the pandemic (Zhongming et al., 2022).

Aside from its appropriateness as a case, I chose to analyze PSD's communication during the COVID pandemic for three reasons. First, I hope to share my findings with PSD to help them understand their crisis communication choices as they move toward the learning phase of the cycle. Second, the PSD website provides vast amounts of data for analysis, given their implementation of a COVID-19-specific website nestled within their district website. Third, I have a background with PSD due to working in the district as a classified paraprofessional substitute staff since 2017. Therefore, I understand the district's culture and personality and can apply that to my findings.

A Timeline of COVID's Impact on Larimer County and PSD

In my analysis of PSD’s communication during COVID-19, I paid particular attention to the fall of 2021 and spring 2022, as the pandemic began to shift into a new state of normal. The timeline below provides a broader context for understanding that communication, starting with early COVID-19 history and gradually getting more specific to Poudre School District regarding geographic location and policy choices.

On January 31, 2020, the CDC located the world’s first known case of COVID-19 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China (Centers for Disease Control, 2020), and the CDC identified the first known “travel related” case of COVID-19 in the United States due to someone traveling from Wuhan to the United States (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). Colorado reported the first known case of COVID-19 on March 5, 2020 (Meckles, 2020), and the Larimer County Department of Health and Environment reported the first known case in Larimer County on March 9, 2020 (Larimer County Department of Health and Environment, 2020).

Due to the Coronavirus, PSD decided to suspend all field trips, events, and activities until further notice on March 12, 2020 (Poudre School District, March 12, 2020). The day after, on March 13, PSD extended spring break for all schools to March 16 through March 27 (Poudre School District, March 13, 2020). Then, on March 18, 2020, the Governor of Colorado signed an executive order prohibiting in-person learning from March 23 – April 17, 2020. At this time, PSD transitioned to remote learning due to COVID-19 (Ruble, 2020).

The following day, on March 19, 2020, the CDPHE announced a statewide ban on public gatherings consisting of more than ten people, which went into immediate effect (Ruble & Mauro, 2020). On March 23, PSD began remote learning. Remote learning was extended on April 1, 2020, when the Colorado Governor extended the school closures through April 30 (Brundin, 2020). On April 2, 2020, during the spring semester, PSD and then-Superintendent Dr.

Sandra Smyser publicly decided to continue remote learning throughout the remainder of the 2020 school year.

Communication and updates regarding COVID and PSD slowed until early July. On July 8, 2020, PSD announced that their Early Childhood Education program might start with students in-person four days a week with health protocols in place. Another update occurred on July 16, 2020, when the Colorado Governor ordered a statewide mask mandate (McMillan & Story, 2020). PSD announced their tentative but not set-in-stone 2020-2021 school year opening schedule with COVID health protocols on July 27, 2020. The plan consisted of students re-entering the classroom in a staggered manner for half days between August 17, 2020, and September 11, 2020. The plan had four phases, and the intention was to start students off in phase three of learning.

Phase one consisted of remote learning with no students in schools and all learning remotely (Lytle, 2020). Phase two was still almost entirely remote learning, but PSD offered potential for small groups of students (ten or fewer) to have in-person classes at a time (Lytle, 2020). Phase four was entirely in-person learning with health protocols in place (Lytle, 2020). Phase three was considerably more complex and detailed below.

PSD broke Pre-K students into Group A and Group B which would decide when certain students would attend in-person class versus online class. On Mondays and Wednesdays, Group A would have in-person class for a half day in the morning. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Group B would have in-person class for a half day in the mornings. PSD scheduled Fridays as teacher collaboration days. The elementary, middle, and high school levels were staggered at their own individual Group A, Group B schedules. Such a Group A and Group B plan would be called phase three.

On August 4, 2020, PSD announced that despite their previous plan, PreK-12 students would begin the 2020-2021 school year remotely on August 24, and learning would remain remote through October 16 at the earliest. PSD would reassess the need for remote learning in the interim (PSD, 2020c). On September 15, PSD announced that pre-K and elementary students would shift to their phase three plan starting the week of October 5, 2020. Ten days later, on September 25, 2020, PSD announced that middle and high school students would shift to the phase three plan for in-person and remote education. The shift for middle and high school students would start on October 19, 2020, which was earlier than initially anticipated. The shifts for pre-K through high school students continued as expected and planned.

On October 1, 2020, the seven-day COVID-19 case average was 31 confirmed COVID cases for Larimer County. By November 1, 2020, the seven-day COVID-19 case average was 89 confirmed cases (USA Facts, 2023). On November 3, 2020, PSD announced they were closely monitoring the Larimer County COVID-19 data. Due to the increase in community spread, PSD struggled to maintain a safe environment and continuity of education for students. PSD told caregivers of students that caregivers should prepare in case in-person learning was scaled back. Also, on November 3, 2020, PSD asked caregivers, staff, students, and the broader Larimer County and PSD community to help them stay open. PSD requested this assistance by saying, “following the three W’s: Wear a mask, Watch your distance, Wash your hands,” as well as monitoring symptoms and staying at home if feeling unwell or awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test (PSD, 2020d). On November 13, 2020, the seven-day COVID-19 case average was 176 (USA Facts 2023), and on that same day, PSD announced that they would shift all grades back to remote learning starting on Monday, November 23, and continuing through winter break.

On December 9, 2020, PSD announced that they had not released any plans about what education would look like after winter break ended on January 5, 2021. However, PSD did release a plan on December 15, 2020. On December 15, 2020, PSD announced that grades K-8 students would learn remotely from January 5 to January 15. Then they would transition back to staggered in-person learning, with the same phase three format as before, starting on January 19, 2023. PSD's high schools would continue remote learning until January 22, 2023, and then would begin transitioning back into in-person learning from January 25 – February 19. PSD's plan to shift from remote to in-person learning progressed as anticipated.

Meanwhile, scientists were making progress in developing a COVID-19 vaccine. On January 29, 2021, the Colorado Governor announced that the State of Colorado prioritized teachers and other essential personnel being able to receive COVID-19 vaccinations beginning February 8, 2021 (Colorado Governor Jared Polis, 2021). However, at this point, children could not get the COVID-19 vaccine.

While PSD was working through the spring semester, planning had begun for the following fall semester. On April 27, 2021, PSD announced its plan to open the 2021 – 2022 school year with in-person learning. Following that date, PSD offered minimal COVID-19 communication between then and early August, prior to the 2021-2022 school year. On August 4, 2021, PSD announced that they would require masks in all PSD buildings for staff, students, and visitors regardless of COVID-19 vaccination status. Once again, COVID-19 communication lulled between then and early January 2022. On January 10, 2022, PSD announced that caregivers, staff, and students should be prepared for occasional shifts back to remote learning, not due to COVID, but due to staffing shortages that the pandemic exacerbated (Poudre School District, 2022).

On January 31, 2022, Larimer County announced that the county-wide mask requirement would end on February 12, 2022, due to overall improving COVID-19 conditions. PSD, in response, said they would drop their mask mandate at the same time as Larimer County (Larimer, 2022; Kyle, 2022). The coronavirus pandemic continued to improve because of increased vaccination rates, better access to COVID testing, and lower COVID case counts. On February 23, 2022, PSD announced that the state of Colorado and Larimer County would release new health guidelines, which would go into effect immediately. The changing health guidelines reflected “A shift from a pandemic to a more routine disease-control approach” (“What new state, county COVID guidelines mean for PSD,” 2022). As the situation with COVID-19 continued to improve, on March 21, 2022, PSD announced that they were adopting the CDPHE’s new “How sick is too sick” protocol about what to do when ill. On the same day, PSD announced that they would no longer follow the “Return to Learn” guidelines that PSD developed. PSD’s communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic tapers off considerably after this point and transitions. Instead of discussing COVID-19, the focus turns to mental health and the end of the school year.

As this timeline illustrates, COVID represents an iterative spiral of crisis cycles and stages with no explicit end or beginning. Despite PSD’s promotion of a new normal, the pandemic continues, and case counts fluctuate. PSD highlighted that, as of April 2022, they are “return[ing] to mostly normal instruction with health protocols... [and] schools are open with a heightened awareness of health and safety as a part of a ‘normal’” (PSD, 2022). The analysis then will explore how PSD communicated during the 2021-2022 school year as it attempted to create a new normal for stakeholders. In the following section, I explain the objects of study that allow a glimpse into the chosen case.

Objects of Study

For this thesis, I analyzed the PSD website and PSD's Twitter posts for communication that was affiliated, either explicitly or implicitly, with the COVID-19 health crisis. I intentionally went through the PSD website communication and the Twitter posts throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year and froze any texts or communication related to the COVID-19 health crisis. All chosen dates were affiliated with potential shifts in the COVID-19 crisis. Some examples of such shifts were when the superintendent communicated about vaccine availability, when updates on health guidelines occurred, or when masking requirements changed. Such moments of change during the COVID-19 crisis were important because they demonstrated when the crisis was potentially shifting from one stage of the crisis cycle to another (Coombs, 2006). I followed the communication to its natural end, even if it included communication outside the PSD district website and the Twitter account until I reached saturation.

By accessing the website and the Twitter posts at numerous points throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year, I was able to better understand the changes that the pandemic brought to PSD's communication. Furthermore, to get a more all-encompassing understanding of the changes in communication over time, I viewed the sources a few days before and after the chosen dates for analysis. Due to the rapidly changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health guidelines frequently shifted, which motivated many of my decisions to analyze communication at specific points throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year.

Specifically, I froze the texts on the following dates:

- August 4, 2021: Communication about changing mask guidelines began. The mask guideline change occurred on August 5, 2021.

- December 2, 2021: The school district’s new superintendent addressed the public in a video message encouraging vaccinations.
- December 31, 2021: PSD began communicating about changing health guidelines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment had yet to provide specific details about the guidelines.
- January 10, 2022: PSD began communicating about changing health guidelines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on updates from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the Center for Disease Control, and the Larimer County Department of Public Health. At the same time, PSD began communicating about staffing shortages as a result of the pandemic.
- January 31, 2022: Communication began about the changing mask mandate guidelines. The mask mandate shift happened on February 11.
- February 23, 2022: PSD began communicating about changing health guidelines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. PSD’s communication at this time was in response to the mask mandate being lifted, the decrease in hospitalization rates, and the increase in vaccination rates.
- March 21, 2022: PSD began communicating about changing health guidelines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and about access to free COVID tests.

Finally, in late October 2021, COVID vaccines were made available for children ages 5 – 11, however PSD had minimal communication about this new vaccine being released during this time, so the date was not included for analysis. Also, communication about the COVID-19 pandemic after March 21, 2022, decreased considerably, which was why there are no chosen

dates for analysis after that time. In the next section, I will provide the specific research questions that this thesis answers.

Research Questions

Previous scholarship has highlighted crises' cyclical nature and pinpoints best practices for proper crisis communication strategies. Moreover, scholars have explored how SCCT, stakeholder attributions, and dialectical tensions add nuance to crisis communication strategies. The aforementioned scholarship, however, has not been thoroughly interwoven and applied to the between-stage spaces of an iterative crisis such as COVID-19. The need to remedy this gap is particularly acute in the context of online communication from educational organizations. This collection of scholarship provides the context to my study of PSD's K-12 website and Twitter communication during the iterative crisis that was COVID-19. In response, I intend to answer the following research questions:

- (RQ1): What stakeholder groups does PSD communicate with and to about COVID through their website and Twitter?
- (RQ2): What themes emerge in PSD's communication of the COVID crisis via their district website and Twitter account?
- (RQ3): What dialectical tensions emerge during the chosen dates of analysis in Poudre School District's website and Twitter communication about the Coronavirus pandemic?
- (RQ4): How does PSD define the stage of the COVID crisis through their website and Twitter communication?

In the following chapter I provide an overview of the methods used to answer the above questions and the means of data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a case study of the Poudre School District K-12 district website and Twitter account to understand PSD's COVID-19 communication. I use a blending of iterative analysis (Tracy, 2013) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021) of PSD's communication to analyze and make sense of the data. In the following sections I provide an overview of the methods used to answer the above questions.

Data Collection and Analysis: Thematic Iterative Analysis

For this research, I used both thematic analysis (Braun & Carke, 2006) and iterative analysis (Tracy, 2013). The steps of both are similar, and I combined elements of each. In part, I took an inductive approach to thematic analysis, where the data collected drove the themes that I created (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While I proposed some RQs I developed before and during the initial data familiarization phase, I grounded the results and themes that arose from the analysis in the data. During iterative analysis, researchers frequently reflect upon current literature, theories, and the data they are analyzing reflexively rather than on autopilot (Tracy, 2013; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). In my research, I attempted to do both, grounding my findings in the data while still reflecting on how those findings spoke to existent literature. Throughout, I attempted to maintain a theoretical and epistemological commitment to code the themes in a neutral, unbiased, and ethical manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and took a nonlinear approach, because I did not have to entirely complete one step before moving on to the next one. Instead, the analysis was "recursive" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 3; Braun & Clarke, 2006) and reflexive.

During this phase, I kept careful analytic memos while working towards reaching theoretical saturation (Tracy, 2013). My analytic memos consisted of my initial thoughts and findings, which allowed me to “brain dump” as I combed through the data so that I had a written record of previous thoughts (Tracy, 2013; Clark, 2005, p. 202). I then had the chance to revise my analytical memos later when I was writing up the findings.

In my first phase, I submerged myself in the data to become familiar with it (Tracy, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data submersion frequently took place at the same time as the data collection process. In the first step, I froze the communication affiliated with the COVID-19 health crisis at numerous points throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year through OldWeb Today, a service that provides javascript browser emulations where websites can be accessed as they originally were at a historic date. I decided what moments in time were closely affiliated with the COVID-19 crisis. On those dates, the website sources were frozen and saved in PDF format on an external hard drive. Any posts on the PSD Twitter account that were explicitly or implicitly affiliated with the COVID-19 health crisis throughout the 2021-2022 school year during the chosen dates were also frozen and saved in JPEG format on the same external hard drive. I named all files using a naming pattern consisting of source of retrieval (the PSD website or Twitter) and date of original posting.

Saving the data was not the only step in the data immersion process, however. I coded the data multiple times in the “first” phase. During this familiarization phase, I fully emerged myself in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2014) and began affiliating specific words or phrases with the data to represent them best (Tracy, 2013). While I was doing this, I also noted any initial observations that I made regarding the analysis. During this phase, I read and revisited the data. Furthermore, as the iterative analysis recommends, I talked with my adviser

about the data I collected and the initial trends in the data. While I completed the initial data immersion phase, I prioritized looking at the data from a broad perspective rather than a deep one (Tracy, 2013).

During the immersion and familiarization processes, I produced many potential codes, knowing that I would condense, change, or alter the codes in the future. Some of the original trends in communication that I noticed were other crises that PSD was communicating to stakeholders about (school shootings, funding and finances, political polarization, war, mental health and trauma, learning loss, school safety broadly), however due to many of these events not taking place multiple times, the code had to ultimately be condensed to an eventual theme that I titled “additional crises.”

When I found the same data across multiple platforms, and found no new data, I reached data saturation (Tracy, 2013), so I knew I did not have to freeze any more data. After I finished collecting the data, submerging myself in the data (Tracy, 2013), and the data familiarization stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013) I began to code the data more purposefully, during which I refined the information that I had already collected to ensure it aligned with my research question(s). *Codes* are words or phrases that embody language-based or visual data (Tracy, 2013; Saldaña, 2009). At this point, I worked to ensure that the data as representative of, or belonging to, specific categories or phenomena such as concepts, beliefs, themes, or actions (Tracy, 2013).

For example, RQ3 asked about the dialectical tensions that occurred during PSD’s communication on the chosen dates of analysis. The initial codes yielded many dialectical tensions that PSD balanced. The initial tensions that emerged were (a) revelation and concealment, (b) disclosure and privacy, (c) judgment and acceptance, (d) stability and change,

(e) predictability and novelty, (f) certainty and uncertainty, (g) given and new, (h) old and new, and (i) ideal and real. Some of the dialectical tensions (disclosure and privacy, stability and change, and certainty and uncertainty) appeared much more frequently than the others, so were automatically refined into their own themes. Some of the other dialectical tensions could be nestled underneath the three main dialectical tensions. Disclosure and privacy as a tension was also able to feature revelation and concealment. Stability and change as a tension also held space for given and new as well as old and new. Through shuffling some of the initial codes around I was able to more consciously tell the story of what trends emerged and did not need to collect any more data.

In the third phase, I labeled and systematized through two additional rounds of primary-cycle coding using the program QDA Miner Lite. QDA allows for data coding in more than one manner through color coordination. At this point in the coding process, I worked to ensure that the codes would be more general and that they applied broadly across the dataset rather than hyper-specific. In other words, I worked to ensure that the data was *lumped* rather than *fractured* (Tracy, 2013). Simultaneously, I ensured that I was labeling all the data with temporary labels, regardless of whether the data was explicitly related with my chosen research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Here, I focused on primary-cycle coding, using the constant comparative method to modify the codes as needed to represent the previously coded data. I worked to define the primary codes and what qualified a piece of data, while also understanding that these definitions and qualifications would change over time. I then condensed and simplified the codes (Tracy, 2013) before beginning to look for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013).

Themes are “a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 3). While developing themes, I also began the secondary-

cycle coding where I fine-tuned the codes with a more analytic and interpretive lens (Tracy, 2013). The secondary-cycle codes get at the “why” of the data, essentially synthesizing and explaining the data, which can be beneficial in creating the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I returned to the literature while creating the themes and fine tuning the codes because of the updated guidance that the literature could provide (Tracy, 2013). I also did a process called prospective conjecture (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Prospective conjecture is when the researcher considers other areas of literature, qualitative data analysis, new theories from other fields, or new concepts that fit into the codes.

With my recent return to the literature and prospective conjuncture in mind, I went back through the data and reviewed the themes (Braun & Clarke 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Reviewing themes was mostly a step of clarity, where I ensured that the themes still were appropriate in relation to the dataset and to the codes previously generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). After incorporating new literature, I continued identifying patterns or groupings of codes that emerged in the dataset (Tracy, 2013). I then grouped primary-cycle codes together. If two themes were similar at this point, those two themes were combined into one. Alternatively, if a previously created theme no longer fit the “story” of the dataset, that theme was discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 3-4).

An example of a theme that I dropped because it was not necessary for telling the “story” of the dataset was the “source of information.” PSD frequently communicated updates on COVID-19 based on information that they received from other sources. The subcodes of the “source of information” theme were (a) CDC, (b) the Larimer County Health Department, (c) the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, (d) Colorado Governor Jared Polis, and (e) the Colorado Department of Education. Although it was beneficial for me to have the source

of information clearly marked for the pieces of data that I was coding, it was not necessary to report as a theme because it did not directly answer my RQs.

The final step of thematic analysis (2006; 2013) is writing up. The writing-up process is when the researcher provides an overview of the “analytic narrative” by telling a story of the data via codes and created themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 4). Another critical part of this step is interweaving relevant literature into the findings to contextualize the data, themes, and the RQs’ findings into this step. I conduct the writing up step below.

Qualitative Quality

Prior to moving forward with the details of the chosen case, I want to take a moment to voice how I tried to uphold the quality of the analysis by adhering to Tracy’s call for qualitative quality through eight criteria (2010). I followed all eight criteria as I worked my way through the research process. The eight criteria that Tracy highlights are as follows: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence (2010). Below I briefly elaborate on these eight criteria and how I personally enacted them in my research.

The first qualitative quality criteria that Tracy emphasizes is ensuring that the research revolves around a *worthy topic* (Tracy, 2010), meaning the topic is relevant, significant, interesting, and timely. COVID-19 is a life changing, international event. Therefore, understanding K-12 school district communication about the pandemic is essential. In case another similar crisis happens again in the future, impacted stakeholders should be able to learn from this experience. The second qualitative quality criterion is *rich rigor* (Tracy, 2010). The rich rigor criteria are representative of the researcher using abundant and appropriate research methodologies and theoretical contexts. I chose to combine thematic analysis and iterative

analysis to make an all-encompassing methodology that served my needs for this thesis by getting an overarching view through thematic analysis, and frequently returned to existing scholarship through iterative analysis.

Sincerity is the third qualitative quality criterion that Tracy puts forth (2010). I, as a researcher, was responsible for disclosing any bias that arose or challenges that occurred throughout the research process and that disclosure was something that I was personally committed to as a researcher. Due to the sensitive nature of the pandemic impacting a K-12 school district, I strove to hold myself to a high standard throughout the research process and am committed to returning my research to PSD so that they may benefit from my research. The fourth qualitative quality criterion is *credibility*, according to Tracy (2010). Credibility looks like showing, not telling, and providing ample description and detail, which I also upheld and reflected in my research. The fifth qualitative quality criterion is *resonance* (Tracy, 2010). Resonance ensures that the findings are accessible to a wide variety of readers. Accessibility is something that was and still is important to me, and throughout the research process I made it a goal to write in a way that was comprehensible so that others may read and reflect on my research.

Significant contribution is the sixth qualitative quality criterion (Tracy, 2010), meaning the research contributes to the academic literature in some capacity. My thesis research contributed to academic literature in four ways. First, I combined aspects of literature that scholars have seldom incorporated in an intersectional manner before. Second, this research used previous scholarship on K-12 leadership during a crisis as a jumping-off point (Grissom & Condon, 2021) to provide a further understanding of how school districts respond to crises such as COVID-19. Third, further research was needed to understand crisis communication beyond

attribution of responsibility better (Coombs, 2016; Lieu et al., 2020), and this research can help contribute to that process. Fourth and finally, at the end of this thesis I propose a new type of crisis for consideration during crisis communication strategies, called a liminal space.

The seventh qualitative quality criterion is *meeting ethical standards*. While this research did not relate to human subjects nor did it require completion of an IRB due to the public and accessible nature of the data collected across Twitter and an openly accessible website, I took other ethical considerations into account. For example, findings from this research will be shared openly and freely with the case being studied so that the case may benefit from my analysis. The eighth and final qualitative quality criterion is *meaningful coherence*. Meaningful coherence ensured that I logically interwove the methods, literature review, research questions, findings, and other aspects of the research in a way that made sense. I frequently consulted the literature throughout the research as an iterative method to ensure that all moving parts of this project were aligned.

In the next chapter, I introduce the findings of the first and second RQs. First, I define the intended stakeholders for PSD's COVID-19 communication and how PSD's messaging across the district website and Twitter account differed depending on the stakeholder. Then, I provide an overview of the themes of PSD's COVID-19 communication throughout the chosen dates of analysis and discuss the implications of those themes.

CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS: STAKEHOLDERS AND THEMES

This findings chapter provides an overview of the stakeholders that PSD primarily communicated to during the chosen dates of analysis. RQ1 sought to define what stakeholder groups PSD communicated with about the COVID-19 crisis on their website and Twitter. Although the intended stakeholder or audience of a message by PSD often remained ambiguous, four unique stakeholders emerged: (a) the Collective Audience, (b) Caregivers, (c) Students, and (d) Faculty and Staff. In the second half of this chapter, I respond to RQ2 and define and explain the primary themes and subthemes that most commonly arose in PSD's online communication. The four primary themes that emerged are (a) Communicating Commitments, (b) Reducing Uncertainty Through Transparent Communication, (c) Shared Responsibility, and (d) Empathy.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are, “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (Freeman, 1984, p. 31; Phillips, 2011). Often, PSD referenced a stakeholder in their communication, but the message may not have been intended explicitly and solely for that stakeholder. For example, on the PSD website on July 27, 2021, PSD wrote, “With students beginning the school year in classrooms, we are grappling with the changing conditions in our country and what they may mean for our mask protocols. Please know we have not yet made a new decision.” This instance was communicating *about* students, but not directly *to* them. PSD was not saying, “with *you* beginning the school year in the classroom...” hence the school district is not communicating to students in this specific message. This analysis will focus on whom PSD communicates to. The analysis will not focus on who it is that the school district is communicating about.

The Collective Audience

Because the intended stakeholder of PSD's communication was sometimes vague, PSD directed most of their messages to a broad audience while keeping stakeholder inclusiveness in mind (Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984). PSD regularly attempted to reach numerous stakeholders simultaneously rather than targeting one narrow stakeholder identity. When an organization attempts to gain support for their organization, the organization should communicate their objectives to a broader stakeholder audience, rather than to individual, narrow stakeholder audiences (Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984). Through communicating to a broader audience, the organization can gain the support of broader groups, rather than narrower ones, thus increasing the organization's chances of survival (Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984). Having clear objectives and stakeholder support makes it more likely for an organization to succeed in the long-term (Eskerod et al., 2015).

One example of communicating to a collective audience occurred on July 27, 2021, on the district website. PSD stated, "We, like you, are frustrated by the constant change that we are experiencing. One constant though, that we can guarantee is that we will continue working in the best interests of our students, staff, and communities." In this instance, who PSD was communicating to was unknown, which upheld stakeholder inclusiveness. The use of a generic and more broadly encapsulating, "you," allowed PSD to communicate across stakeholder groups. By addressing "students, staff, and communities" and the generic "you" PSD signaled who they *may* be communicating to or may communicate to in the future, without limiting who PSD *could* be communicating to in this particular message.

Another example of PSD communicating to the collective audience was on a post on the PSD website on December 31, 2021:

As winter break comes to a close and we move into the New Year, we are reaching out today to provide you with an update on the impact of COVID-19 within our communities. Our school districts continue to prioritize in person education and the unique experiences students, teachers and staff have when they are together in school. We are steadfast in this shared commitment, even as COVID cases of the more contagious Omicron variant rise quickly.

The choice for PSD to use a generic, “we are reaching out today to provide *you* with an update” both communicated to a wide variety of stakeholders while also neglecting to clarify to whom specifically PSD communicated. While the post later mentioned “our school district” and “students, teachers, and staff,” the post’s contents were vague enough that the stakeholder and intended audience were both unclear. The vague audience could be both a hindrance and some help to PSD’s crisis communication. The choice to keep the stakeholder vague could have been beneficial because it allowed PSD to communicate their goals and objectives more generally, potentially leading to more stakeholder support (Eslerod et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984).

Upholding stakeholder inclusiveness can backfire, however, because it can lead to a lack of support from stakeholders for the organization, should primary stakeholders for a particular job begin to feel underappreciated (Eslerod et al., 2015). Also, stakeholders may assume that they are being heard and listened to should an organization take a broad, stakeholder inclusiveness approach, and then feel disappointed should that turn out to not be the case (Eslerod et al., 2015). Therefore, organizations should be intentional and strategic about relying too heavily on stakeholder inclusiveness.

Caregivers as Stakeholder

The next stakeholder that PSD communicated to regularly was the caregiver. The caregiver stakeholder includes any parents, guardians, or caregivers of students attending PSD. One example of PSD communicating to the caregiver stakeholder is in a video message from superintendent Kingsley, uploaded on July 27, 2021. Superintendent Kingsley said:

Hi everyone. It's Brian, and I'm here with a very important update. Together we have an incredible responsibility to work as a team. To accomplish that, our communication must be open. It must be honest and compassionate. Our children and the PSD community are always at the center of our hearts and our work.

Including “our children” not only explicitly communicates to caregivers but also connects caregivers to the broader PSD community and other potential stakeholders who may see the students of PSD as “theirs”. This continuous use of “our” also communicates between PSD and the caregivers. In this message, PSD asks that caregivers continue to participate and actively engage in open, honest, and compassionate communication to keep, “our children and the PSD community” at the “center of our hearts and our work”. This creates a community between the stakeholder group and PSD. Through PSD using a shared style of language they show support for their stakeholders which, in turn, attempts to demonstrate empathy. The use of empathy will strengthen PSD's relationship with their stakeholders. In a crisis moment, ensuring that an organization has strong relationships with their stakeholders can be helpful, because should another or a new crisis come around, if the organization and the stakeholders had a strong relationship pre-crisis, that relationship will serve as a buffer during the crisis, potentially protecting both the stakeholders and the organization (van der Meer et al., 2017).

Students as Stakeholder

Another more clearly defined stakeholder group was students, though few of their online messages were directed specifically to the student stakeholder. When PSD communicated to student stakeholders, it was inferred that they generally were communicating to all PSD students rather than students of specific identities or in certain groups.

One specific instance of PSD communicating directly to the student stakeholder was in a message from Superintendent Kingsley on December 2, 2021. The message read:

Students, I want to talk to you for a moment. You've told me that you want us to build this district with you, not for you. As I think about what that means I want to make sure that your ideas and your needs inform what school looks like, that you can explore what you're interested in and feel like you belong.

While not all communication to students was this explicit or overt, this example was beneficial in understanding PSD's intentions in communicating with students. The above message showed that PSD wanted its students to know that the district could and will work with them, thus creating a sense of collective community. Furthermore, the district working with students is consistent with educational crisis literature that finds educational organizations can assess a response to a current and previous crisis while still accommodating students and students' needs, thus working *with* students rather than only working *for* them (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

Very rarely, however, did PSD communicate solely to only the student stakeholder. Three potential implications for PSD's choice existed. First, PSD likely used other mediums to communicate primarily with students. Due to broad access to email, the potential for face-to-face or virtual communication between teachers and students, and PSD's use of the online grade and schedule tracker, Synergy, PSD has alternative, and more direct, mediums through which to communicate to students. Second, student stakeholders may have been included as the intended recipient of PSD's messages when PSD was communicating with other stakeholders. Much of PSD's communication had numerous intended audiences interwoven into the messaging, so this was a likely reason. Third, and potentially the most harmful, PSD may not have frequently communicated with student stakeholders. It was impossible to know if this was the case due to the narrow scope of this analysis. PSD's choice had the potential to leave a stakeholder group uninformed and uncertain. Should an organization fail to communicate to a specific stakeholder group, it may be difficult for the organization to gain a beneficial reputation in the eyes of the stakeholder who they did not communicate with (Dawkins, 2005). Also, when an organization

does not channel their messages to a particular stakeholder group, the organization may fail to communicate effectively to that stakeholder altogether (Dawkins, 2005). PSD communicates to the faculty and staff stakeholders more frequently, for example. The below section explains instances of PSD communicating with the faculty and staff stakeholders.

Faculty and Staff as Stakeholder

When PSD communicates to faculty and staff, most communication encompasses all employees with little differentiation between which stakeholder(s) PSD targets with its communication. An example is a Tweet from the PSD Twitter account posted on December 4, 2021. The Tweet features an infographic that says, “Fully vaccinated employees don’t need to quarantine. If it’s been more than two weeks since your last dose of COVID-19 vaccine, you don’t need to quarantine if you’re exposed to someone with COVID-19.” This example, referencing “employees” and the direct communication of “you don’t need to,” “since your last dose,” and “if you’re exposed” demonstrates broad communication to faculty and staff without specifying what role stakeholders might play in the organization. Though most of PSD’s communication regarding faculty and staff is broad, like with students, communication with specific faculty and staff groups may occur on a platform that is not the website or Twitter.

As an example of PSD’s communication to the broad faculty and staff stakeholder, on December 2, 2021, Superintendent Kingsley spoke directly to staff in a video message. That message said:

Staff: You’re rising to the many challenges that face us. All the while modeling tenacity, grit, and fortitude. For that, I thank you. I’ve appreciated your candor as you share how hard it’s been and I heard that you need more support as you educate and connect with our students. Please keep your honesty coming. I always want to hear from you about what our district can do for you.

Kingsley's brief message reflects PSD's intentions to demonstrate gratitude and appreciation for faculty and staff within the district during the COVID-19 crisis. PSD recognizes the challenges that faculty and staff are facing and vocally welcomes feedback on how to offer more support. Organizationally, leadership that welcomes feedback, even if that feedback is critical, is seen as stronger and more confident by stakeholders (Coulson-Thomas, 2022). PSD's choice to welcome faculty and staff feedback may improve their image in the eyes of the public, which, during a moment of crisis, is critical to an organization being able to succeed long-term (Eskerod et al., 2015). Also, when there was a lot of change in an organizational context, supervisor support became more important than to reduce uncertainty and upkeep organizational morale (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022) which may explain the messages directly from the superintendent to faculty and staff.

Interestingly, this message came before a post on the PSD website on January 10, 2022, regarding staffing shortages:

As the considerable rise in Omicron cases impacts our county and schools, public health guidance continues to change. In this update, we will address what staffing shortages may mean for district operations... Our district remains resolute in our commitment to in-person learning. That said, we want to be transparent about our significant, daily staffing challenges. In PSD last week, there were 40 custodians and 21 Transportation staff out on one day – numbers that nearly impacted our ability to provide these services.

At 6:30 a.m. Monday, there were 274 employee absences across the district, and that rose to 317 within three hours. Getting substitutes to cover during a sub shortage is particularly difficult, as one example.

The combination of these two messages in such proximity paints a picture of PSD possessing a high degree of gratitude, albeit without offering many action steps or incentives behind the messages of thanks. While PSD expresses that they want "our district" to remain open for in-person learning, "our" faculty and staff lack resources to keep employees in the building to uphold the commitment PSD stresses in previous messages. Ultimately, the messages that PSD

intends for faculty and staff, similarly to the messages that PSD intends for the caregiver Stakeholder, are lacking in action steps beyond providing emotional reassurance.

PSD's message is consistent with crisis communication literature, which finds that messages regarding crisis events tend to "privilege explanation at the expense of... specific action steps," (Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 565). This can prevent receivers of those crisis messages from feeling empowered enough to take self-protective action (Sellnow et al., 2017). A lack of guidance from the educational organization may have led to impacted stakeholders not knowing how to return to a new normal in the moment of crisis as well as before the next crisis arrives, thus continuing to impact organizational performance negatively (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

The first RQ asks what stakeholder groups PSD communicates with and about the COVID crisis through their website and Twitter. To answer that question, the four main stakeholders who PSD most frequently communicated with were the collective audience, caregivers, students, and faculty and staff. As previously noted, most of the PSD's communication was meant for a collective audience. Organizations that seek stakeholder support may be more successful should they communicate to a broad, general audience rather than to more narrow audiences that require more message customization (Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984), which may have motivated PSD's decision to communicate primarily to the collective audience. In contrast, the student stakeholder group was communicated with the least frequency, perhaps because other channels of communication were more appropriate, such as email, or the PSD grade entry system, Synergy. Should a stakeholder group be left out of the communication process, however, there can be negative repercussions. Stakeholders who are not communicated to may experience distrust towards the organization which may lead to the crisis being more difficult to resolve (Cannaerts, 2021; Horsley & Barker, 2002). In the next section, where I

define and explain the themes, or patterns, which emerged during the analysis of PSD's communication.

Primary Themes

As discovered throughout the analysis, certain patterns, or themes, emerged from PSD's communication. The second RQ of this thesis asks what primary themes emerged in PSD's website and Twitter communication about the COVID-19 pandemic. The four primary themes that emerge from PSD's communication are (a) Communicating Commitments, (b) Reducing Uncertainty Through Transparent Communication, (c) Shared Responsibility, and (d) Empathy. The four primary themes and their affiliated subthemes are defined with examples below.

Communicating Commitments as Primary Theme

Due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, PSD had to navigate many hurdles throughout the semester while continuing to educate, employ, and care for the safety of impacted stakeholders. In short, PSD must uphold its prior commitments to stakeholders despite the crisis. Commitments are those instances when an organization is either emotionally or intellectually bound to uphold a promise of performing a certain action for stakeholders, which may include the dedication of time or resources (Mohammad et al., 2022; Eisenberger, 1990). PSD had numerous commitments to maintain and communicate during the pandemic, and sometimes those commitments overlapped.

Throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year, PSD described three primary commitments: (a) Commitment to COVID-19 Safety, (b) Commitment to Continuing Education, and (c) Commitment to Privacy. PSD had to balance these commitments throughout the year. At times, certain commitments had to take precedence over another. In other circumstances, the requirements of one commitment counteracted the requirements of another commitment.

Therefore, some commitments may only be prioritized at certain times (Cahyadi et al., 2022). Understanding how PSD communicated about these commitments may shed light on how such a balance can be achieved during crisis.

The Commitment to COVID-19 Safety

The Commitment to COVID-19 Safety was one of PSD's primary commitments for the 2021 – 2022 school year. PSD frequently made reference to this commitment in their communications about changing mask policies, social distancing, or vaccine protocols. PSD's COVID-19 messages were often direct but complex because of the rapidly and frequently changing health protocols, and while PSD occasionally communicated to specific stakeholders, the messages about COVID-19 safety were often broad and aimed at multiple stakeholders at once.

On August 4, 2021, Superintendent Kingsley authored a post on the PSD website. The message stated that starting August 5, 2021, all staff, students, and visitors to PSD schools would be required to wear masks regardless of COVID vaccination status. The message continues, "I know some of you will be angry about this decision, while others may feel a deep sense of relief. Whether you agree or disagree, I value you and want to remain transparent about how we made our decision." Kingsley directly communicated to stakeholders whether they agreed or disagreed with the concept of masking. Here, PSD is attempting to prevent the alienation of stakeholders who disagree while firmly communicating their commitment to safety by requiring masks whether stakeholders like the decision or not. Kingsley also acknowledges stakeholders who may appreciate this decision and feel safer because PSD requires masks. By citing multiple sources in the message, Kingsley communicated that PSD researched these decisions before making them public, demonstrating a high degree of work happening behind the scenes. This shows that PSD

cares about and is committed to keeping stakeholders safe because PSD does not make these decisions lightly.

On November 3, 2021, PSD posted another message on their website about COVID vaccine. "Please get vaccinated, if it is the right decision for you and your family. PSD does not require but strongly encourages staff and students to be vaccinated. PSD continues to partner with public health agencies to offer vaccination opportunities." PSD's message here reiterates the commitment to an inclusive stakeholder audience, rather than to one particular stakeholder group. PSD is careful not to tell stakeholders what they should or should not do regarding COVID vaccines but is also communicating support and encouragement for vaccination. By offering vaccination opportunities, PSD provides material resources for vaccination, and demonstrates a strong commitment to safety in both word and action. Through PSD acting in response to their stakeholders expressing a need, PSD is showing that not only are they going to listen to their stakeholders, but that they are going to decisively act in accordance to what stakeholders are saying, which can improve the relationship between stakeholders and the organization (Wu et al., 2020). Although listening to stakeholder needs and then acting in accordance with those needs can help an organization's performance during crisis (Boutilier et al., 2012), such rapt attention to stakeholder needs may make it more difficult for an organization to act in accordance with the organization's goals (Edinger-Soons, 2020).

One example is a post on PSD's Twitter account on December 4, 2021, which reads, "Students and staff who are fully vaccinated are exempt from quarantine for exposure through classroom or school activities. PSD encourages staff and students to be vaccinated." At this point of the semester, PSD overtly supported stakeholders getting vaccinated against COVID-19. However, what specific stakeholders PSD communicated to shifted compared to the message on

November 3, 2021; PSD explicitly communicate to “staff and students” rather than the more ambiguous “you and your family” from before. This word choice may be a conscious decision for PSD to narrow the intended recipients of their COVID-19 messaging. It could also be an attempt for PSD to distance itself from communicating to stakeholders’ private sphere of “your family.”

The message above also is more clinical and makes less appeals to emotion than previous COVID-19 messaging by PSD. The word choice has shifted to “encourages staff and students to get vaccinated” compared with the previous, “Please get vaccinated, if it is the right decision for you and your family.” Such a shift may be because students and staff are already tied explicitly with PSD, where families and caregivers may be slightly more removed from the district because they themselves do not attend PSD, rather, a family member does. Due to the distance, a more emotional appeal was needed, compared with faculty and students, who PSD could be more clinical towards. Regardless of the reasoning, PSD has shifted whom they are communicating to, and this message focused explicitly on the faculty and student stakeholder.

Like the above message, PSD again provides commitment to safety through its messages and actions. Here, PSD highlights the incentives to faculty and student stakeholders who do decide to get vaccinated, which indicates that PSD wants to encourage and reward such behavior. The rewards (no longer requiring those vaccinated to quarantine for exposure to COVID-19 through classroom or school activities) may motivate stakeholders to get vaccinated if they were on the fence about the decision. Because COVID-19 safety is a commitment for PSD, such decisions make sense if PSD believes vaccinating will increase COVID-19 safety. This aligns with best practices in crisis communication. Stakeholders may be more likely to support an organization if that organization can provide the stakeholders with sufficient rewards (Steers,

1977). Therefore, such a decision may allow PSD to gain more support from stakeholders who are vaccinated and then do not have to quarantine.

A similar message was posted on the PSD website on July 21, 2021. The message read:

PSD is strongly encouraging but not requiring staff or students to get COVID-19 vaccines. Those who are fully vaccinated (14 days from their last dose) will not be quarantined if exposed.

PSD is a mask-friendly district. Masks are highly recommended and supported for people who are unvaccinated, following Colorado's current public health order. PSD supports those who choose to wear masks. Depending on outbreaks or other high-risk activities, masks may be required indoors.

Once again, PSD directly communicated to staff and students rather than to a broader, ambiguous "you" stakeholder. Vaccinated stakeholders continued to be rewarded through diminished quarantine requirements, therefore serving as the reward that may motivate Stakeholders to support the organization (Steers, 1977).

Masking, however, received less direct support, though PSD still attempted to demonstrate its commitment to public health safety. Due to how COVID-19 was politicized and polarized (Halpern, 2020), masking was a complex topic for many members of the public. PSD points out that they are a "mask-friendly district" and "supports those who choose to wear masks." In contrast, PSD did not say that they support those who choose *not* to wear masks or that they were a district that was friendly for folks who did not decide to wear masks. Through this stance, PSD implicitly communicated that they were siding with stakeholders who chose to wear masks but were attempting to avoid alienating folks who chose not to wear masks.

The continued commitment to safety, and appeal to stakeholders to act, was demonstrated later in the same post. PSD noted that folks who wore masks and followed the health protocols helped uphold PSD's commitment to COVID-19 safety because, "Due to current health conditions and Larimer County's success with vaccinations (almost 68% of residents ages 12 and

older have at least one dose of the vaccine), you will see that some protocols are more relaxed this school year, compared with 2020-21.” Here, PSD acknowledges the responsibility of stakeholders, stating that because stakeholders had helped to contribute to the vaccination rate, such protocols could be relaxed. PSD again creates a community with stakeholders, highlighting the need for community members to demonstrate their own commitment to safety through their individual actions and connecting those individual actions to the safety of the whole community.

With their stakeholders safe, PSD could turn its attention to the other commitments that they as a district made. As a result, not only was PSD following through on its commitment to COVID-19 safety, but they were also upholding another commitment that PSD made to stakeholders: education.

The Commitment to Continuing Education

Frequently in PSD’s communication the district emphasized the importance of how they intended to continue their day-to-day operations, primarily that of continuing education, despite the crisis state of the COVID-19 pandemic. Messages that fall into this subtheme focus on maintaining the status quo for PSD operations. Throughout the dates of analysis, PSD continued to provide education to the student stakeholders and employment to the faculty stakeholder despite the uncertain events of the COVID-19 crisis.

On August 4, 2021, PSD posted a message explaining a masking requirement for in-person learning, “We need to come together as a community to prioritize keeping our kids in school.” In this message, PSD highlights the importance of maintaining the status quo of in-person education, even if it requires changing protocols due to COVID-19. The message continued, “You can do this by wearing your mask, washing your hands, following PSD’s health and safety protocols, and getting vaccinated if it’s right for your family.” PSD did not explicitly

tell its stakeholders to get vaccinated and they were communicating the many ways other stakeholders could help PSD continue with in-person education. Based on PSD's messages, keeping kids educated and in school also relied on other stakeholders such as the caregivers of the students, rather than on PSD alone.

Despite their commitment to in-person education, PSD faced a significant challenge when determining the modality of education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, both due to the contagious nature of the COVID virus and the combination of other challenges that the pandemic highlighted. One such challenge that COVID exacerbated was staffing shortages. PSD posted about this topic to the PSD website on January 10, 2022:

Our district remains resolute in our commitment to in-person learning. That said, we want to be transparent about our significant, daily staffing challenges. In PSD last week, there were 40 custodians and 21 Transportation staff out on one day – numbers that nearly impacted our ability to provide these services.

At 6:30 a.m. Monday, there were 274 employee absences across the district, and that rose to 317 within three hours. Getting substitutes to cover during a sub shortage is particularly difficult, as one example.

We have and continue to do everything we can to maintain in-person learning, planning proactively to cover open positions. At the same time, we may need to shift classes, programs, grade levels or even entire schools to remote learning. This could be due to the number of staff and student absences (COVID or illness symptoms) or a lack of staff needed to ensure we have enough caring, trained adults with our students.

Even though one of PSD's primary goals for the year was to maintain in-person learning, this proved difficult for the district to manage. As a result, PSD wrestled with the complicated decision of moving schools online, not simply because of the pandemic but due to staffing shortages.

In the above message's first and second paragraphs, PSD makes it clear that they intend to hold fast to their commitment to continue educating student stakeholders, preferably in person if they are able, however, that may not always be possible. The hardship of upholding this

commitment is not just due to the pandemic anymore. Instead, staffing shortages are one of the new hindrances to PSD achieving that goal. Not only was this a difficulty, but it is an instance of shared responsibility. If kids are not in school, it could be both the district's handling of the pandemic as well as the lack of faculty and staff who could be responsible.

PSD's same post on January 10, 2022, continued, only in a more explicit manner than the previous implicit communication. The message stated, "Please know that we will communicate shifts to remote learning as soon as possible but that these could occur with little notice." PSD's message, in this case, explicitly tells stakeholders that they may not have much notice should in-person learning shift to remote learning. Such messages contrast with the more implicitly communicated messages in the above paragraphs. Through PSD's repetition of potential need to shift modalities to continue education, PSD tells stakeholders that, even though it is difficult, they will continue educating students in one way or another. Moreover, PSD only shares the relevant information that stakeholders need to know without speculating when or why such shift might occur. In this instance, PSD tells stakeholders just what they need to know, and nothing else, at least for the time being. Such communication of relevant messages keeps stakeholders informed (Rawlins, 2008) and decreases the chances of miscommunication due to an overload of information (Lele, 2022).

When exploring the way PSD communicated their commitment to continuing education, a few patterns emerge. PSD demonstrated transparent communication by explicitly telling stakeholders that school may shift modalities, adhering to best practices for communication with K-12 stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferren, 2021). Due to the quick decision-making processes, however, those messages may not have been as effective as they could have been. Despite an inability to predict the future, PSD communicated the potential for shifting

modalities as transparently as they could, based on the data that was analyzed for this thesis. Even so, PSD could have increased their effectiveness of their communication by, for example, telling stakeholders *how* they would communicate such sudden shifts in learning modality. During crises, individuals will attempt to reduce their uncertainty by engaging in information seeking, even if they are doing so across multiple channels of communication (Kim et al., 2023). The channel through which a communication message is sent may be more important than the content of the message itself, in terms of upholding an organization's reputation (Schultz, et al., 2011). To protect their reputation, the organization could communicate to their stakeholders about what channels may contain messages. Then, in the future, PSD's stakeholders would not need to look through multiple channels of communication for crisis updates.

The Commitment to Privacy

Another commitment that PSD made was a commitment to stakeholder privacy. Because the virus presented a public health crisis, the commitment to privacy often competed with the commitment to safety. PSD often sought to uphold privacy and safety through transparent communication about what PSD was going to share, to whom, and why. Privacy in terms of a public health crisis is further complicated when the nuance of information ownership comes into play. For example, an organization may co-own information with their stakeholders should their stakeholders share information with their organization (Barta, 2019). Then, it is no longer just the stakeholder that has responsibility over a piece of information, but an organization as well (Barta, 2019). As a result of that co-ownership and co-responsibility over the private information, the stakeholder and the organization may need to work together to decide what to do with the information, as well as when and why something should be done with the information (Barta, 2019; Petronio, 2002). For this thesis, privacy refers to moments when

someone attempts to keep any personal information out of other's hands (O'Neil, 2001) or protects information and security over something private (Petronio & Child, 2020).

Because of public health concerns, PSD often had to tell stakeholders what information they could keep private from the district and what information they needed to share with the district. For example, on November 25, 2021, PSD posted on their website about how and why COVID-19 information about students could be shared:

Why can PSD share my or my student's information with the public health department for a contact tracing investigation. Doesn't the district need my consent first?

PSD works with the Larimer County Department of Health and Environment to support the agency's contact tracing investigations, a critical tool to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus in our schools and community. Part of that work involves identifying close contacts (individuals who were within 6 feet of someone with COVID-19 for 15 minutes or more). For investigations, our two organizations exchange information to support this important health safety work....

PSD may need to share some student information requested by LCDHE staff completing contact tracing investigations that includes but isn't limited to parent/guardian name, parent/guardian phone number(s), student name, student grade, student school of attendance, and student date of birth. PSD will never share parent/guardian or student social security numbers. All disclosures will be made in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

In the message, PSD clearly tells stakeholders the specifics of what information may no longer be private due to the pandemic. PSD communicates how they as a district must decide what to uphold and when: privacy, or broader public health concerns. Such a battle was one that many educational institutions wrestled with during the pandemic (Reddy & Vance, 2020). Through sharing this, PSD tells stakeholders that some information will not be private because it relates to the health of other stakeholders within the district. Such a message could imply that, although PSD made a commitment to uphold privacy when they could, they may not be able to uphold the

level of privacy that some stakeholders expect, particularly when it conflicted with their commitment to safety.

In the case of a COVID-19 pandemic, not only would caregivers be required to share information with PSD, but PSD could share information with the LCDHE as well. Through making stakeholders aware of such private information disclosures, PSD attempted to demonstrate their commitment to upholding privacy through transparency. PSD's implementation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) impacted the sharing of some information during the pandemic. PSD was legally required under FERPA to uphold their commitment to privacy. However, PSD also told stakeholders that giving up privacy was worth seeing the "important health safety work" through to the end. While PSD told stakeholders that social security numbers would be kept private, other information such as "parent/guardian name, parent/guardian phone number(s), student name, student grade, student school of attendance, and student date of birth" may no longer be private information should LCDPHE request it. For student safety, stakeholders had to give up some privacy. Such a balance was a precarious tightrope for PSD to walk. PSD did not want to harm stakeholders by sharing information that some stakeholders may not want shared, but the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed society, leading to the need to rebalance commitments to privacy and public health (Lenert & McSwain, 2020).

Contact tracing provided another example of PSD managing the balance of privacy with commitments to safety. Here, PSD communicates to an inclusive stakeholder audience that students in the district are required to abide by their district-wide policy. PSD argues that, under this policy, some privacy must be given up in exchange for public health safety:

District Policy - RA/JRC - Student Records / Release of Information on Students states PSD may disclose student education records or personally identifiable information

without written consent of the parent/guardian or eligible students under several circumstances, including if the disclosure is in connection with an emergency, if knowledge of the information disclosed is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other persons.

Additionally, according to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, “Schools are required to disclose names of people with COVID-19 to public health authorities. Schools should not disclose the name(s) of students, teachers or staff members with COVID-19 to other teachers, staff, students, parents, the media, or anyone outside public health. Public health staff are trained in how to manage health information in order to protect your privacy. They will never share your information without your permission, and they store records securely and keep them safe.”

In the above message, PSD explains the details and reasoning for why and how specific pieces of private information can be shared in cases of “an emergency” or “to protect the health or safety of the student or other persons.” Such explicit messages tell stakeholders what instances allow for PSD to share stakeholders’ private information. Such transparency may help stakeholders trust PSD as an organization and continue to support the organization and its reputation (Steers, 1977). Through such messaging, PSD communicates that they are attempting to balance stakeholder interests and preferences in both safety and privacy rather than choosing to compromise (Vargas, 2018; Moco, 2021). Communicating and upholding such shared values can be beneficial to the organization’s maintenance of stakeholder support (Freeman et al., 2020; Moco, 2021). The next section explores how PSD used ambiguity to manage these commitments.

Reducing Uncertainty Through Transparent Communication as Primary Theme

Uncertainty and ambiguity are common in moments of crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000) and can lead to further uncertainty in urgent and high stakes situations. Therefore, it may be best to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity during moments of crisis and an effective way to do so is through transparent communication on behalf of the organization (Hadley et al., 2011; Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). Even adopting a “negative capacity” (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817) can be beneficial for an organization during moments of uncertainty, because it allows the organization

to communicate to stakeholders that there will be uncertainty, so it does not come as a surprise when the uncertainty arises. Epidemics and other public health events often pose high degrees of ambiguity (Kahn, 2009), which makes uncertainty worse. In an attempt to reduce ambiguity, stakeholders often demand access to information and scientific research that will allow them to understand and respond to the crisis (Kahn, 2009). However, making reliable information quickly accessible is precarious and sometimes not even possible, which can further the ambiguity of such health crises (Kahn, 2009).

When a crisis emerges, the organization experiencing it may not know whether an action is appropriate to take. Only after deciding to act can organizational members observe the results and evaluate the efficacy of their choices (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000; Weick, 1988). Although research supports early public responses to minimize crisis damage, taking appropriate action early on in the face of an uncertain and ambiguous event can be difficult (Marconi, 1992; Schuetz, 1990; Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995; Fink, 1986; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Communicating during COVID-19 was complex for any organization that was actively attempting to respond to the changes, such as the disease variants and changes in COVID policy, brought on by the pandemic in real time. Below, I describe subtheme of reducing uncertainty that demonstrates PSD's attempts to manage this dilemma.

Crises are frequently defined by uncertainty, or by a lack of knowledge about a situation (Liu et al., 2016). Uncertainty impacts how stakeholders view crises, including crises in educational organizations (Grissom & Condon, 2021), and managing communication about and during crises frequently includes acknowledging uncertainty (Janoske, 2013; Seeger, 2006). In the face of crisis, transparent communication can help decrease uncertainty (Ruppel et al., 2022). When uncertainty is reduced, the potential psychological impacts of that crisis are also reduced

(Liu et al., 2016). Stakeholders, when given transparent communication by the organization in crisis, are less likely to disengage from the organization experiencing crisis and are more likely to have decreased levels of uncertainty about the crisis (Ruppel et al., 2022).

An example of PSD wrestling with and communicating about uncertainty was on July 27, 2021. “And, as of today, state, national, and local guidance isn’t aligned. We, like you, are frustrated by the constant change that we are experiencing.” In this message, PSD acknowledged that because of the lack of aligned and consistent guidance across national, state, and local levels, all stakeholders were experiencing uncertainty because they may not be sure what guidance to follow and in what context. PSD recognizes the frustration that comes with this lack of certainty and is ultimately acknowledging the hardships resulting from the uncertainty. Here, PSD tries to mitigate uncertainty by providing consistency in its own communication despite the lack of certainty about future decisions (Reppel et al., 2022).

A second example of PSD communicating uncertainty was as follows:

PSD COVID-19 data dashboards will remain available for anyone wanting to monitor cases at a particular school or department. Dashboard users can filter cases by date and grade level. Please note that dashboard data may not be as up to date as it was prior to the overwhelming number of Omicron cases; that said, PSD staff continue to enter cases as quickly as possible.

The reference to the COVID-19 dashboard is an attempt to reduce uncertainty in the moment while offering transparency about the accuracy of the information. In moments of crisis, organizational leaders should have a source or a bank of information that is easily accessible to ensure that organization members can work with each other successfully (Wooten & James, 2008). However, if this dashboard may not be as up to date as it has been in the past, the usability of this information source comes into question. PSD attempts to balance both the desire for information with the uncertainty about the accuracy of such information. In this message

PSD uses transparency to both respond to stakeholders' desire for more information while acknowledging the ambiguity of the circumstances.

A third example of PSD managing and communicating about uncertainty was on January 31, 2022, which was in response to Larimer County planning to lift their mask order in early February. The message was, "Masks are still required in all PSD facilities. We have not yet determined what the county's announcement means for PSD's existing protocol requiring masks and will communicate a district decision as soon as possible." Like the above example, PSD tried to keep its communication and transparency consistent during the pandemic, even if little else was. The simplicity of PSD's message helps in this instance; PSD does not know what the plan is, and they are transparent about it. Such attempts can work to the benefit of stakeholders because such consistent, clear, and regular communication from an organization can decrease stakeholder anxiety during a crisis (Beesley & Devonald, 2020).

A final example of PSD using transparency as a communication tool to combat uncertainty was posted on the PSD website on January 10, 2022:

Our district remains resolute in our commitment to in-person learning. That said, we want to be transparent about our significant, daily staffing challenges. In PSD last week, there were 40 custodians and 21 Transportation staff out on one day – numbers that nearly impacted our ability to provide these services.

At 6:30 a.m. Monday, there were 274 employee absences across the district, and that rose to 317 within three hours. Getting substitutes to cover during a sub shortage is particularly difficult, as one example.

We have and continue to do everything we can to maintain in-person learning, planning proactively to cover open positions. At the same time, we may need to shift classes, programs, grade levels or even entire schools to remote learning. This could be due to the number of staff and student absences (COVID or illness symptoms) or a lack of staff needed to ensure we have enough caring, trained adults with our students.

PSD again reduces uncertainty through the act of transparency by explaining why the modality of education may need to shift in the future: because of staffing shortages. In their message, PSD

tells stakeholders what hurdles they as a district may encounter when attempting to meet this commitment. When PSD communicates to stakeholders about the staffing shortage, they offer informationally transparent messages. Informational transparency, which attempts to make information known to a relevant party, is one of three forms of transparent communication that help increase trust (Rawlins, 2008; Hopp & Fisher, 2021). Through sharing information that is transparent, organizational stakeholders are statistically more likely to feel a sense of trust towards an organization (Rawlins, 2008). Here, PSD uses informational transparency to generate trust from stakeholders. Next, I will discuss how PSD frequently highlighted the need to communicate and share responsibility as a primary theme.

Shared Responsibility as Primary Theme

Because crises are unexpected and negative, impacted individuals often seek to attribute or ascribe responsibility, or blame, for the event (Coombs, 2015; Weiner, 1986). That attribution of responsibility either by the organization or by the stakeholder themselves shape how stakeholders feel about or behaved towards an organization (Coombs, 2015). Frequently, this ascription of responsibility may be done because of the crisis response strategy that an organization used throughout the crisis. COVID-19 in PSD might be considered a victim crisis because the crisis impacted both the stakeholders and the organization (Coombs, 2007). Organizations can respond to a victim crisis such as a pandemic with instructing information (Coombs, 2006). Instructing information provides stakeholders with information after the crisis has begun, such as basic information about what the crisis is, and how to protect themselves and the organization from the crisis (Coombs, 2006). COVID-19 also poses elements of an accident crisis, because as the pandemic evolves over time, PSD's decisions may impact the crisis for organizational stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Accident crises often call for a diminish response

option. The diminish response option is when an organization recognizes that a crisis has occurred but attempts to deflect the crisis responsibility off themselves to protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2006). Below I discuss how PSD utilized certain crisis response strategies, particularly the diminish response option, to deflect responsibility away from themselves as an organization (Coombs, 2006).

PSD frequently did not tell stakeholders explicitly what they should do to keep themselves safe, instead they allowed stakeholders to make their own choices while stating PSD's preferences for masks and vaccinations. Providing these types of recommendations exemplifies instructing information (Coombs, 2006). One example of PSD attributing responsibility on stakeholders is their post on August 4 when they discussed strategies for keeping children in school. The post read, "You can do this by... getting vaccinated if it's right for your family." PSD is not explicitly telling stakeholders that they have to get vaccinated if they want children to stay in school, rather PSD is leaving the decision of getting vaccinated against COVID-19 up to the stakeholders. In contrast, PSD does provide more explicit instructing information in the same message by also saying, "You can do this by wearing your mask, washing your hands, following PSD's health and safety protocols." Because COVID-19 vaccines are a much more politically charged topic, PSD allowing that decision to remain with their stakeholders keeps PSD separated from the reputational threat that may occur, should PSD express strong opinions towards their stakeholders' potential political views.

Sometimes not only did PSD attribute responsibility towards their stakeholders, but they shared responsibility with them as an organization. In a video message from the superintendent, uploaded on July 27, 2021, Superintendent Kingsley said:

Hi everyone. It's Brian, and I'm here with a very important update. Together we have an incredible responsibility to work as a team. To accomplish that, our communication must

be open. It must be honest and compassionate. Our children and the PSD community are always at the center of our hearts and our work.

In this instance, PSD communicated a shared responsibility for the pandemic instead of putting the responsibility solely on themselves, thus using the diminish response option (Coombs, 2006). Through PSD encouraging stakeholders to help them as a district, the labor of managing the COVID-19 crisis is distributed, and PSD's sole labor is diminished. Through framing the responsibility as a team effort, stakeholders may feel as if they have more agency in the situation. PSD also benefits, because some of the labor is taken off of their plate.

An example of PSD attributing responsibility towards other external parties was in their message on January 10, 2022, "We know that some have felt confused by ever changing guidelines from the CDC, CDPHE, and LCDHE. It is worth noting that the majority of our protocols have not changed." In this case, PSD provides stakeholders with other authority figures involved in the decision-making and information-crafting process regarding COVID-19. PSD alone was not creating the changing guidelines; the CDC, LCDHE, and the CDPHE were all collectively informing the decision at various levels of government. Once again, the diminish response option was used; PSD was not the only one who invoked such responses due to the pandemic; other organizations did.

On August 4, 2021, PSD once again provided stakeholders with other external organizations so that stakeholders may attribute responsibility to them rather than to PSD. Superintendent Kingsley authored a post on the PSD website which stated that starting August 5, 2021, all staff, students, and visitors to PSD schools would be required to wear masks regardless of COVID vaccination status. Kingsley said, "Our priorities are safety and keeping kids in school. We want to provide a dynamic learning environment for students and minimize quarantines. We are also using data and public health guidance to be responsive, meaning that

we monitor PSD-specific, Larimer County, state, and national data.” Such a statement not only aligns with PSD’s commitments for the school year, but it shifts responsibility for educational decisions by saying they are following “data and public health guidance” from other organizations (Larimer County, the State of Colorado, and data from the United States at a national level). By communicating this, PSD makes it harder for stakeholders to assign responsibility to PSD itself for this decision, thus safeguarding PSD’s organizational reputation.

The same message by Superintendent Kingsley on August 4, 2021, additionally placed responsibility on stakeholders, saying, “I am hopeful and inspired to partner with you to make this a great school year for our students and families. The first day of school is only two short weeks away, and we’re excited to welcome students back to classrooms full-time.” Through the decision to use the words “partner with you” and “we’re” PSD implicitly communicates that it is not their responsibility alone to get students back in classrooms. Instead, they are saying it is a “partnership” that they are all working on and towards together. To this degree, PSD once again uses the diminish response option (Coombs, 2006) by invoking the other stakeholders as responsible, as well.

Often, PSD combined an instructional approach in the messages that shifted responsibility. On November 3, 2021, PSD posted on their website about COVID vaccines. They stated, "Please get vaccinated, if it is the right decision for you and your family. PSD does not require but strongly encouraging staff and students to be vaccinated. PSD continues to partner with public health agencies to offer vaccination opportunities.” Ultimately, PSD leaves the decision up to students, staff, and their families despite the encouragement from the district. PSD offers instructing information but does not give an order for stakeholders. In this act, PSD shifts responsibility. Although PSD told stakeholders to get vaccinated "if it is the right decision for

you and your family," PSD communicated that if the commitment to COVID-19 safety did waver, it may have done so because anonymous "you" and "your family" chose not to get vaccinated. Through this, PSD attempts to protect its organizational reputation by saying placing the responsibility for upholding one of its primary commitments on the wider community.

Another instance of PSD deferring responsibility through instructing information is a post on Twitter. A Tweet posted on the PSD Twitter account on December 5, 2021, included an image depicting children playing with the text, "Vaccinating kids and teens against COVID-19 will protect their health and allow them to participate in activities without fear of getting sick or having to quarantine. Talk to your child's healthcare provider about your questions." Through PSD telling stakeholders to talk to "your child's" healthcare provider(s) PSD is instructing the caregiver stakeholder to encourage a conversation that may lead to children getting vaccinated against COVID-19. The "your" in "your kids" and "your child" hinted that PSD intends to put the responsibility for getting kids vaccinated on the caregiver stakeholder. This message also implies that caregivers are responsible for getting kids "back to what they love" through talking to "your child's healthcare provider" about getting vaccinated. By not explicitly stating whether caregivers should or should not get their kids vaccinated, they put the responsibility and action on the caregivers rather than on PSD.

Empathy as Primary Theme

Aside from direct attributions of responsibility, emotions and empathy influence the assignment of responsibility in a moment of crisis, particularly within an organization that is experiencing a crisis after previously experiencing a different crisis (Weiner, 2006; Coombs, 2007). Organizational leaders expressing empathy during times of crisis is also seen as a best

practice, if that leader can balance expressing empathy with also expressing accountability (Semenets-Orlova et al., 2021).

To have empathy is to take the perspective of others and understand others' thoughts, emotions, and points of view (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004), as well as being able to adopt the perspective of the emotions that someone else is experiencing (Blair, 2005). Empathy within the context of crisis communication can decrease reputational damage in the eyes of stakeholders (Schoofs et al., 2019). Victims' empathy for the offending organization in the case of a crisis, particularly if the crisis type is not a victim type, can lead to less reputational damage for the organization (Coombs, 2006; Schoofs et al., 2019).

Empathy is one of the many ways that organizations in crisis can communicate to stakeholders about the crisis while also building a stronger relationship between stakeholders and the organization (Coombs, 2007; Schoofs et al., 2017). A study of university employees' wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that as organizations experience change as a result of crisis, organizational supervisor support becomes more important because it helps to reduce uncertainty of employees (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022).

Expressing empathy helps the organization appear ethical and social in the eyes of their stakeholders (Schoofs et al., 2022), and doing so without attributing responsibility in moments of crisis can help facilitate organizational reputation repair if attributing responsibility is not an option (Schoofs et al., 2017). During the chosen dates of analysis, PSD does follow the best practice of expressing empathy to stakeholders and regularly acknowledges the emotions that stakeholders were experiencing. Crises are emotional events, which can impact the mental wellbeing of stakeholders involved. How the organization experiencing a crisis handles the emotions that arise impact the crisis management (Marsen, 2020).

A post on August 4, 2021, reflected many different emotions that PSD acknowledged throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Superintendent Kingsley's message initially led with positivity through Kingsley saying, "I am hopeful and inspired to partner with you to make this a great school year for our students and families. The first day of school is only two short weeks away, and we're excited to welcome students back to classrooms full-time." Kingsley recognized a communal excitement for a return to normalcy and the status quo after having students in online classrooms. Furthermore, Kingsley's use of the word "you" regarding partnerships was relevant because it is generic and could encapsulate many different stakeholders simultaneously. The start of Kingsley's message created a genuine and upbeat tone for the upcoming school year, easing stakeholders into a sense of security (and perhaps "inspiration" and "hope"). Through Kingsley's use of "we" when discussing feeling "hopeful" and "inspired," he indicates that he shares the emotion with stakeholders, therefore expressing empathy for stakeholders who may be allowing themselves to feel hope or inspiration at the concept of returning to in-person learning.

An organization leader's job is to communicate with and inspire stakeholders to stick with the organization throughout the crisis so that once the organization reaches the renewal and rebuilding stage, it can come back stronger (Ulmer et al., 2007). In this message Kingsley strives to inspire stakeholders, as he looks forward to students returning to the classroom and thanks them for their efforts that made such an in-person return possible.

Later in the same August 4 message, Kingsley references more negative emotions because of the return to in-person learning. "I know some of you will be angry about this decision, while others may feel a deep sense of relief." Kingsley recognizes stakeholders who may have felt anger as a result of PSD's decision and in doing so attempts to minimize the potential backlash that PSD may experience as a result of ignoring the emotions of stakeholders

who disagreed. After all, anger is seen as an appropriate emotional response when invoked in response to a victim crisis (Xiao et al., 2018), and expressing anger during a victim crisis can help organizations attribute responsibility to external circumstances (Coombs, 2007). An organization empathizing with stakeholders' anger demonstrates that the organization cares for the wellbeing of stakeholders, regardless of if they are experiencing positive or negative emotions (Schoofs et al., 2022).

Similarly, an August 4, 2021, message acknowledged stakeholder frustration while still holding to PSD's priority of keeping kids in school, "The beginning of school is a time of celebration and belonging. This news may be discouraging, but let's not lose sight of why we're here: to be hopeful, to be inspired and to make sure every child learns every day." PSD recognizes that all stakeholders may not like the decision to require masks, so they acknowledge that those stakeholders may feel discouraged. However, they also choose to communicate hope, inspiration, celebration, and belonging to encourage stakeholders to remain hopeful and positive. This demonstrates that PSD is aware its stakeholders have differing opinions. Such acknowledgments can help stakeholders feel heard and recognized (Pless & Maak, 2004). By PSD expressing empathy, the likelihood of stakeholders and the organization forming a community increases and that sense of community strength may help PSD throughout the COVID-19 (Palmer & Stoll, 2011).

In the next chapter, I address RQ3, which explores the dialectical tensions that PSD communicates about and balances in their messages to stakeholders. I provide a brief reminder of dialectical tensions literature and the importance of dialectical tensions or crisis communication, and then I explain what dialectical tensions emerge in PSD's communication. Finally, I elaborate

on RQ4, and I examine the stage of crisis that PSD is in throughout the chosen dates of analysis, and the implications for PSD being in particular stages for their crisis communication.

CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS: DIALECTICAL TENSIONS AND STAGE OF CRISIS

This chapter analyzes and answers RQ3, which asks about the dialectical tensions that PSD is balancing in their communication during the dates of analysis, as well as RQ4, which identifies the stage of crisis that PSD is in during the dates of analysis. First, I provide a brief reminder of the literature on dialectical tensions. Then, I will define the specific dialectical tensions that PSD is managing and provide examples of each of those tensions. Finally, I will review the stages of crisis, and define and explain the stage of crisis during the dates of analysis and the way that this context impacted PSD's crisis communication.

Dialectical Tensions

Dialectical tensions are conditions, needs, or goals that are in competition with other conditions, needs, or goals, and they may be both situated outside of communication, as well as managed through communication (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Tensions can occur within individuals, groups, organizations, or society as daily life pulls interactants in different, sometimes conflicting, directions (Baxter & Scharp, 2015; Prentice & Kramer, 2006), but communication can help surface the competing perspectives or goals that underlie dialectical tensions (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Dialectical tensions often arise in moments of crisis (Baxter & Scharp, 2015), and reflect underlying power imbalances (Rice, 2022). They also reflect the complexities of folks attempting to balance their own interests and needs, the interests of their organization, as well as the interests of the organization's stakeholders (McGuire et al., 2020). In the case of PSD and their stakeholders, the tensions reflected conflicts that arose throughout the pandemic. Although PSD attempted to be responsive to stakeholders, their interests often came into conflict with one another. Unfortunately, such tensions are an unavoidable part of everyday

operations in organizations that attempt to accommodate multiple different stakeholders (Jenkins & Dillon, 2012; Bliss, 2020). In response, organizations should adopt a tension-centered approach that acknowledges underlying tensions and communicates about them with stakeholders (Jenkins & Dillon, 2012; Bliss, 2020).

To further identify strategies for communicating through crisis, I turn to an exploration of the dialectical tensions that emerge from PSD's handling of COVID-19. In my analysis, I seek to understand how those tensions are communicated, and communicated about, in the district's messaging throughout the pandemic. Two primary dialectical tensions emerged in PSD's communication about the COVID crisis throughout the 2021 – 2022 school year: (a) stability and change and (b) disclosure and privacy (Baxter & Scharp, 2015). The tensions often arose in response to the themes as PSD's commitments, responsibilities, and attempts to meet the needs of stakeholders came into conflict with one another. In the following section, I provide overviews of the dialectical tensions that most frequently emerged in PSD's communication, examples of the tensions, and discussions of the tensions, and how PSD's response to the COVID-19 crisis relates to crisis communication scholarship.

Stability and Change

The tension of stability and change refers to changes within a relationship (such as between an organization and stakeholders) as well as changes within the state of something (such as an organization) (Galanes, 2009). Stability and change may exist simultaneously if a precarious balance is reached, but not without difficulty (Lin et al., 2020). Change can lead to future stability as an organization works through complex situations that require the organization to alter its operations in some capacity. Stability also can lead to change because stability provides the security and resources that are needed in order to recognize when change will

benefit an organization as well as see those changes to fruition (Lin et al., 2020). Responding to the tensions between stability and change requires balancing predictability, certainty, and stability with novelty, stimulation, and uncertainty (Baxter, 1994). The notion of stability and change is important for crisis communication because crises are “the perception of an unpredictable event” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). Because that event cannot be predicted, it may include the potential for change, or the lack of stability. As a situation shifts from one state to another, or as a moment of crisis shifts from one stage to another, change occurs. Change does not occur from one moment to the next, or from a moment of stability to a moment of change. Instead, it is a process of becoming (Galanes, 2009). In contrast, stability represents a lack of shift and is the foundation on which change is built (Galanes, 2009).

When faced with managing stability and change, organizations must grapple with the need for something that is at one point a change to become something that is stable in the future. Such shifts from change to stability become possible when enough stakeholders agree to adopt the change (Kivilahti, 2013). Therefore, what may initially be something that stakeholders do not support, such as COVID-19 protocols, may become something that has support if it continues within the organization (Kivilahti, 2013). During the pandemic, change was constant, and PSD had to communicate those changes as they occurred and came into being. The stability and change tension frequently arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, as PSD and affiliated stakeholders determined what would change, and what would remain the same, to continue to function as a school district. The tension is particularly relevant to the COVID-19 crisis because of how rapidly it developed, therefore prompting shifts, or changes, in protocol. As COVID-19 variants emerged, the school district had to race to keep up, not only changing their health

protocols, but communicating those changes to stakeholders before the pandemic could change again.

PSD posted to their district website on August 8, 2021, discussing the impact of the pandemic on Larimer County, and the changes that occurred as a result. Superintendent Brian Kingsley wrote the following:

As I shared in my last update, we have been grappling with the changing conditions and what they mean for our mask protocols. One of the biggest challenges I have heard was how difficult quarantines were for everyone. Our goal is to keep kids in school. The easiest way to do that is to wear masks. When masks are worn appropriately, they're extremely effective at protecting both you and me.

This both creates a collective community between PSD and stakeholders and demonstrates the need to balance changing conditions while maintaining a sense of normalcy, or stability.

“Keeping kids in school” would provide stability so that students could continue learning and engaging with academic material in a way that is like pre-pandemic practices. The addition of masks, and the shifting masking protocols, is the presence of change. By combining messages about stability and change, PSD eases stakeholders into the changes while still acknowledging what will remain the same. The emphasis on stability attempts to ensure that stakeholders are not confronted with too much change all at once, which can undermine stakeholder support of organizational decisions (Tummers, 2019). Combining messages of stability and change can reassure stakeholders that some things will stay the same; so, although there is some changing in the day-to-day operations of the organization, organizations can highlight spaces of stability and, subsequently, maintain stakeholder support (Tummers, 2019).

The same post continued with more references to the stability and change tension, with a bit more of an explanatory tone:

A lot of you may ask why. Why now? What's changed? The short answer is the Delta variant. It's more contagious, it's spreading and it's impacting both vaccinated and unvaccinated people. With our increased case rates and current vaccination rate, Larimer

County is now considered high risk. The benchmark set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that we need additional protective measures. And truth be told, even though we've done everything in our power to keep our community safe, we need to do more.

This communication explicitly references the change taking place in the form of the Delta variant. PSD clearly explains the changing risk and the implications of the Delta variant on stakeholders. Even so, PSD highlights the need to continue doing what they were doing previously to keep the case count down and keep kids in school, even if "we need to do more." Here, PSD says that there will be stability because they will continue to use previously implemented protective measures. However, there will also be change because the variant of COVID-19 that the district is attempting to manage is also changing.

PSD also used discussions of change and stability to deflect responsibility while empathizing with stakeholders. On January 10, 2022, PSD acknowledged that their stakeholders may have been experiencing confusion due to the frequently changing COVID-19 guidelines.

PSD posted the following message to their website:

We know that some have felt confused by everchanging guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), and Larimer County Department of Health and Environment (LCDHE). It is worth noting that the majority of our protocols have not changed.

PSD acknowledges that there is some stability because most of their protocols did not change. However, PSD also recognizes that because of current events, stakeholders may experience change. However, PSD emphasizes that the changes are not because of their decisions but because of guidelines implemented by other institutions. Through PSD's recognition of their stakeholders' confusion, they also empathize with the stakeholders. By saying "we know that some have felt confused," PSD is validating those feelings.

In the above message, PSD centered the CDC, CDPHE, and the LCDHE as responsible for the change, therefore the district subtly pushed the responsibility for those pandemic related decisions onto those organizations rather than onto themselves. If stakeholders feel confused, it is not PSD's fault, instead the other organizations continuously changing guidelines caused stakeholders' confusion, and therefore the CDC, CDPHE, and LCDHE are at fault. Through communicating this, PSD is reminding individuals that not only are they managing their own expectations as an organization, but that of their stakeholders and other organizations, as well, further complicating the issue (McGuire et al., 2020). Through PSD shifting responsibility and blame, their reputation is protected. Throughout the changes, some stability still exists in PSD's message, however. PSD communicating through the website channel about COVID-19 health guidelines is something that has become expected, or stable, for stakeholders. The overall content and context of the message is stable with what PSD has communicated before, however the details that are being communicated are, themselves, a change.

An example of PSD communicating the stability and change tension is also in a message by Superintendent Kingsley on July 27, 2021:

As we continue responding to COVID-19, many of you have expressed your thoughts and suggestions. I hear you.... Everyone feels differently about what's best for them.... We can agree that living and working in a global pandemic is complex and that we all face tough decisions.... With students beginning the school year in classrooms, we are grappling with the changing conditions in our county and what they may mean for our mask protocols.... Please know, we have not yet made a new decision. However, it is possible that we may need to re-evaluate what mask-wearing looks like in our buildings.

The above example has instances of communicating the stability and change tension because PSD acknowledged that they may re-evaluate mask-wearing policies at a future date, so the mask protocols at large may change. PSD is also following the best practice of asking one of their stakeholders, in this case the faculty and staff community, for their feedback (Boiral, 2021). In

contrast, there is stability amongst stakeholders because the pandemic has been going on for over a year at this point, and such stability is communicated in Kingsley's comment, "we can agree that living and working in a global pandemic is complex and that we all face tough decisions." Furthermore, the "changing conditions in our country" highlights how PSD may need to pivot to accommodate such changes, such as shifting COVID-19 protocols, on a smaller, organizational scale. PSD is communicating stability because students will begin the school year in classrooms, as is normal, or stable, for stakeholders. However, to accommodate such stability, other elements may change. PSD does not communicate only stability or only change, because through doing so, part of the message may be missed, instead PSD weaves the stable and the changing together in the message, to not mislead stakeholders one way or another. PSD's communication is stable in that they will communicate changes to stakeholders, as if the communication of change, itself, is something that has become stable, or expected.

The tension of stability and change often overlaps with the presence of certainty or uncertainty (Baxter, 1994; Kerdchoochuen, 2011; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). Risk is defined as the absence of certainty (Sellnow et al., 2008), and crises are inherently uncertain (Baxter, 1994). In the example below, PSD highlights the stability and change tension and its relationship to certainty. On a post on the PSD website on January 10, 2021, discussing staffing shortages:

"At the same time, we may need to shift classes, programs, grade levels or even entire schools to remote learning. This could be due to the number of staff and student absences (COVID or illness symptoms) or a lack of staff needed to ensure we have enough caring, trained adults with our students. To be clear: We do NOT want to shift our entire district to remote learning and are being intentional with this targeted approach. Please know that we will communicate shifts to remote learning as soon as possible but that these could occur with little notice."

Numerous aspects of change are referenced in this post. The use of "may" as a word to describe the potential shifting in modality of teaching is critical, because it does not explicitly

communicate to stakeholders about PSD's potential plan should the problem of staffing shortages grow. Even though PSD vows to communicate to stakeholders about these "shifts to remote learning" swiftly, it is uncertain whether or not stakeholders will be given ample time to prepare, or even if the shifts will occur at all.

Here, PSD tells stakeholders that they are confident that there will be change, to the extent that change should be expected. However, PSD is not sure if they will need to shift "classes, programs, grade levels, or even entire schools" to an online learning format, when this may happen, and how much advance notice, if any, that stakeholders will get. PSD's decision to prepare stakeholders for a lack of certainty can be beneficial so stakeholders are not caught off guard by the change (Yang & Meng, 2023). Avoiding instability and change altogether can lead to overcompensation by an organization during crisis, which can worsen an already crisis-level situation (Tam, 2020). PSD's decision to prepare stakeholders for change protects their reputation because then future instances of change are not surprising to stakeholders. Even though the shifts may occur, PSD promises to communicate those shifts to stakeholders. Preparing for and communicating change ahead of time is ultimately in the organization's best interests, so long as such preparation and communication is flexible to meet the needs of the dynamic nature of uncertainty (Tam, 2020).

On August 12, 2021, a similar post was made on the PSD website. The post read, "Please note that fall protocols could shift, as PSD adapts to public health conditions and guidance." In this instance, "could" was the hint that PSD balanced this tension between stability and lack thereof. Like the message above, PSD highlights the potential for changes to fall protocols and public health conditions. By informing stakeholders that such shifts may take place, PSD lets stakeholders know ahead of time that they may need to be flexible and ready for change. Should

an organization in crisis provide too certain and too reassuring messages, the organization may be perceived as less credible, and more alarm can result from the crisis (Seeger, 2006).

Therefore, talking more freely about the potential lack of stability may be the safer option to maintain the organization's credibility (Seeger, 2006).

A final example of how PSD communicated both sides of the stability and change tension occurred on November 25, 2021, on the PSD website. "We anticipate there will be cases and outbreaks in PSD that will lead to shifts from in-person to remote education, health department-mandated quarantines for close contacts and possible, temporary closure of individual schools. Things will likely happen with little notice." PSD assures stakeholders that, "there will be cases and outbreaks," that they should plan for them, and as a result, which shifts in remote learning will take place. By informing stakeholders of plans for future changes, PSD acknowledges change as a stable current condition. PSD avoids the risk that comes with large changes happening swiftly and with little notice and gives stakeholders the chance to prepare in advance. In this instance, PSD prepares for changes in a flexible manner, protecting their organizational reputation and allowing both themselves and their stakeholders to prepare for the uncertainty of crises ahead of time (Tam, 2020; Van Der Bles, 2019). Though PSD remained vague and uncertain about when and how these events would come to pass, they attempted to minimize those risks through preemptive communication about the potential changes. In sum, PSD communicated change as a certainty, or something that was stable and expected.

Disclosure and Privacy

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health information privacy has been a concern for the public, particularly regarding contact tracing (Hong & Cho, 2021). The disclosure and privacy tension emerges when communicators decide whether they should or should not share

information, and how much and often appears when communicators are debating health decisions or disclosing health decisions (Kingsley Westerman, et al., 2022). When stakeholders disclose health information to their organization, the ownership of the information may shift, so that the stakeholder is no longer the sole owner of that health information and instead, the stakeholder and the organization(s) are co-owners (Barta, 2019). As a result of that shared ownership, stakeholders may feel that they have less agency over information which previously belonged solely to them (Barta, 2019). Should stakeholders not trust the organization's actions regarding the data, especially if the choice to share that data is not given, stakeholders may feel vulnerable as a result (Brough & Martin, 2021).

Such concerns for privacy are reflected in PSD's communication, particularly in communications with caregivers, students, and faculty stakeholders. On November 25, 2021, PSD posted on their website in response to caregivers asking why PSD shared their students' information with the LCDHE for a COVID-19 contact tracing investigation. PSD quotes the LCDHE's website when responding. "PSD may need to share some student information requested by the LCDHE staff completing contact tracing investigations... all disclosures will be made in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)." In this message, PSD attempts to communicate to stakeholders that, although some information was being disclosed, it was doing so only within the confines that FERPA allows, therefore privacy was still upheld. However, through the act of sharing that information, PSD's stakeholders would no longer be the sole owner of their information, and PSD as well as LCDHE would become co-owners of that information (Hong & Cho, 2023). PSD is attempting to walk a tightrope between privacy and disclosure. PSD communicates that stakeholders may need to disclose some

information and elaborates that only certain instances of private information will be shared because of FERPA.

In the same statement, PSD goes on to quote the CDPHE website:

“Schools are required to disclose names of people with COVID-19 to public health authorities. Schools should not disclose the name(s) of students, teachers, or staff members with COVID-19 to other teachers, staff, students, parents, the media, or anyone outside of public health. Public health staff are trained in how to manage health information in order to protect your privacy. They will never share your information without your permission, and they store records securely and keep them safe.”

This message explained both what information would be accessible to parties other than PSD (or be disclosed) and what information would not be shared (or kept private). Furthermore, the message elaborated upon whom the information would be disclosed to. PSD did not tell stakeholders that this disclosure was an option. Through this message, PSD attempts to put stakeholders’ minds at ease by reassuring them that although their information will be disclosed, it will only need to be disclosed to certain people. Therefore, the information will still be kept private from others. This is a common concern for stakeholders during health crises, in particular (Hong & Cho, 2021; Hong & Cho, 2023). PSD reiterates that only FERPA-allowed information is being shared with the public health authorities who are trained in managing sensitive health data. In this case, PSD attempts to maintain their commitment to privacy, as discussed in the previous chapter, while explaining the necessity for disclosure. Even though PSD’s stakeholders will need to have some of their information disclosed, PSD tries to reassure their stakeholders that they can trust the disclosure process due to the nature of the COVID-19 health crisis requiring such a disclosure to take place. Also, because it is common for stakeholders to be more wary of disclosing health information (Hong & Cho, 2021), PSD reassures stakeholders that FERPA is not being violated.

PSD took a similar approach when discussing vaccination records. LCDHE kept records of who had been fully vaccinated and who had not. The website continued:

New for second semester: When PSD COVID-19 Response Teams conduct contact tracing investigations, they will submit names of all possible close contacts of a case to LCDHE. LCDHE will verify whether anyone on the list has been fully vaccinated. Those who have a verified vaccination status will not have to quarantine.

In this post, PSD discussed the disclosure of a potential COVID-19 exposure, as well as disclosure of COVID-19 vaccination status. In PSD's message, they communicate that the choice to disclose close contacts of someone who was diagnosed with COVID, and whether that close contact was fully vaccinated, is no longer in the hands of the stakeholders. PSD's COVID-19 response teams decide to submit the names to the LCHDE, so stakeholders should be aware that, based on this message, such information will not be kept private. Therefore, disclosure to COVID-19 exposure and vaccination status will become the norm. The disclosure norm is a contrast to PSD's commitment to privacy. Turning against that commitment may open PSD up to experiencing a contradiction of their organizational identity shifting from an organization that upholds their commitments, to an organization that does not (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). In the next section, I define and analyze the stage of crisis that PSD is in during the chosen dates of analysis. I also will overview the implications for the stage of crisis that PSD is in during the chosen dates of analysis.

Defining the Stage of Crisis

The fourth and final research question asked how PSD defined the stage of the COVID crisis during the time of analysis. Overall, PSD did not define the stage of the COVID-19 crisis and instead allowed for communication about the pandemic to taper off into minimal messages rather than declare that they were in the post-crisis stage. PSD would shift in and out of the during-crisis and post-crisis stages because of the iterative nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. I

term this moment as a liminal space, during which a crisis may swing back and forth between the during-crisis and post-crisis: resolution and recovery stages because the crisis is unable to meet the requirements of moving entirely to the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage. The liminal spaces may occur because the during-crisis stage is still happening, but there is some resolution or recovery taking place. This case study revealed that liminal spaces can exist between the during-crisis stage and the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage. Whether or not the liminal spaces could exist between other stages of crisis is yet unknown and an area for potential future research. In their communications, PSD does not so much define the COVID-19 crisis as they discuss it. Towards the end of the spring 2022 semester there is not a point where PSD says that the COVID crisis is over. Instead, for a brief period, communication about COVID tapers off as communication about other crises began to drift into the limelight. Then, PSD students are away for summer vacation, and communication from the school district drops off, as it has in previous years, due to stakeholders not needing to hear from the school district as often because students and teachers are not in class. PSD discusses COVID when it is flaring, or in the during-crisis stage. PSD would then communicate minimally when COVID is not flaring or is not in the during-crisis stage, or when there are other crises also needing attention.

To briefly review the stages of a crisis, initially, there is the pre-crisis stage. This stage is also known as the warning stage, where an organization may be keeping an eye out for any warning signs of potential crises, but no actual crises are occurring at the time (Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008). For educational organizations, this stage is where educational leaders ask what their blind spots are or how they can better prepare for future crises (Grissom & Condon, 2021). The next stage is the during crises stage, which occurs in response to a triggering event, as well as during the beginning and escalation of a crisis

moment where organizational members attempt to limit the damage of the crisis (Seeger et al., 2003; Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). The third stage is the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage, where organizations promote resiliency, begin crisis cleanup, and may or may not use the crisis moment to motivate organizational change (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Wooten & James, 2008). Educational organizations specifically assess a school's response to the crisis while accommodating and monitoring the needs of the stakeholders at this time (Grissom & Condon, 2021). The fourth and final stage is post-crisis: learning, where the crisis is over and as a result organizational leaders learn from the crisis that took place and reassess how to improve in future crises (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992).

This thesis only analyzed PSD's public messages for the 2021 – 2022 school year that were communicated through their district website and public Twitter account. Those outward facing messages did not depict PSD reaching the post-crisis: learning stage because much of their communication, even during the latest spring 2022 dates for analysis, focused more on continuing to manage the crisis as opposed to communicating what PSD learned from the COVID-19 crisis. That is not to say that PSD certainly did not reach the learning stage and discussed it internally, but based on the analyzed communication, the post-crisis: learning stage was not discussed. By the spring of 2022, the pandemic had occurred for two years, and the United States was still under a Public Health Emergency (Miller, 2023). By spring 2022, PSD was not in one specific stage.

Some of PSD's communication hinted that they were approaching, or at least attempting to approach, a return to normalcy. However, PSD was also stuck in a continuous state of preparedness because there was potential for PSD to return to a during-crisis moment. Some elements of life had returned to normal (or were recovering), but not everything. The dynamic of

balancing crisis communication as a during-crisis moment and a post-crisis: resolution and recovery moment functions like a tension, because the two states are at odds with one another and cannot easily exist simultaneously. Despite that, both do exist in proximity, and PSD must balance their communication accordingly, and communicate the tension between a during-crisis and post-crisis: resolution and recovery moment to multiple stakeholders simultaneously.

For example, Kingsley's August 4, 2021, post on the website said, "I am hopeful and inspired to partner with you to make this a great school year for our students and families.... And we're excited to welcome students back to the classrooms full-time." In that message, Kingsley expresses communal excitement by using the word "we're" when referencing students' return to in-person learning. However, on the same day, PSD posted, "we need to come together as a community to prioritize keeping our kids in school.... You can do this by wearing your mask, washing your hands, following PSD's health and safety protocols, and getting vaccinated if its right for your family." The message demonstrated some resolution and recovery because students could participate in in-person learning, which they previously were not doing. There was not a complete resolution and recovery yet, though, because PSD is still working on "keeping kids in school" and implies that there is a possibility that children will be no longer kept in school for in-person learning should a COVID-19 outbreak occur.

In this moment, PSD was existing in a liminal crisis space between the during-crisis and post-crisis resolution and recovery phases while demonstrating some attributes of both stages, as if they were in tension with one another. In the above analysis, the dialectical tensions of stability and change and privacy and disclosure appeared as PSD moved between the during-crisis stage and the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage. As with those tensions, PSD needed to balance their communication while existing between and within multiple stages.

By the spring 2022 semester, PSD found itself in a complex situation. The school district was neither in the trenches of the during-crisis stage nor safe in the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage. Instead, PSD was in between those two stages. PSD recovered from the crisis enough that students could return to school but had not recovered enough to remove all crisis-related policies and restrictions. PSD remained vigilant in a perpetual state of preparedness in case the COVID-19 crisis forced PSD to take a step back into the during-crisis stage. While this is like the pre-crisis stage because PSD needed to actively scan for threats and prepare for future crises, PSD did not return to the pre-crisis stage because the crisis itself was still taking place. In short, PSD was required to both engage in threat detection and crisis management simultaneously. Whenever a crisis is reoccurring or has potential to reoccur over a period of time an organization adopting and continuing to have a continuous state of preparedness has been identified as a best practice (Kratz et al., 2019; Tawaha, 2021). Learning more about the liminal spaces of the crisis cycle may be helpful for organizations who find themselves in a continuous state of preparedness, such as those focused on emergency response and infectious disease. More research exploring the implications for remaining in a liminal space between the during-crisis and post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage for long periods of time is needed.

Narrative has been noted as a potential beneficial method of communicating iterative crises or long-term crises that could last years (Kalodner-Martin, 2022). Specifically, narratives may be a helpful tool in understanding the implications of disruption and inequality that result from long-term crisis, as reflected by people's lived experiences. While crisis communication does already attempt to center marginalized voices that are impacted by crises, adding a narrative methodology can be helpful in exploring long-term crises, rather than the much more commonly studied short term crisis (Kalodner-Martin, 2022). However, all narrative research particularly

that with a focus on crises should be handled reflexively and with respect to make the most out of the valuable insight that such research may offer (Kalodner-Martin, 2022). Future research on liminal spaces and long-lasting crises may benefit from a narrative research methodology.

One final area for future research is further exploration of liminal spaces and communicating long-term crisis; how audiences stay engaged and listen to informative messages during crises, as well as what effective delivery in these liminal spaces looks like may be helpful from a practical and academic standpoint. One possible vein of similar research that could be incorporated is misinformation, communicating new knowledge as scientists make further discoveries, and persuasion of scientific messages during long-term crises not limited to COVID-19.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

This section will provide an overview of the findings as well as details on the theoretical contributions from this thesis. Throughout this research I explored how PSD communicated the COVID-19 pandemic across their website and Twitter channels, what stakeholders PSD communicated to, what dialectical tensions emerged in their communication, and what stage of the crisis cycle PSD experienced at the time of their communication. PSD communicated with four stakeholders via their district website and Twitter messages, and those three stakeholders were (a) a Collective Audience, (b) Caregivers, (c) Students, and (d) Faculty and Staff. The stakeholders whom PSD most communicated with during the chosen dates of analysis was the collective audience. During moments of crisis, management should address multiple stakeholders in their messaging, minimizing the number of messages needed to be sent and therefore the risk of miscommunication (Lele, 2022). While communicating to a broad stakeholder audience, as opposed to communicating many messages tailored to specific stakeholders required less labor from PSD, it also allowed for less personalization of communication across stakeholder groups.

RQ2 explored the themes that PSD communicated about via their district website and Twitter account. I answered that question by defining and examining the themes that emerged in PSD's communication. The four primary themes that emerged from PSD's communication are (a) Communicating Commitments, (b) Reducing Uncertainty Through Transparent Communication, (c) Shared Responsibility, and (d) Empathy.

The Communicating Commitments theme had three subthemes that PSD most frequently communicated about: (a) Commitment to COVID-19 Safety, (b) Commitment to Continuing Education, and (c) Commitment to Privacy. The three commitments that PSD communicated

most frequently about were commitments that the school district made themselves at the beginning of the pandemic and helped to guide their communication throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The commitment to COVID-19 safety most frequently communicated PSD's safety protocols such as mask mandates, reporting, testing, and social distancing as well as how those protocols shifted throughout the pandemic. The commitment to continuing education was how PSD communicated to their stakeholders about how students, faculty, and staff would stay in school. Finally, the commitment to privacy was PSD telling their stakeholders that although some information would need to be disclosed, that PSD would attempt to allow stakeholders as much privacy as they could. The final commitment showed up more in dialectical tension format, which is elaborated on below.

Moments of crisis naturally bring about uncertainty (Coombs, 2007) and can require high stakes change (Hadley et al., 2011). By relying on their communities, PSD may be able to return to a sense of normalcy once the crisis is over. Through highlighting their commitments throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, PSD told stakeholders that even in moments of uncertainty their baseline goals as a school district have not changed, despite the many other things that have. Knowing that intense changes naturally follow moments of crisis (Hadley et al., 2011), an organization may consider keeping some of their pre-crisis commitments at the forefront of their plan, so they have something to return to when the crisis moment has ended, or momentarily calmed.

It is common for stakeholders to attempt to attribute responsibility during moments of crisis as explained in SCCT (Coombs, 2007), and PSD also communicated about attributions of responsibility for the COVID-19 crisis in their communication. Empathy can influence how stakeholders assign responsibility for a crisis, (Weiner, 2006; Coombs, 2007) and helps

organizations build community with and among their stakeholders (Palmer & Stoll, 2011). PSD, specifically the superintendent, often expressed empathy for the hardships that stakeholders were experiencing and reminded stakeholders that he and the PSD community were going through the pandemic together. Best leadership practices during times of crisis demonstrate that leadership needs to show “psychological security” to their stakeholders to be successful (Semenets-Orlova et al., 2021) and such empathy by PSD is a step in the right direction.

Leaders, however, should also demonstrate accountability (Semenets-Orlova et al., 2021). PSD’s frequent sharing or deflecting of responsibility may have harmed their ability to communicate such accountability to stakeholders. Stakeholders naturally attribute responsibility during moments of crisis (Coombs, 2006). During accident crises like pandemics (Coombs, 2015), the additional element of empathy complicates responsibility attribution. An organization may attempt to remind stakeholders that the crisis negatively impacted them as well as the stakeholders to increase empathy and protect themselves (Coombs, 2006), however that may be difficult to pull off because accident crises increase the likelihood that stakeholders may place blame on the organization (Coombs, 2015). PSD and their superintendent did express empathy; however, they did not take accountability or attribute accountability elsewhere.

Stakeholders could then continue to attribute responsibility to PSD as an organization. Empathy is critical to crisis communication and can be a helpful tool for communicating crisis messages. Also, it is a tool that can be helpful in communicating crisis responsibility (Schoofs et al., 2019). While PSD did express empathy across stakeholder groups, empathy alone is not always a crisis solution (Coombs, 2020). Furthermore, when organizations in crisis communicate the damage that they experienced, reputational damage is minimized (Schoofs et al., 2019; Palmer & Stoll, 2011). So, while empathy is beneficial and a best practice, it primarily serves as

a way of negating reputational threat and crisis responsibility while uplifting a sense of community. Ideally, empathy would supplement other crisis solutions. For PSD during the COVID-19 crisis, some of those other crisis solutions looked like their commitment to safety, commitment to continuing education, and their commitment to privacy as well as their many health protocols throughout the school year.

When an organization expresses that they, too, are harmed by a crisis, it may increase stakeholder empathy for the organization and increase stakeholder support (Coombs, 2006). PSD's decision to communicate empathetically in a broader way may have been an attempt to gain that support from a wider variety of stakeholders. Because organizations may express empathy in particular ways to stakeholders to meet the specific needs of those stakeholders (Wooten & James, 2008) perhaps the broad use of empathy was PSD's means of meeting the needs of the most communicated to stakeholder audience.

My third research question sought to understand what dialectical tensions emerged during the chosen analysis dates. Dialectical tensions commonly emerge during moments of crisis when folks attempting to manage the crisis must balance the need to protect themselves, their organization, and their stakeholder(s) (McGuire et al., 2020). The two dialectical tensions that emerged most are stability and change and disclosure and privacy.

The stability and change tension allow for PSD to build either more change or more stability for the organization by talking about them in tension with the other (Lin et al., 2020). Stability and change overlap considerably with certainty and uncertainty because of their similar definitions, so scholars frequently will combine the tension of certainty and uncertainty with the tension of stability and change (Baxter, 1994; Kerdchoochuen, 2011; Baxter & Scharp, 2015). For change to occur successfully, there needs to be a stable foundation upon which that change

could be built (Lin et al., 2020). Because PSD had that stable base of day-to-day operations set in place prior to the pandemic, they were able to add in pandemic-protocols and enact those changes. Although PSD frequently experienced change during the pandemic, the existence of change as a tension throughout the dates of analysis may lay the groundwork for a future stability within the district, so long as the changes are repeated, consistent, and clearly communicated (Lin et al., 2020). Through that additional and new sense of stability, PSD may be more prepared for future crises that are like COVID-19. Such a dynamic echoes the poetic concept of “negative capability” (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817) where the person or organization experiencing change may remain uncertain, doubtful, and unsure, yet still not have an intense need for solutions or answers and instead learn to accept the potential for change and uncertainty.

Disclosure and privacy were also key tensions because of the possibility of stakeholders losing trust in PSD as an organization due to fears of disclosing personal information. Once someone consents to the sharing of personal information, the sharer puts their trust in the person they are sharing with to not take advantage of the disclosure (Hong & Cho, 2023) Through that process, the sharer consents to a co-ownership of the information, so the information is no longer only in control of the sharer. For PSD, whenever they had to share their stakeholders’ personal information about a COVID-19 exposure, their stakeholders’ information not only belonged to themselves, but to PSD as a school district as well. The stakeholders then had to trust that PSD would not share their information without their consent. Although PSD does make a point to tell stakeholders that their information is only being shared with local, state, and federal agencies for the purposes of contact tracing, reiterating who information is going to, and what information specifically is being shared, is seen as best practice (Rockwern et al., 2021).

The fourth and final research question explores the stage of crisis that PSD was in during the chosen dates of analysis while the district was navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. By the final date chosen for analysis, PSD was not firmly rooted in the during-crisis stage, the post-crisis resolution and recovery stage, or the post-crisis learning stage. At no point during the chosen dates of analysis did PSD reach the post-crisis: learning stage because their communication consistently sought to manage the COVID-19 crisis, rather than indicating that the crisis was complete. Instead, PSD was struck in a continuous state of preparedness, should the crisis flare up once again. While crisis stages are fluid and evolve over time (Fink, 1986; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Wooten & James, 2008; Grissom & Condon, 2020), literature on crisis communication seldom considers the moments between crisis cycle stages.

It is difficult to determine if it would have been beneficial or detrimental for PSD to have more clearly communicated what crisis stage they were in. However, if they had explicitly stated in a clearer manner where they were in the crisis cycle, there could have been an opportunity for stakeholders to be lulled into a false sense of security. If PSD said they were in the recovery or learning stages, post-crisis too early, then stakeholders' uncertainty and caution due to existing in crisis (Coombs, 2007) may have increased. However, because PSD did not communicate where they were in the crisis, stakeholders may have been more likely to experience crisis fatigue, which can lead to burnout and dissatisfaction (Chetty, 2021). Because of this, it may have been beneficial for PSD to not explicitly state what stage of the crisis cycle they were in so as to protect their own reputation and protect their stakeholders from stepping out of a state of continuous-preparedness before they safely could do so.

PSD did not declare that they were ever beyond the during-crisis stage. Instead of signaling the entrance to a post-crisis resolution and recovery or a post-crisis learning stage, PSD began to communicate about the COVID-19 crisis less. Once PSD began to decrease their communication, they would occasionally communicate as if they were in a during-crisis moment, and less frequently as if they were in a post-crisis moment because of the iterative nature of the COVID-19 pandemic (Maier et al., 2021). Due to how PSD did not explicitly define the stage of crisis they were in, and instead allowed their communication to shift between stages to fit the moment throughout the chosen dates of analysis, I propose two concepts to help explain what occurred.

Theoretical Contributions

First, I propose between-stage spaces, where organizations experiencing a crisis may sit in spaces between pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis during moments of transition between the stages, because the change from one stage to another is not an immediate, easily identifiable moment. Second, I propose the liminal space within a crisis cycle, which is when organizations may shift between the during-crisis and post-crisis: resolution and recovery stages. The liminal spaces are when a crisis does not yet meet all the requirements to be in the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage, but the crisis is not always in the during-crisis stage, either, thus the communication may shift to best fit the moment.

Understanding the liminal space during moments of iterative health crisis such as COVID-19 could help organizations navigate the waves of crisis and swing between during-crisis and post-crisis. The complexities of an iterative crisis such as COVID-19 call for further exploration about how to communicate during a continuous state of preparedness. Organizations that frequently deal with risk and crises should adopt a continuous state of preparedness to react

quickly and accordingly (Labrague et al., 2018), so the same may be said for organizations that find themselves in an iterative, long-term crisis.

Adopting a “negative capacity” may be beneficial for communicating in these moments where uncertainty and change is frequently present (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). Setting the expectation early that there will be uncertainty, change, and doubt may help stakeholders mentally prepare for the future, even if the crisis, especially if it is iterative, may not come to a swift end. Holding a “negative capacity” mindset may be crucial during a liminal space of crisis because it promotes an acceptance of not only the elements of crisis broadly, but it does so in a way that is not explicitly harmful (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). The following sections provided more detailed information about what practical recommendations arose from this thesis, study limitations, and areas for future research.

Practical Recommendations

Below, I will make six practical recommendations for PSD’s crisis communication based on my findings of this thesis. Those recommendations are (a) communicate to a broad audience, (b) communicate the same information to all stakeholders, (c) be transparent, (d) communicate coherently across message channels and platforms, (e) communicate action steps in public messages, (f) communicating that they trusted their audience and finally (g) adopt a “negative capacity” mindset (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). As previously stated, much of PSD’s communication was to an inclusive stakeholder audience, and regarding crisis recommendations, this is not necessarily a bad idea. By communicating with an inclusive and broad audience, PSD can tell a wider variety of stakeholders about their goals and objectives, which may lead to more stakeholder support (Eskerod et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984). This is a good opportunity for PSD to communicate more to their student stakeholder, as well. Because the data I analyzed did not

feature many messages directly to the student stakeholder, incorporating further messages specifically targeting them via an online channel may be beneficial. Young folks have been born in a time where it is extremely common for them to rely on digital spaces for news and information consumption (Boczkowski, 2018; Battle, 2023) and approximately 60% of teenagers spend time on social media daily (CITE).

Therefore, continuing to communicate to an inclusive stakeholder audience regardless of the communication channel can be effective, provided it is done intentionally and with awareness of the potential drawbacks of the decision. If stakeholders do not feel heard or listened to, they may decrease their support for the organization (Burnside-Lawry, 2012).

If an organization communicates the same information to an inclusive stakeholder audience, more stakeholders may have similar information upon which they can built their attributions of responsibility, and in moments of crisis, it is natural a natural tendency for stakeholders to attribute such responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Organizations should also prioritize being transparent about any uncertainty that they are experiencing (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817), transparently communicate any actions that are taken because of stakeholder feedback, as well as listen to and reflect with stakeholders (Boiral et al., 2021). Even though natural disasters such as pandemics start as victim type crises, they may shift to an accident type crisis should stakeholders believe that an organization did something wrong (Coombs, 2015). Therefore, it may be in an organization's best interest to communicate transparently across multiple channels to maximize message viewership across multiple audiences so that stakeholders have more information to avoid that claim of wrongdoing.

It is ideal for all stakeholders to receive the same information, so it may be best to ensure that all messages are communicated equally across platforms, especially if different stakeholders

may be getting information through different channels. PSD occasionally communicated certain messages only on their website, or only on their Twitter, and PSD did not communicate some messages consistently across both platforms. Practically, such consistent communication may look like PSD posting the same information to their website as their Twitter account, as well as any other social media and communication channels that they use (Instagram, YouTube and email). Because Twitter recently turned into X (Ivanova, 2023), PSD may decide to stop using the platform altogether, in which case they would need to clearly communicate that shift of platforms to stakeholders and ensure that stakeholders know exactly where they should look in the future for updates from PSD, if not Twitter, should Twitter be a stakeholders' primary means of receiving messages.

PSD and similar organizations would also benefit from communicating action steps in their public messaging. While PSD was consistent about communicating the intention and act of listening and hearing stakeholders' concerns, there was little communication after the fact demonstrating the specific action steps that the school district was going to take because of stakeholders expressing their needs not being met. Should the district ask for stakeholder feedback, the school district should provide the action steps that will result from reasonable stakeholder requests.

Should action steps not be provided, stakeholders may not feel heard or listened to or believe that sharing feedback with the school district will bring about change. Organizations should listen to stakeholders, particularly employees, and ask how they are doing. Through the acts of listening and reflecting, the organization and their stakeholders share their experiences (Boiral et al., 2021). Not being listened to can lead to feelings of frustration (Berzins et al., 2020), which can be particularly detrimental for stakeholders in a time of crisis when an

organization needs stakeholder support. As an example, PSD rarely communicated via the analyzed channels with the student stakeholder, and so it was a missed opportunity for PSD to communicate with students through their Twitter and district website. Similarly, encouraging information and scientific process literacy may be beneficial due to the scientific and complex nature of COVID-19. This thesis did not analyze audience reaction, so if audience members felt not heard or like they could not understand what was occurring, this thesis does not tell us why. However, that may be another window of opportunity to improve future communication in similar infectious-disease contexts. While listening is highlighted as a best practice (Boiral et al., 2021) it does not make up for a lack of action, however. So, despite how PSD listened to stakeholders and welcomed feedback, the actions that may have been taken because of such listening were not explicitly communicated. Organizations would benefit from communicating the actions that are taken as a result of listening to stakeholders.

A brief but still beneficial practical recommendation is for PSD to communicate that they trust their stakeholders. Much of PSD's communication towards stakeholders was ambiguous which perhaps protected PSD due to the politically polarized nature of COVID-19. However, PSD's communication frequently also framed trust towards stakeholders as trusting their stakeholders to do the right thing *for them* rather than simply *trusting their stakeholders*. Such a re-framing of messages may allow stakeholders to feel more agency especially while PSD was trying to be strategically ambiguous in their communication.

Organizations may also benefit from continued use of a "negative capacity" mindset. Adopting a "negative capability" mindset may be beneficial to organizations experiencing ongoing crises because it encourages the acceptance of change without the need to immediately solve the problem (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). The addition of strategic ambiguity, or

intentionally choosing to not communicate all of the information, is a similar phenomena and may be helpful in encouraging a “negative capacity” (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). Such a mindset may be particularly helpful for a crisis such as COVID-19 when there is frequently a lack of information or stability because it encourages the acceptance of uncertainty. A “negative capacity” (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817) may also be helpful for a crisis such as COVID-19 that goes on for a long period of time. Finally, the “negative capacity” mindset may be useful when accepting stakeholder feedback and listening to stakeholders because, as previously discussed, it acknowledges that uncertainty will occur.

A critical follow-up recommendation here is the addition of action steps. A more ambiguous perspective can help to normalize uncertainty, but it does not negate the need to communicate practical action items as well. So, a “negative capacity” perspective can be beneficial but should not be employed alone (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). A “negative capacity” may allow organizations more flexibility in implementing stakeholder feedback, because the uncertainty is transparently communicated and shared between the organization and the organization’s stakeholders (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). In educational contexts a “negative capacity” mindset may be helpful because so many stakeholders of many demographics must be communicated to (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817). By recognizing uncertainty, the organization may receive more sympathy or empathy from stakeholders about the situation, which protects the organization’s reputation as they continue to listen to stakeholders and act as a result of stakeholder feedback, even and especially in the midst of uncertainty.

Having overviewed the practical recommendations that arose from this research, I would like to turn my attention to the limitations. Below, with transparency in mind, I recognize and

explain the limitations of this research. Similarly, I will explain the implications of those limitations on this thesis and, specifically, the research findings.

Limitations

Two of the most prominent limitations of this thesis are the chosen dates of analysis and the limited scope of the channels analyzed. First, because I only analyzed a few days prior to and following the chosen dates any communication by PSD outside of these dates was not included. Also, I did not include any of PSD's communication sent through channels other than the PSD website and PSD's Twitter account. Therefore, PSD could have communicated in a manner that might have changed these findings, had my analysis been more all-encompassing. Future studies may consider analyzing a broader overview of communicative channels to understand a single organization's communication during any event, but specifically during a large crisis such as COVID-19. Analyzing messages not only from the organization, but from organizational stakeholders, may also yield more in-depth and detailed findings. This analysis did not include an exploration of how stakeholders interpreted the messages, and so stakeholder and audience reaction to PSD's communication cannot be yielded based on the findings of this research. While this may have helped keep the analysis manageable, it does limit the story that my data can tell as well as the implications of the findings.

Limitations of context should also be addressed. This thesis only analyzed the communication of a singular school district, at specific dates in time, surrounding only the COVID-19 crisis. Had I analyzed a school district or organizational entity other than PSD experiencing a crisis other than COVID, the limitations may have been different, even if similar methodologies were employed. Other contexts that could be analyzed are different school districts in terms of geographic location, public vs. private school, religious vs. non-religious

schools, and more. Another potential context for analysis is different platforms. PSD rarely communicated through channels outside of Twitter and their website however school districts that prioritized Instagram may have communicated differently because of the image-related messages rather than text-related messages. Twitter specifically brought a limitation to this study because of the word count on the platform, which may explain why PSD communicated many messages on their website.

Another thing that I want to acknowledge in this thesis is the possibility of my own bias. As mentioned in chapter one, I have been a classified paraprofessional substitute for PSD since 2017. Although I have not worked there during this thesis process, it is worth noting that I could have an unconscious bias in my reporting of my findings. Having known of the possibility of such an unconscious bias, however, I have done what I can to check myself and my writings for any such bias when I am able. In the final section of this thesis, I turn my attention to potential areas and research questions for future research that arose because of this thesis.

One final limitation that I want to acknowledge is that this thesis did not take scientific literacy into account. Due to the unprecedented nature of COVID-19, it is possible that scientific literacy, trust in organizations and positions of authority, and the influence of misinformation may have all been operating behind the scenes despite not showing up in my analysis. This could be an important area for future research. I explain other possible spaces for future research below.

Areas for Future Research

There is a need for more research on the moments between pre-, during, and post-crisis, whether in a moment akin to a liminal space or not. Iterative and “layered” (Maier et al., 2021) crises also need more research because scholarship that expands on the concept and applies

theory to numerous crises occurring simultaneously is rare despite the realistic implications of studying crises in such a way. Scholars may apply such layered crisis in an educational setting to school districts' management of threats of violence at a school, to mental health crises, or to staffing shortages. Crises are not stationary nor are they isolated events, and researchers should only view them as such with caution. Expanding our perception of crises to not only fluid moments that can come and go, but also moments that can move between stages in a flexible or liminal manner, is critical to furthering our understanding of crises and how to manage them in a proper manner.

A final opportunity for future research is further expansion and exploration of the liminal spaces of a crisis cycle, or the stage where a moment of crisis may move fluidly between stages and exist in a liminal space instead of firmly in one specific stage. A crisis may be in the during-crisis moment, and a shift occurs resulting in the crisis entering the post-crisis: resolution and recovery stage. However, soon after, something changes once again resulting in the crisis returning to the during-crisis stage, and the pattern may repeat itself. The liminal space is different from the between-stage of a crisis, which is when a moment of crisis exists and primarily remains firmly between two different stages, such as in the moment between during-crisis and post-crisis: resolution and recovery. While the liminal space does fit well to an infectious disease crisis where disease variants further complicate the crisis cycle, that is not to say that a liminal space will or will not be appropriate for other types of crises in different contexts. Therefore, a deeper analysis of crises that may move between stages is needed. Similarly, a deeper exploration of “negative capacity” (Behal, 2014; Keats, 1817) as well as strategic ambiguity in relation to liminal spaces and between-stages spaces in crisis cycles may help to explain potential best practices and strategies to manage fluid crises.

There is no way of telling if the COVID-19 pandemic will be the last one, but it is unlikely. As K-12 school districts encounter more crises, health related or otherwise, it is paramount that they are prepared to properly manage and communicate those crises to best protect themselves and their stakeholders. An understanding of liminal spaces, as well as between-stage spaces, may help scholars better understand the nuances of iterative crises such as COVID-19. The more scholars can improve our understanding of crisis cycles and other crisis theories, the safer organizations adopting those theories can be.

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