

Virtual Management of Students' Unrest During the COVID-19 New Normal: The Need for an Innovative Approach

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has changed the face of universities in terms of their operation, which include but are not limited to teaching, learning, researching, and management system. However, this does not exclude the management of students' unrest. Despite the COVID-19 inversion, students' unrest did not stop; instead, it took a more sophisticated dimension. Such dimensions include virtual protests and virtual meetings using social media. This significantly affects the culture of teaching and learning and also attempt to blackmail the image of the universities. Therefore, this conceptual paper argues that an innovative approach to virtual management is required in the pandemic. It also proffered an up-to-date management style suitable for managing student unrest during COVID-19. The argument is located within Diffusion of Innovation Theory to understand the university stakeholders' behaviour and adaptability to new ways of doing things during the COVID-19-inflicted change. Therefore, the study argued the need for a change in the management styles towards managing students' unrest. The challenges that hinder the university towards effective management of virtual protest/unrest and the possible solutions to the new methods of students' protest/unrest was also presented. The study recommends, among others, the incorporation of strategic leadership and communication in the universities' management styles to meet the unavoidable dynamics of human behaviours in the system.

KEYWORDS

Virtual management; students' unrest; virtual protest; COVID-19; universities.

INTRODUCTION

Student unrest has been a challenge to universities all over the world. Students' movements and strikes range from the protest against the violation of human rights, protest against economic policies, protest against discrimination on ethnic, disability and colour basis; protest against rising in tuition fees (Barton, 2020; Frederick & Shifrer, 2019; Pickard, 2014), among others. Student movement must be viewed in perspective. It is important because students play a huge role in society at large (they graduate later and become active members of society). Student unrest is complex and necessitates management action based on experience with a determination to address genuine issues that lead to complaints by students and subsequent unrests, which in most cases results in a bad image of the universities (Biry, 2020). As a result, universities lose reputation and trust among stakeholders, affecting their financial stability and productivity among stakeholders of the societies. Hence, university management has faced many challenges when dealing with student unrest situations, including disruption to the academic process, violation of human rights, and low visibility due to internet connection (Czerniewicz et al., 2019). However, a new dimension brought by COVID-19 makes it difficult for university authorities to handle student unrest and strikes.

The entire world was recently trapped due to the coronavirus epidemic, otherwise known as COVID-19, which is said to have originated in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 (Varalakshmi & Arunachalam, 2020; Tarman, 2020). The virus was detected as communicable through social interaction and subsequently labelled a pandemic (WHO, 2020a). Most people are infected with the virus through coughing, sneezing, and close contact with a carrier (WHO, 2020b). COVID-19 has wreaked havoc worldwide due to its uncontrollable spread to almost all countries, including South Africa. The government of numerous nations, including South Africa, has complied with WHO's recommendations by closing the nations against all activities, including education sectors. Though a larger percentage of activities have resumed operations, many activities are still done online, including teaching and learning and meetings. COVID-19 seems to have revolutionised university student activism by shutting down the physical space and forcing activity into the cyber realm (Hove & Dube, 2022). This is because the lockdowns at universities forced student activism to adapt into online crusading as a viable alternative to make demands in the form of protest on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, among others (White, 2020).

This virtual dimension of student unrest is done without the usual mass mobilisation of students at the university premises or in any public place. It is worth noting that the advent of COVID-19 requires universities to operate within their normal system, which includes handling virtual operations of all the university stakeholders (Madimabe & Omodan, 2021), including the student protests and meetings. Management of student unrest during the COVID-19 new normal is likely to have a significant effect on the teaching-learning process because, during this online protest, students do not attend lectures or laboratory exercises, it affects examination grading (withdrawals by students due to disruption of academic work) and affects both students and university productivity. Virtual/online student unrest also disrupts the management of

universities because the university has to keep adjusting and re-adjusting activities to ameliorate the lost time during the protest. This unrest seems to affect students as well, mostly first-year degree students because they are new to a university environment and have no previous study habits. Some of them were admitted to universities during the COVID-19 new normal, and they do not know how to manage their time effectively. This agrees with Kaisara and Bwalya (2021) argument that first-year students struggle to cope with the new academic environment during the COVID-19 new normal. However, the effect of this may not be as obvious as it is, but sooner or later, the lacuna will be created against the students. Therefore, as universities have been responding by managing or preventing students' unrest during the contact session, concerted efforts must also be made to respond, prevent and manage virtual unrest.

Literature, however, confirms that universities face many challenges when dealing with student protests due to changes brought by COVID-19 (Almossa, 2021; Hove & Dube, 2022; Matarirano et al., 2021). This is because student movements become more systematically violent as a result of the internet which spreads news faster than before (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). It has been noted that some students hide their identity on the internet using masks for various reasons such as drug abuse, deceiving families about their activities and making derogatory comments (Zhu et al., 2017). This new dimension is somewhat sophisticated to the extent that virtual committees among the students have been formed through social media to mobilise themselves to engage in online activism. Such committees have various objectives, including organising sit-ins, boycotts of classes, and virtual meetings organised by students to discuss future plans without physically gathering within or outside the university gates as before COVID-19 (Soled et al., 2020). The most common between the old activism (physical protest) and the new activism (virtual protest) is that the causes are the same, that is, the issues related to tuition fees, poor infrastructure, lawlessness in universities, human rights, better student's conditions and inclusive management are still the causes of unrest. Also, students' attitudes against social inequalities (Olonisakin et al., 2021) propels social unrest even in the wake of COVID-19.

Based on this, it is expedient for the universities, and their management system must be rejigged to meet up with the dynamics of the COVID-19 new normal. This is the premise upon which this study aims to explore. Therefore, this conceptual paper aimed to respond by proffering an up-to-date management style suitable for student unrest during the COVID-19 era.

Research Question

The following research question was formulated to guide the study and its conceptual and theoretical argument towards new ways of managing students' unrest in universities:

- How can virtual students' unrest and its activism be managed during the COVID-19 pandemic in universities?

Research Objectives

To respond to the above research question, the following two objectives will be perused to give ways to the analysis of the adopted theory:

- The study argued possible challenges that may hinder the management of virtual students protest/unrest/activism in universities.
- The study also presented possible solutions based on the adopted theory towards the effective management of virtual students' unrest in universities.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a conceptual paper laced with concepts to understand the issues of online student unrest and or activism. The argument is located within Diffusion of Innovation to understand the university stakeholders' behaviour and the new ways of doing things during the COVID-19 inflicted change. First, the origin of the theory was explored, followed by the assumptions/principles/purposes within which the argument towards effective management of student unrest during COVID-19 was derived. The sense from this article is located and brought out from the ingredient of diffusion of innovation supported by relevant literature. This is expedient because the guiding philosophy for this study is the transformative paradigm. This perspective is also utilised as a guiding approach for this argument. This is relevant because the goal of the study is to improve university operations during emergencies such as COVID-19 in university education, which has been plagued by several problems. According to Jackson et al. (2018), the Transformative Paradigm (TP) embraces the exploration of solutions to the problem of marginalised communities as well as transforming the power plays and various contradictions that have degenerated the community.

As a result, this paradigm allows me to view the students and the university authorities as one family that must work together to ensure the university system's success (Mertens, 2009). This is in line with the argument of Jackson et al. (2018), who claim that the distinguishing feature of this paradigm is to recognise links between powerful (university authorities) and powerless (students), which creates openness to the minds of the *researched*. Furthermore, it is clear from Dube's (2016) and Omodan (2020) definitions that TP's major goal is to improve the lived experience the researched for better. Therefore, the study argued the need for a change in the management styles towards managing students' unrest. The challenges that hinder the university towards effective management of unrest and the possible solutions towards effective management of the new methods of students' unrest was also presented. This study is taken from a larger project with ethical clearance number FEDREC 03-11-21 approved by the ethical committee of the Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

UNDERPINNING THEORY: THE DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION (DOI)

The Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory, propounded by E.M. Rogers in 1962, is one of the most well-known social science theories. It began as communication to explain how an innovation or

product spreads over time through a specific population or social system. DoI states that people's perceptions of innovation and its newness will determine their decision to adopt or reject it (Rogers, 2003). The ultimate consequence of this diffusion is that individuals, as part of a system, should do something different than before (buying or utilising a new product, learning and performing a new behaviour) (Rogers, 2003). DoI has limitations but uses innovation to describe any change perceived as new by members of a social system (Rogers, 2003). As a result of diffusion processes, a new idea, behaviour, or physical innovation may be accepted or penetrated. Relativity advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, and visibility are five attributes identified by Rogers as having major impacts on adoption behaviours (Al-Jabri & Sohail, 2012). The DoI is a well-known theory that understands why and how individuals embrace new ideas and technologies. This is in consonance with the argument of Dearing (2009) that DoI is a social science model that explains how, when, and at what speed innovation and technology is accepted and spread across cultures.

According to Rogers (2003), there are five recognised adoption categories. While the majority of the adopters fall into the middle ones, it is still critical to understand the characteristics of people when promoting or adapting to innovation. The categories are innovators, early adapters, early majority, late majority and laggards.

- **Innovators:** These are individuals who want to be the first to try out new things. They are enterprising and open to new ideas. As a result, these individuals are often the first to come up with innovative solutions. Because this group is so eager to take chances, little, if any, modifications are required in order for them to be attracted.
- **Early adapters:** These are individuals who have much influence. They enjoy positions of leadership and embrace change chances. They are already aware of the need to change and find new ideas quite easy to adopt. This category does not require facts to persuade them that something must change.
- **Early majority:** People like the ones are rare. However, they do adopt new ideas before the average person. They typically require proof that the innovation works before adopting it, however. Stories of success and evidence of effectiveness may be effective in appealing to this group.
- **Late majority:** Since they are wary of change, those who make up this group will only embrace an innovation after the majority has tried it. Information on how many other people have attempted the innovation and succeeded may be used to appeal to this demographic.
- **Laggards:** This is the most difficult group to attract. They are restricted by custom and tradition, and they are cautious of change. This is the most difficult demographic to win over because they are the most guarded. Statistics, scare tactics, and peer pressure from people in other adopter groups might all be used to appeal to these individuals.

This theory is relevant because it enables the researcher to understand the dynamics of people in the social system and the extent to which they are open to change. There are individual differences when it comes to change adjustment towards development. In the case of this study, one could see that universities need to galvanise the knowledge of various innovators who can swiftly think and find a way to manage virtual protest and unrest in universities. This case will assist the early adapters who are already aware of the need to develop new ways of managing students' unrest. In the same vein, this will convince the early majority on the need to kin into the ideas and which could stand as proof of such innovation. The trend and readiness of innovators, early adapters, and the early majority will motivate all the university managements members, including the late majority and laggards, towards an innovative management style that could respond adequately to the new dimension of students' unrest in universities. The argument here is that the new trend of students' protest orchestrated via social media needs an up-to-date management style that understands the sophistication of 21st-century university operations.

This theory also takes solace in the transformative worldview as indicated in the methodology. It preaches that capability must be gathered from the innovation and collaboratively implemented by university management in COVID-19. However, some challenges may hinder its implementation towards managing virtual unrest in the university system. The challenges and the possible solutions are elaborated on below.

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL MANAGEMENT OF STUDENTS UNREST IN UNIVERSITIES

This section discusses the challenges associated with managing virtual protest/unrest in the university system during the COVID-19 new normal. These challenges are perceived as a cogent hindrance for university management to adequately respond to virtual unrest among university students. Among many challenges, literature is consistent in the lucrativeness of lack of coordination and feedback, lack of physical response mechanism as a major hindrance to managing virtual protest among students.

Lack of Coordination and Feedback

One of the problems of managing human capital is the lack of coordination and feedback (Abbasi et al., 2013). This effect university as well as employees in the corporate world. Management is done through guiding, controlling and coordinating, such as the combination of activities that ensure that an organisation plans to achieve its objectives (Comfort, 2007). However, effective management will only occur if there is coordination and feedback between each individual and the group include all activities that facilitate the creation and re-creation of organisational resources towards mentioning physical and virtual peace. Therefore, coordination and feedback enable an organisation such as a university to attract, develop, and retain people who can contribute value to the organisation. However, this indicates a lack of coordination and

feedback mechanism to enable the system to respond to all kinds of issues arising from stakeholders.

Since students' use of social media as a medium of protest is not under the university authority, it becomes complex and challenging to coordinate and or regulate how they use social media. This also results in a lack of feedback. At most times, students protest online, and the majority of their agitations are not taken to the appropriate authority for solutions to come in time. Though, over the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of internet protests as people around the globe fight for human rights and legal justice. The internet has allowed people to freely express themselves on social and political issues through social media. According to scholars, the internet assists marginalised groups in developing their deliberative forums, connecting up, and then contesting dominant meanings and practices (Sen, 2012). Alternative media's contribution to the ability of subaltern groups to challenge established power structures is demonstrated (Downing, 2000). This evidence further contributes to the university's inability to coordinate the students' activities on social media, which automatically gives no right to an opportunity to feedback, whether from students or any meaningful stakeholders.

Not only that, it becomes difficult for the university management to respond to the students' agitations made via social media because some university policies and modes of operation only recognise agitation made via official channels of such universities. The internet and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are driving today's student activists to be more active, connected, and committed (Hernández, 2015; Wong, 2015). The energy and enthusiasm of online campaigners appear to have been renewed, with students appearing more energised than in the past. It has been shown that it can be a useful tool for student activism (Hove & Dube, 2022), making it difficult to manage.

Lack of Virtual Response Mechanism

In this study, the response mechanism is how the universities respond to crisis/protest situations. In the past, it was a physical response that used to come by addressing the protesters, using security forces to disperse the crowd of students within the university facilities (Fomunyam, 2017; Gusfield, 1971). However, this is not the case during the COVID-19 new normal where students do not need to stage any physical protest, instead, they take to social media to make their agitations known (Wahid et al., 2020). In the present time, students from various online committees plan and mobilise themselves towards online protest. In most cases, they come out with attractive hashtags such as #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall (Hodes, 2017; Laurore, 2016; Soled et al., 2020). According to movement researchers, this further confirms the argument that online networks offer the foundation for organising and coordinating protestors and organisations (Diani, 2003; Diani, 2015; Melucci, 1996). As a result, the capacity of social media to enhance the inherently relational nature in the collective action of the students by providing a global technological infrastructure that supports the rapid development

of communication networks is precisely what makes them so appealing and difficult to manage (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Deducing from the dynamics of such development, it sounds difficult to manage and may stand as an obstacle to university productivity and could also result in the destruction of university image. This calls for the implementation of DoI theory where all the stakeholders in the university should get together based on their behaviours to innovation as indicated above to find lasting and or situational solutions to the challenges. Below are the possible solutions argued from the DoI perspectives

Solutions to the Challenges of Virtual Management of Students Unrest

Having highlighted and discussed the challenges of managing student unrest/protest in the wake of COVID-19, the following solution was argued as one of the ways in which university management could adequately respond to the virtual unrest in universities. This solution is strategic leadership and communication management.

Strategic Leadership and Communication Management

During catastrophes, strategic leadership communication is vital for the formation and management of crisis networks in order to rescue organisations and authorities. That is, the place of collaboration and communication of information is imminent. Networking has been identified as one way to enhance an organisation's crisis management capabilities (Hyvärinen & Vos, 2015), including universities. According to several studies, poor networking and/or communication may be a major barrier in the process of crisis management (Kapucu et al., 2010). According to research, difficulties in networking during crises have been documented as a major hindrance to managing crisis situations (Kapucu et al., 2010). However, according to Boal and Hooijberg (2000), strategic leadership involves changing, learning, and applying managerial wisdom towards problem-solving. This study argues that to effectively manage student unrest of any kind, either physical or virtual, the place of strategic leadership cannot be underestimated. This also connects the need for effective management with strategic communication. This implies concerted efforts of a system involving "purposeful actor, rational and deliberate decision-making, and the implementation" of the plan of action in the process of managing issues and or crises (Sandhu, 2009).

Strategic communication is fundamental to the management of virtual students' unrest and predominantly to management in general because of reasons such as: "(a) supporting communication in the response network, (b) monitoring stakeholder needs, and (c) communicating with citizens and news media" (Johansson & Bäck, 2017, p. 324). This strategy is useful because it enhances sharing of information to understand the issues and organisational needs towards solving issues. Based on this, this study argues that strategic leadership communication is prominent in managing and or responding to the virtual student unrest in the universities. This aligns with Johansson and Bäck (2017) that strategic leadership communication helps organise networks and significantly enhances 'disaster resilience'.

According to Paton (2006), disaster resilience is the adaptive capacity to identify, activate, and alleviate response resources to the crisis situation. Furthermore, strategic leadership communication also synchronises the innovators' categories as indicated by Dol: early adapters, early majority, late majority and laggards and the strength of an organisation needed in the wake of the COVID-19 new normal.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored and established that students' unrest in universities took a new dimension where students no longer rely on their physical strength to make their agitations known to the public through virtual protest. This study argued the need for an up-to-date and virtual management style by exploring the challenges and possible solutions. Diffusion of Innovation theory was explored as the brain behind the urge for innovation to respond to the student unrest during COVID-19 new normal. Based on this, the study concluded that lack of coordination and feedback and lack of physical response mechanism are the major challenges, while strategic leadership and communication management was suggested as a means by which virtual unrest could be managed in universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this, the university authorities must make a concerted effort to understand the core value of Dol and leverage its strength to ensure that the behaviours and capability of organisational members are explored towards managing virtual unrest in the system.

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