

## Strategic responses to crisis: how major corporations faced the COVID-19 pandemic.

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**Conflit d'intérêts :** L'auteur ne signale aucun conflit d'intérêts.

**Pour citer cet article :** MOUISSA. H & MOUSSA. A (2024) « Strategic responses to crisis: how major corporations faced the COVID-19 pandemic », African Scientific Journal « Volume 03, Numéro 23 » pp: 1315 – 1333.

Date de soumission : Mars 2024

Date de publication : Avril 2024



DOI : 10.5281/zenodo.11350506

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study examines the dynamics of managerial discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic and analyses how leaders from different sectors adapted their communication strategies to the new challenges posed by the crisis. Using NVivo software, the study examined 120 letters from 30 companies from 2019 to 2022, focusing on leaders' strategic communication adaptability, responsiveness to stakeholder needs, and intentional use of emotional language. The results show that leaders have largely adopted the flexible and adaptive communication strategies needed to maintain business continuity, build resilience, and enhance organizational sustainability during a pandemic. Importantly, executive communication is not limited to responding to urgent business challenges. Leaders effectively used emotional language to build empathy and reassure stakeholders, emphasizing themes such as empathy, resilience and looking to the future. This study highlights the important role of strategic communication in crisis management. By incorporating an emotional element into their discourse, leaders can build a deeper connection with stakeholders, creating trust in the face of uncertainty. The study also offers valuable insights into effective leadership practices that can help build resilient organizations that can weather turbulent times and thrive. In summary, the analysis shows how strategic communication can shape stakeholder perceptions and organizational narratives in times of crisis and provides a model for leaders to develop their crisis management capabilities. By emphasizing the importance of adaptability, stakeholder focus, and the integration of emotional intelligence into leadership practice, this study contributes to the broader debate on crisis communication strategies. As organizations continue to face global challenges, these insights are critical to developing sound leadership structures that not only respond effectively to crises, but also pave the way for continued organizational growth and stability.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, strategic adaptability, organizational resilience, emotional language.

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## **Introduction**

On January 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a global crisis emergency for COVID-19. The virus has rapidly spread to several countries worldwide and transformed into a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) (WHO, 2020; Wilder-Smith & Osman, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only posed challenges to global healthcare systems and economies but has also presented unprecedented challenges for leadership across all sectors worldwide (Pradhan et al., 2021). This situation has forced business leaders to navigate uncertainty, volatility, and rapidly changing circumstances with adaptive strategies to cope with emerging crises while maintaining organizational resilience (Mizrak, 2024; Pertheban et al., 2023). Under this circumstance, leadership communication has become a crucial element in navigating uncertainty, reassuring stakeholders, and guiding companies toward resilience and growth (Santoso et al., 2022). So, in this context of crisis, our study focuses on how this crisis is represented in management's discourse.

Leaders' discourse plays a crucial role not only in defining organizational responses but also in influencing internal and external perceptions and attitudes. However, studying the executive discourse dynamics during crises is essential to understanding how leaders communicate, adapt, and strategize in response to unprecedented challenges (Aritz et al., 2017; Eisele et al., 2022). Examining the evolution of leaders' discourse amid crises can provide future leadership strategies and practices used by leaders to navigate effectively through turbulent times that resonate with different stakeholders (Brodie, 2019; Osman & Elamin, 2024). Ever changing world, the notion that strategy manifests itself as "patterns of action" and contingency theory, emphasize the adaptive nature of leadership communication during crisis has become more effective than ever (AMGHAR, 2022; Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022).

By validating hypotheses related to adaptability, responsiveness to stakeholders, and the strategic use of emotional language, this study offers guidance to leaders facing similar challenges. It highlights the importance of integrating empathy, resilience, and long-term vision into crisis communication strategies, which can strengthen organizational reputation and stakeholder trust.

This study's structure is based on discourse analysis of the most powerful companies in the ranking of Forbes 500. The objective is to work towards understanding the strategies and the way managers of these companies communicated to with shareholders during different phases

of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has as a goal to contribute to examining the dynamics of leadership discourse in the context of a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It adds nuance to previous studies of crisis management and communication strategies by emphasizing the role of discourse in reflecting organizational strategies and values (Diers-Lawson, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020; Kim, 2018; Marsen, 2020). In addition, the study highlights the evolving nature of leadership communication, particularly the consideration of societal concerns and environmental challenges. Indeed, this study explores the dynamics of leadership discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how leaders adapt their communication strategies to meet the evolving needs of stakeholders. By analyzing the discourse of leaders in various sectors, we look to uncover trends, patterns, and insights that illuminate effective leadership communication in times of crisis.

The aim of our research is to explore in-depth how leaders adapt their communication strategies during crisis. We seek to understand their approaches to inspiring stakeholder trust and commitment, as well as navigating emerging challenges and promoting organizational resilience. Furthermore, we will examine the impact of emotional language in executive discourse, especially regarding its influence on commitment to sustainability, innovation, and organizational values. Moreover, we will investigate the strategic adoption of optimism and confidence to shape a promising future, and explore the resilience strategies adopted by companies, including strategic investments, harnessing technology, and effectively managing uncertainty. Finally, we will chart crisis narratives for some companies as example of how managers coped with the pandemic as well as a sectorial comparison.

Studying the dynamics of leadership discourse during crises will add to the existing theory an insight and a practical guidance for organizational leaders and contributes to the ongoing debate on crisis management and strategic communication. Recognizing the crucial role of discourse in organizational thinking and strategy formation, this research underscores the importance of effective leadership communication in navigating turbulent times and fostering organizational resilience and sustainability.

## **1. Method**

This study is a qualitative analysis research conducted on a sample of 120 speeches from thirty companies using Nvivo software (Allsop et al., 2022; Limna, 2023; Zamawe, 2015). The main objective of our study is to analyze the dynamics of leadership discourse during the pandemic by studying how leaders communicate covering the period from 2019 to 2022.

### **1.1. Data collection**

To achieve our research objectives, the research was designed with an emphasis on qualitative research, as it was the most applicable given the study's objective, techniques, and context. This qualitative research is an approach rather than a design and requires situational and interpretive research designs including specific approaches to knowledge production and any research using qualitative data (Lehman et al., 2009). However, these methods include specific approaches to producing knowledge and include any research using qualitative data (Flick, 2002; Hammarberg et al., 2016). Our qualitative research based on letter to shareholders found in the annual report. These corporate discourses are a valuable tool for data collection in qualitative research (Tenny et al., 2020). In our study, we collected data from thirty companies' letters to shareholders from their formal website for four years then received 120 documents.

### **1.2. Analysis method**

The technique involves the intentional selection and diversification of synchronous data for the coding process, combined with comparative analysis. The methodological framework used for data analysis is that of the inductive approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2013), who describe six steps for conducting a thematic analysis (data identification, first codes generated, theme search, revision of themes, identification and labeling of themes, report production) (Clarke & Braun, 2013). For our study, NVIVO software was used for data analysis. Although, the NVIVO program provides insights into qualitative data. A tool eases textual analysis, the sorting, structuring, and analysis of numerous texts, as well as the management of interpretations (Welsh, 2002).

## **2. Common strategic themes in discourse: unveiling patterns in communication.**

The thematic analysis using Nvivo software, revealed four thematic in the letter speech of the 30 companies. This analysis of leadership discourse dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the multifaceted strategies used by leaders to navigate the unprecedented challenges posed by the crisis. A key finding is the prevalence of communication strategies aimed at providing rapid support and response to emerging needs. Leaders from a variety of sectors prioritized the resolution of immediate concerns, ensuring the continuity of essential services and demonstrating a commitment to organizational resilience. These strategies emphasize the necessity of flexibility and adaptability to respond rapidly shifting situations, helping leaders to build confidence and stability in the midst of uncertainty.

In addition to internal organizational considerations, leaders are also influenced by external factors that shape the way they communicate. The need to adapt to social distancing measures, respond to technological advances and cope with supply chain disruptions emerged as important themes. By recognizing and responding to these external influences, executives have gained a nuanced understanding of the interconnections between organizational resilience and broader social issues.

Emotional language becomes a powerful communication tool for managers, influencing stakeholders' perception of organizational strategy and fostering trust and commitment. Leaders convey key messages and encourage collective action by expressing empathy, solidarity, and optimism. Of particular note is the pervasive nature of empathy and solidarity, which resonates strongly with stakeholders when it comes to responding to the challenges of the pandemic. By expressing their genuine concern for the well-being of employees, customers and communities, leaders can build stronger bonds and help achieve common goals in the face of adversity.

In addition, the focus of management communication reflects a strategic commitment to transparency, stability, and long-term sustainability. Leaders emphasize communicating the strategic vision, responding to uncertainty with confidence and proactively addressing stakeholder needs and concerns. By encouraging innovation, fostering organizational development, and empowering employees and communities, leaders demonstrate a proactive leadership approach aimed at promoting positive change and ensuring resilience in the face of disruption.

Finally, the analysis highlights the critical role of leadership discourse in shaping organizational crisis response. By adapting communication strategies to the changing needs of stakeholders and effectively managing external challenges, leaders can increase resilience, build trust and achieve positive outcomes in the face of unprecedented uncertainty. As organizations continue to grapple with the consequences of the pandemic, these insights provide valuable guidance for leaders as they navigate future challenges and build a more resilient and sustainable future.

### **2.1. Adapting to adversity: general strategies for crisis management**

In examining leaders' communication strategies during the crisis, particularly in public speeches, we found a coherent narrative approach covering several key areas: recognizing growth opportunities, fostering innovation and confidence, demonstrating resilience in the face of adversity, promoting ethical behavior in corporate governance, and promoting a strategic vision for sustainable growth. Executives from a variety of industries, including CVS Health,

ExxonMobil, JPMorgan Chase, Microsoft, Reliance Industries, Meta, Glencore, Verizon, Elevance Health and Volkswagen, have expressed these areas in their communications.

For example, the CEO of CVS Health clearly communicated the message of achieving operational synergies in his 2019 letter to shareholders: *“I am pleased to announce that we have a clear goal of realizing more than \$750 million in synergies from the combined CVS Health business by the end of 2020, and we have already begun implementing a plan to achieve this goal.”* This statement demonstrates the company's strategic vision and gives stakeholders confidence in the company's course in a dynamic market.

Similarly, ExxonMobil management focused its narrative on long-term industry fundamentals to reassure stakeholders that the company will remain profitable despite market volatility, as stated in the 2019 corporate letter: *“Our growth strategy to significantly improve earnings and cash flow generation is supported by long-term industry fundamentals.”*

They also highlighted innovation and trust as cornerstones of organizational success. The CEO of JPMorgan Chase proudly reported on JPMorgan Chase's record year in 2020: *“2020 was another record year for JPMorgan Chase, with record revenues and record-breaking performance in every other aspect of our business”*. The same as Microsoft CEO in 2021 details use of “Teams” in hybrid work environments: *“Our approach to hybrid working begins with Teams, an all-in-one solution that enables one meeting, conversation, chat, collaboration and business process automation every day”*.

However, Reliance Industries has responded to the challenges with determination and optimism, and in its 2019 annual report, the company spoke of its impressive performance despite oil market challenges: *“Our hydrocarbon business has performed well despite volatile oil prices.”* As well as Meta in its 2020 corporate statement, emphasized its strong year-end performance: *“Our communities and businesses delivered a strong year-end performance”*.

Transparency and ethical behavior were also a focus for corporate governance, with Glencore committing to a significant reduction in carbon emissions in its 2020 sustainability report: *“The IPCC's more ambitious 1.5 degrees Celsius scenario assumes a 40% reduction in total emissions by 2035 from 2019 levels.”*

Nevertheless, Verizon was praised for its transparency during the pandemic, writing in its 2020 sustainability report, *“Verizon has been a leader in employer response to the pandemic because of its role model and the transparency with which it communicates with employees...”*.



Finally, the inspiration of this vision is evident in the strategic communication between Elevance Health and Volkswagen. Elevance Health's commitment to transforming healthcare through agility and responsibility is highlighted in the 2022 corporate letter: *“Our work is both a privilege and a responsibility, inspiring our sales of approximately €500 million. Our 100,000 employees inspire us to transform our company with speed and agility, while responsibly advancing our mission to improve global health”*. While Volkswagen's in 2022 CEO reaffirmed the company's willingness to embrace industry transformation with innovative technologies: *“The automotive industry will change more in the next five years than it has in the last 50 years”*.

Overall, these themes paint a complete picture; effective management communication not only addresses immediate crisis management issues, but also lays the foundation for long-term strategic success. Through speeches and public statements, leaders from a wide range of industries have demonstrated a variety of ways to lead their organizations through turbulent times with a clear, coherent, and optimistic vision, reinforcing the critical role of communication in effective leadership.

## **2.2. Exploring language dynamics in management discourses**

In corporate leadership, the strategic use of emotional language in management communications is essential to align stakeholder engagement with the overarching goals of sustainability and innovation. This analysis explores how some leaders of global companies have used empathy and ambition to build deeper relationships, build trust, and drive transformational initiatives.

China State Construction Engineering Corporation, for example, expresses its commitment to long-term value creation through transparent communication that emphasizes both a deep sense of ownership and a strategic approach to stakeholder engagement: *“We strive to create desirable and sustainable value for our shareholders and investors, and to share the fruits of our growth.”* This statement is a good example of how emotional resonance in communications can strengthen stakeholder relationships and commitment to shared goals.

In the same way, Comcast's campaign also incorporates an empathetic approach to leadership, emphasizing proactive corporate responsibility and the company's environmental sustainability strategy: *“True to our values, we're always looking for new ways to make a meaningful difference, from promoting digital equality and economic mobility through our UP program to fostering a cleaner environment through our commitment to carbon neutrality”*.



Messages like this show not only that Comcast is responsive to societal needs, but also that the company is committed to using its corporate resources to make a positive difference, demonstrating a comprehensive strategy to align corporate operations with community values and stakeholder expectations.

In the other hand, CVS Health also exemplifies this dynamic by incorporating optimism and transparency into its strategic communications, focusing on the tangible benefits its initiatives will have on company performance and community well-being: *“The anticipated healthcare cost savings will also have a significant impact on CVS Health's financial performance”*. This approach not only builds trust, but also underscores the company's role as a responsible organization committed to collective health.

Furthermore, Meta recognizes its role in strengthening community resilience through technology in challenging times, demonstrating a deep empathy and commitment to the well-being of its users: *“I am proud of the role our service plays in helping people support each other in such difficult times”*. This message reinforces the organization's credibility and underlines its commitment to social responsibility and support in the digital space.

Finally, Microsoft's commitment to sustainability is also reflected in its commitment to improving the environmental performance of its operations, as stated in its 2019 statement: *“We are committed to ensuring that our data centers are among the most sustainable in the world.”* This statement not only calls for innovative sustainability practices, but also builds trust in the face of global environmental challenges through transparency and accountability.

In summary, the skillful use of emotive language in management communications can be effective in mobilizing collective enthusiasm and commitment to corporate goals, particularly in the areas of sustainability and innovation. As these business leaders demonstrate, the strategic combination of empathy and ambition not only encourages greater stakeholder engagement, but also motivates companies to achieve their long-term goals while adhering to the principles of corporate social responsibility. This approach underpins the dynamic evolution of corporate communications for a sustainable and inclusive future.

### **2.3. External forces shaping managers' discourses strategies.**

In the wake of rapid market and societal changes during the pandemic, companies' strategic communications emphasized the need to dynamically adapt to changing consumer behavior. Comcast, for example, emphasized the importance of enriching its basic broadband offering, proving an initiative-taking response to changing consumer needs: *“Enhancing the value of our*

*basic broadband offers*". In addition, the company has reaffirmed its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in response to the social upheaval of the times: *"In a year of social upheaval, we have accelerated our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion"*. This shows that Comcast is not just responding to market expectations but is a company that is aware of the social realities around it.

For its part, P&G has identified changes in consumer behavior related to a greater focus on personal hygiene and an increased demand for environmentally friendly products: *"We are likely to place more emphasis on personal cleanliness, washing our hair more often, scrubbing our bodies and doing laundry."* Awareness of changing consumer expectations is the basis for P&G's adaptation to consumer expectations. In addition, P&G points out in 2021 the impact of virus outbreaks on economic recovery, which shows that P&G recognizes the external factors that directly affect its business: *"In some markets, virus outbreaks may delay economic recovery."*

Furthermore, Walmart reflects this insight when it points to the significant growth in online shopping and the demand for contactless shopping: *"Online shopping in the marketplace has grown at an extraordinary rate since the start of the pandemic."* Walmart's ability to adapt to these trends shows that the company can maintain its relevance in the market. In addition, Walmart's emphasis on cross-industry collaboration in response to the crisis demonstrates the close interdependence of industries that is critical to addressing societal challenges: *"We are seeing this across industries: automotive manufacturers are quickly adapting to produce respirators, textile manufacturers are shifting to produce masks and gowns, and beverage distillers are shifting their processes to provide hand sanitizer"*.

In summary, companies like Comcast, Procter & Gamble and WalMart have proven their ability to weather the turbulence of the pandemic by adapting their communications and strategies to respond effectively to rapidly changing consumer behavior and societal needs. These adjustments were not only responsive, but also strategically aligned with evolving societal values, demonstrating the convergence of profitability and social responsibility that is critical to long-term success in a changing business environment.

#### **2.4. Navigating crisis with purposeful action**

In a crisis, a company's ability to adapt, innovate and be resilient is critical to its survival and success. This analysis examines the strategic responses of Costco, Walmart, UnitedHealth Group, and Microsoft in inconvenient situations. By exploring their approaches to operational

efficiency, adaptability, and resilience, we gain insight into how these companies respond to immediate challenges and achieve long-term growth in a dynamic business environment.

In the face of rapidly changing market dynamics, Costco and Walmart demonstrated strong adaptive capacity by quickly taking practical steps, such as installing protective barriers and improving hygiene protocols in the event of a pandemic. These actions highlight their ability to respond effectively to pressing challenges while still focusing on operational efficiency. However, Costco in 2022 has optimized its inventory management by focusing on high-demand items. While Walmart in 2020 has recognized the long-term potential of certain services and, despite the crisis, integrated them as part of its post-crisis “new normal”.

For its part, UnitedHealth Group has demonstrated its resilience through a clearly defined strategic approach. The company acknowledged the impact of the global health crisis while highlighting the actions taken to support stakeholders during this tough time. Their commitment to supporting communities, members, patients, caregivers, and customers reflects their ability to overcome disruption and maintain stability during COVID-19. In 2019, *“The Impact of the Global Health Crisis and the Actions We're Taking to Support Communities, Members, Patients, Caregivers, and Customers”*. In addition, UnitedHealth Group has demonstrated its adaptability by focusing on improving access, affordability and outcomes for all by creating a modern, efficient health care system through innovation and realignment of incentives in 2022 *“By redefining incentives with health care providers, with providers, employers and public sector leaders to create a modern, efficient health care system that improves access, affordability, outcomes and experiences for all who need it”*.

In stark contrast, Microsoft emphasizes resilience as a catalyst for unprecedented digital transformation in response to the devastation caused by pandemics. Microsoft recognizes the growing demand for digital technologies to overcome challenges and highlights the industry's increasing reliance on digital solutions to respond effectively to complex situations in 2021 Microsoft *“While pandemics bring devastation and suffering to our lives and communities, they are also catalysts for unprecedented digital transformation”*. This forward-thinking approach has made Microsoft in 2022 a leader in technological innovation and resilience in the face of adversity *“Amid all the uncertainty in the world, one thing is clear: people and organizations across industries are increasingly turning to digital technologies to overcome today's challenges and become stronger”*.

The strategic responses of most of the companies of the sample highlight their resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. Through practical measures, operational efficiency

initiatives and digital transformation efforts, these companies have proven their ability to weather the crisis while maintaining stability and seeking growth opportunities. All companies exemplify the qualities required for long-term success in today's rapidly changing business environment by embracing change, driving innovation, and prioritizing stakeholder interests. In conclusion, most of the discourses examined demonstrate a consistent utilization of terminology that can be collectively represented within this word cloud. This visualization captures the essence of the language patterns and themes prevalent across the analyzed material.

**Figure N°1: Most frequent words used in CEO discourses during COVID-19**



**Source: auteurs**

### **3. Charting crisis narratives: discourse dynamics across phases**

Having analyzed the letter to shareholders of the leaders between the years 2019 to 2022, we can conclude that there are discernible changes in communication that reflect the company's responses to the changing global landscape, particularly in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Here are some examples of CEO discourses throughout Covid-19.

#### **3.1. China State Construction Engineering**

- Before the crisis (2019): Communication focuses on achievements and growth, reflecting a period of normal business operations. The language is triumphal and optimistic, reflecting a period of relative stability and economic dynamism for the company and the country.
- During the crisis (2020-2021): There is a marked shift in tone to address the severity of the pandemic, conveying a balanced message of resilience and responsibility. The leader's message is intricately linked to national pride and the company's crucial role in

responding to the crisis, emphasizing an ethic of service and contributions beyond business performance. The communication adopts a narrative that positions the company as a pillar, contributing to the stability of society.

- Post-crisis (2022): Post-crisis communication emphasizes a return to growth, with a particular focus on the company's ability to navigate through challenges. While financial success is acknowledged, there is also a repeated commitment to innovation and technology, writing down a strategic direction that looks beyond the crisis to future resilience and sustainable success.

Throughout these periods, the Chairman maintains a consistent theme of expressing gratitude in addition, a forward-looking perspective. However, the period of crisis catalyzed an obvious broadening of the dialogue to include topics such as employee well-being, social responsibility in the face of adversity and the importance of adaptability. After the crisis, while returning to a focus on business performance, speeches integrate the lessons of the crisis into a narrative of strength and continuity. The leader adopts a language that generates trust among stakeholders and subtly reassures that the lessons learned have strengthened the company, preparing it for future challenges.

In conclusion, the Chairman's approach demonstrates strategic flexibility in communication, adapting the message to address period-appropriate stakeholder concerns while maintaining a consistent underlying theme of responsibility, resilience, and gratitude. This evolution signifies the balanced role of contemporary business leadership not only in promoting financial success, but also in demonstrating a commitment to social well-being and an ability to apply the lessons of crises to plans and narratives.

### **3.2. Costco**

- Pre-crisis (2019): The letter conveys a tone of stable growth and stability. The focus is on financial performance, international expansion, and strategic investments. It reflects a routine attitude with optimism about Costco's global growth and its ongoing commitment to core values.
- Beginning of the crisis (2020-2021): The onset of the pandemic brought about a shift in which management recognized the challenges posed by the crisis. Communication is more empathetic, acknowledging employees' efforts during a period of "uncertainty and panic buying." It discusses the extensive measures taken by Costco to guarantee safety and continuity of service. The tone suggests decisive action and a sense of responsibility towards members and employees. The letter reflects adjustment and resilience in the

face of continuing challenges. The emphasis is on continued strong financial performance despite the crisis, as well as adaptations such as an increased focus on e-commerce due to changes in consumer behavior. The communication shows gratitude and acknowledges the arduous work of the whole team. There is an underlying message of strength and overcoming adversity.

- **Post-crisis and recovery (2022):** With the decline of the worst part of the pandemic, the letter shows a return to a focus on expansion and growth, while keeping a tone of appreciation for the team's efforts. The language is forward-looking, emphasizing sustainability, diversity and continued post-pandemic expansion. There is also greater emphasis on the growth of e-commerce, reflecting a shift in consumer habits. The speech conveys lessons learned from the crisis and a roadmap for future progress.

In the wake of the recent challenges, Costco's communication strategy during the Covid-19 has demonstrated a remarkable adaptability and flexibility by reshaping its business operations to navigate the supply chain disruption, inflation, and evolving customer behavior. This period has also highlighted the employee's appreciation. The tone of gratitude towards employees deepens as the crisis unfolds. Later letters focus on salary increases and employee recognition as essential to the company's success. Furthermore, there is a notable pivot to e-commerce. There has been a noticeable shift in communication towards the importance of e-commerce, reflecting changes in sales models and the strategic response to the pandemic. The aftermath the crisis Costco has shown sustainability and social responsibility. There is a stronger focus on sustainability initiatives and social responsibility, aligning with global sentiment and post-crisis consumer expectations. Moreover, an emotional tone and optimism. The tone becomes more emotionally charged through the crisis, reflecting empathy, and understanding. As the situation improves, there is a return to a tone of cautious optimism for the future.

In conclusion, Costco's management communications evolved to meet the challenges of the crisis, demonstrating adaptability, a heightened sense of responsibility and a strong focus on employee and member well-being. The communications strategy integrated real-time issues and was rooted in transparency and recognition of the evolving business landscape.

### **3.3. Chevron**

The evolution of Chevron's is like the previous two companies as well as all the others in the corpus of studies. The company adapted to the phases of crisis and showed some major changes. Leadership adjusted its tone from a focus on stability and growth to an assurance to stakeholders of Chevron's ability to manage unforeseen challenges, eventually evolving into a forward-



looking, sustainability-focused discourse. Over the years, there has been increasing the focus on sustainability and carbon reduction. A growing commitment to environmental responsibility. While initially mentioned as part of corporate responsibility, it has become a central strategic focus by 2022. Resilience and adaptation during 2020's communication stands out by highlighting Chevron's immediate response to exceptional global events, aiming to project initiative-taking control and management. Moreover, strategic investments are a substantial emphasis on strategic investments, particularly in technologies that reduce carbon emissions, which is growing over time and contrasts sharply with the focus of previous years, which was more on operational and financial performance. Additionally, there is a gradual shift towards transparency, with the presentation of data-driven results to reassure stakeholders of progress, and greater emphasis on partnership as a means of addressing industry challenges.

To conclude, following this analysis of corporate discourses between 2019 and 2022, we can see that leaders have had to demonstrate great adaptability in their communications, responding to the global health emergency with compassion and resilience. Despite the varied contexts and sectors, several common themes appear: Reinforced Commitment to Social Well-Being: All communications showed increased social responsibility, with a particular focus on the health and safety of employees and customers.

- **Resilience and Adaptability:** The crisis has propelled these companies into a state of flexibility, where they have had to quickly adapt to new operational realities and integrate new practices, such as the emphasis on e-commerce.
- **Sustainability and the future:** The pandemic has reinforced the need for a focus on sustainability and innovation in long-term strategies, as seen by the example of Chevron and its increased investment in reducing carbon emissions.
- **Confidence and Long-Term Vision Communication:** Companies have adopted a language that inspires confidence and communicates a promising future despite present difficulties.

In short, leaders have shown an impressive ability to navigate the COVID-19 storm through communication that not only addresses financial and operational challenges, but also takes account of social and environmental dimensions. This shift demonstrates a growing awareness of the significant role played by companies in society, testifying to an evolution towards a more conscious and humane capitalism. My study underlines the importance of communication that evolves with the times, able to reflect the changing values and priorities of business and society. The post-COVID period thus reveals a transformation not only of business models, but also of ways of communicating in an interconnected, ever-changing world.



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#### **4. Sectorial comparison**

The comparative sector analysis reveals distinct approaches that different industry leaders are taking to navigate through today's economic and social landscapes. In the energy and oil sector, companies such as Aramco, Chevron and ExxonMobil display a strong commitment to the energy transition, with varying focal points on resilience, operational efficiency, and contribution to low-carbon solutions. Despite diverse communication styles and strategic emphases, a uniform recognition of adapting to evolving energy demands while guaranteeing shareholder value is evident.

The retail and wholesale sector also reflects a dichotomy of strategies and tones, with innovation, adaptation, and sustainability as common threads. From bold transformations to mission-driven growth, companies such as Amazon and Costco remain focused on customer experience, employee well-being and solving macroeconomic challenges, while navigating cautiously through global business uncertainties. In healthcare and pharmaceuticals, the narrative is turning to personalized care and digital innovation, with companies prioritizing the delivery of accessible, quality healthcare.

Through strategic partnerships, digital healthcare services and a focus on stakeholder vitality, organizations such as Pfizer are demonstrating a strong commitment to ESG strategies with tangible efforts in product innovation, equitable access, and corporate responsibility. Across all sectors, the importance of adapting to industry-specific challenges and global trends - such as digitization, sustainability, and ethical governance - is apparent. Companies continue to prioritize growth, stakeholder engagement and transparency not only to prosper, but also to contribute positively to the societies they serve. While their methods may differ, the underlying goal of successfully transforming themselves into a more sustainable, inclusive, and innovative future unites them.

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## **Conclusion**

This research contribution provides an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of management discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the complex strategies employed to address organizational challenges. The findings highlight the critical role of adaptive communication in effectively managing internal and external organizational dynamics in the context of global disruption. By integrating grounded theory and methodological approaches, the study enhanced our understanding of leaders' communication practices in times of crisis and highlighted the nuances and subtleties of leaders' discourse in different contexts.

In particular, the study explored the importance of emotional perception in leadership discourse, highlighting how empathy, optimism and determination contribute to organizational resilience. This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework of strategic communication, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between leaders' communication strategies and stakeholders' reactions in crises. The empirical findings of this study enrich the existing literature, provide valuable insights into communication practices in crises, and open new avenues for research in this area.

The study also has important practical implications for practitioners and policy makers as it highlights the importance of an initiative-taking and adaptive approach to leadership communication in order to manage crises effectively. The findings of the study suggest that organizations that adopt flexible and responsive communication strategies are more likely to be able to respond to new challenges and opportunities. Therefore, it is important that managers understand the strategic importance of communication and develop communication capabilities in their organizations.

Finally, this article calls for continuous rethinking of communication practices in times of crisis and encourages researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms that shape managers' discourses and their impact on organizational outcomes. In this context, future research could focus on examining the long-term effects of strategic communication on organizational resilience and developing a stronger theoretical framework to guide managers' communication practices in times of crisis.

In summary, this paper sheds light on managers' communication practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the importance of adaptive, empathic, and strategic communication in successfully managing disruptions in organizations. By integrating empirical data and rigorous theoretical analyses, this study makes a significant contribution to the understanding

of executive communication in times of crisis and provides valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in the field of crisis management and organizational communication.

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