



## The Communication Strategy of the University of Cape Town and the University of Tehran in Dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

With the spread of the Coronavirus in Iran and almost simultaneously around the world, universities were forced to operate online and use distance education. The efficiency of universities in these critical situations depends to a large extent on their communication and media policies to advance their educational and research goals. To review the media and communication policy of the University of Tehran and the University of Cape Town, the content of their official websites from March 2020 to January 2021 was evaluated. This paper, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis, examined the content of these websites in connection with the Corona pandemic and evaluated their communication strategy in conveying their messages. Both universities have prioritized medical and emergency services which show the importance of students' and staff's health for both universities but the social responsibility were more evident in Tehran University with its deeper commitment to its social missions. In terms of communication strategy, Cape Town University adopted a "supportive and egocentric" strategy to provide the necessary news and refrain from publishing the comments of audiences, and the University of Tehran took a "supportive and selective" strategy intending to provide the most news with selective comments.

**Keywords:** Cape Town University, Communication strategy, Coronavirus, Media policy, University of Tehran

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## 1. Introduction

The coronavirus, which quickly became a global pandemic and claimed the lives of many people around the world, was an unknown disease, for which no evident prevention or treatment was known. This virus, like many public and environmental affairs, heavily influenced education and led to the closure of face-to-face education; many university campuses were closed and face-to-face classes were replaced with online or distance learning (Watermeyer, Crick, Knight & Goodall, 2021, p. 623). To be more precise, in 200 countries, the Coronavirus pandemic affected the education of 98.6 percent of learners (United Nations, 2020), and online learning and remote education were identified as the only solution for continuing education (Dhawan, 2020). In this “emergency online migration” (Watermeyer et al., 2021, p. 623), universities, professors and students’ preparedness was crucial (Oliveira, Teixeira, Torres & Morias, 2021; Starkey, Shonfeld, Prestridge & Cervera, 2021). In such critical situation, in which a significant transformation was requested in various educational settings, especially in the first days and months of experiencing this pandemic, the role of university websites in raising awareness, monitoring the situation, guiding the emotions and behaviors of a large and important part of the society, as well as orienting and clarifying the new educational conditions (online education and online research) was highly prominent.

This article intends to describe and evaluate the significant role of universities’ websites at two universities, the University of Cape Town and the University of Tehran, by addressing the following issues: First, during the outbreak of the Coronavirus and the closure of face to face activities in universities, what news and content were released for students, instructors and staff? Second, what

communication strategies were used by university websites to reach the audience?

Various theoretical frameworks have been proposed to study media communication strategies, such as the "process" school and the "semiotics" school, which place special emphasis on "encryption and decoding" and "production and transmission of meanings" (Fiske, 2010, pp. 2-3). In another approach, called the "framing" theory, Robert Entman discusses the way in which the form of news and media can affect the process of thinking and understanding (Entman, 1993, p. 51). One of the communication analytical frameworks, which is suitable for descriptive research, is the six strategies that Floreddu and Cabiddu (2016, p. 494) have developed in their research. These six strategies are: 1. egocentric, 2. conversational, 3. selective, 4. openness, 5. secretive, 6. supportive. In the "egocentric" strategy, information and content are shared but conversational and two-way interaction with the audiences are not formed and the main objective of the strategy is simply to increase the visibility of the website and its supporting institute. In the "conversational" strategy, all comments of audiences are responded and any kinds of conflict would be managed and averted. In this strategy, by establishing a two-way conversation and interaction, a deep relationship will be established between managers of website and audiences. In the "selective" strategy, only positive comments regarding the website and its supporting institution will be mentioned and all the negative feedbacks would be ignored; the webmasters merely take the positive comments into account and respond to them if necessary. In the "openness" strategy, the main objective is enhancing the transparency of interactions between webmasters and audiences; the comments from the audiences are not deleted and webmasters

respond to them openly. In contrast to the openness strategy, in the “secretive” strategy, the main purpose is to control and manage any conflict or disagreement; as a result, all opposite comments are replied through a private channel (like emails) or are simply deleted. In the last strategy, the “supportive” strategy, the main purpose is to increase the awareness of audiences and transfer the essential information to them (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016, p. 495). The remarkable point about these six patterns is that it is possible to combine some of these strategies and apply one or more strategies simultaneously depending on the institution’s communication policies and methods. For example, a website may peruse the egocentric and supportive strategies or the egocentric and secretive strategies simultaneously; another organization may use the openness and supportive strategies or the conversational and openness strategies. In this article, especially in the section on conveying messages and communicating with audiences, Floreddu and Cabiddu’s (2016) six analytical framework is used.

To describe and understand more about the University of Cape Town and the University of Tehran’s Coronavirus mitigation policies and communication strategies, this paper examines the most important themes and topics that are covered by their websites and aim to answer the following questions:

- What are the most important themes and topics covered by the two university websites regarding COVID-19?
- What are the most important communication strategies used by the two university websites to cover issues related to COVID-19?

The first section of the current paper explains the research method and how it is applied. To present the main findings, the second section describes both universities’ main themes and topics

in mitigating the Coronavirus' various implications and fulfilling their educational and social responsibilities. In the third section, we discuss the most important implications of both universities' themes and topics regarding their mitigation policies and educational responsibilities. Finally, in the conclusion, we will discuss the main communication strategies of both university websites in covering issues related to coronavirus.

## 2. Research Method

The data collection method used in this research consists of quantitative content analysis, which is a common method for analyzing documents and texts, especially for media content (Bryman, 2012, p. 289). Through careful and systematic study of different texts, this method is one of the most prominent data collection procedures used in documentary studies (Seyed Emami, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 377). Krippendorff (2004, p. 18) describes it as a method for reproducible and valid deduction from data. To apply this method, it is essential to pay attention to the three conditions of objectivity, discipline and generality (Holsti, 1969, p. 5). Content analysis is a method that seeks to quantify content based on predetermined concepts and categories, in a systematic and renewable format (Bryman, 2012, p. 290). Based on the main principles of this method, first the official website of the University of Tehran<sup>1</sup> (including the website of the Faculty of Medical Sciences<sup>2</sup>) and the official website of the University of Cape Town<sup>3</sup> (including the website of the School of Health<sup>4</sup>) were

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1. <https://ut.ac.ir/fa>

2. <https://tums.ac.ir/>

3. <https://uct.ac.za/>

4. <https://health.uct.ac.za/>

identified as cases under investigation, and all news and web materials relating to COVID-19 through a period of 11 months, from March 2020 to January 2021, were selected for analysis. This data consists of all related news and materials, including interviews, notes, reports, announcements, articles, pictures, clips, etc., in which Corona or COVID-19 were directly or implicitly mentioned.

## **2. 1. Sampling and Data Collection**

The corpus of this study consisted of all news and materials related to the Coronavirus pandemic. It should be noted that according to the objectives of this study to generalize its findings to the whole population, it was necessary to utilize a representative sample (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, p. 268; Bryman, 2012, p. 176). Accordingly, all news and materials were investigated during this eleven month period, of which 1486 news pieces belonged to the website of the University of Tehran<sup>1</sup> and 522 news pieces came from the website of the University of Cape Town. These materials consisted of news related to the Coronavirus and/or its consequences for the university, professors, students, and/or society.

## **2. 2. Coding and Categories**

This research aimed to explore both universities' media policy in serving their educational and research objectives alongside

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1. Materials related to the Coronavirus on the website of the University of Tehran could have been more than this, but some similar news and materials were not included in the cycle of further analysis due to their repetition.

increasing the awareness of students, professors and staff during the Coronavirus pandemic. In the initial stage of coding, various codes, such as University's announcement concerning distance learning and, health and psychological advice to students, some information about the Coronavirus, opening hours of universities during the pandemic, etc., were identified.

In axial coding, from detected initial codes (which included several sub codes) nine codes or main categories were recognized. These themes and their sub categories are concisely explained below:

1. Medical strategy: this category refers to news related to the prevention and treatment of the Coronavirus, which can be divided into two sub-categories "controlling the pandemic" and "providing medical educational contents";
2. Universities' approach to the Covid-19 vaccine: the second theme relates to news and content on the importance of vaccination, vaccine production and/or purchase;
3. Strategy of giving different services during the pandemic: this category refers to all news and materials related to various services that universities provided for their students, academic staff, and administrative personnel;
4. Educational strategy: this theme refers to news related to education and educational activities, such as announcements on the universities' courses and programs at the time of the quarantine, changing the deadline for the exams, new term schedules, and infrastructures regarding online learning;
5. Research strategy: this category refers to the news related to universities' scientific activities, research projects, scientific articles and research reports on various topics related to the Coronavirus, as well as propagated academic webinars and

- conferences either about COVID-19 or in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic;
6. Social responsibility mission: this category refers to the news related to social and voluntary activities (such as charitable activities, help to control the pandemic in the community, help to improve the online education in some schools ...) performed by universities (either by students or university officials) to contribute to the larger society in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic;
  7. Stress management and cultural activities: the seventh category refers to the news related to cultural activities and various measures taken by universities to reduce students and university staff and personnel's anxiety;
  8. Student initiatives to fight against the pandemic: this category refers to the news related to student's activities (either at the university or outside of the university) to combat the Coronavirus;
  9. Appreciation of health defenders: the last category refers to the news related to appreciating the great efforts of the medical staff in mitigating the community.

In addition, in this research, it was important to evaluate the way in which these universities covered their news and tried to reach their audiences. To this end, based on Floreddu and Cabiddu's model (2016, p. 494), six communication strategies were defined. These strategies are briefly defined below:

1. Egocentric: this strategy refers to a communication in which information and content is shared but two-way interaction with the audience is not formed;
2. Conversational: in this strategy all comments of audiences are responded and a two-way conversation and interaction



between managers of the website and audiences is established;

3. Selective: in this strategy, only positive comments are published/responded and all the negative feedbacks are ignored and/or deleted;
4. Openness: in this strategy, all comments from the audiences are published and webmasters respond. In this “emergency online migration” (Watermeyer et al., 2021, p. 623), to them openly;
5. Secretive; in this strategy, all comments are replied through a private channel or are deleted;
6. Supportive; in this strategy, the main aim is to increase the awareness of audiences and thus webmasters try to give the essential information to them as much as possible.

In the Findings section, these nine categories will be evaluated in more details. In fact, these categories indicate the main strategies used by the University of Tehran as well as Cape Town University to handle the Coronavirus pandemic and its side effects in the university and in the society. In the conclusion, based on the two university websites’ news coverage and the way they tried to reach their audiences, we discuss both universities’ communication strategy at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **3. Research Findings**

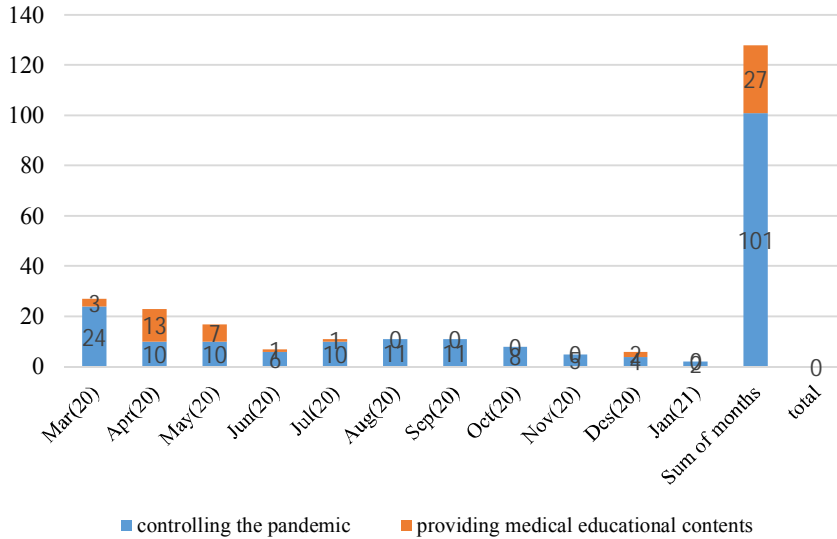
In this section, to have a more complete understanding of the University of Cape Town and the University of Tehran’s Coronavirus mitigation policies, we examined the most important themes and topics that were covered by the two institutions’ websites in the time of the Corona pandemic. Our findings indicate

that, based on the frequency, nine themes seemed to have been important to these university websites. These themes and their frequency in each month are analyzed below.

### **3. 1. Medical Strategy**

One of the main goals of this research was to explore the medical policies and health strategies adopted and promoted by the official websites of the University of Cape Town and the University of Tehran against the Coronavirus among students and staff. To this end, the related news and contents of websites regarding the Covid-19 prevention and treatment were identified and analyzed. News related to the prevention and treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic at the University of Cape Town may be divided into two categories "controlling the pandemic" and "providing medical educational contents". On "controlling the pandemic", issues such as health communication protocols, closing and reopening the campus with special measures and priorities for medical treatment were underlined. To increase awareness on medical issues, different articles, announcements, videos and other forms of media content were published for training the public in adopting preventive measures and in protecting the well-being of the personal and the general public. This website published 128 news and articles concerning its medical policies and approaches, of which 101 were about the pandemic control and 27 were about medical recommendations. A noteworthy point in this regard is the reduction of relevant news in the final four months. This is despite the fact that the Coronavirus infection in South Africa began to increase in July (WHO, 2021a). Chart 1 illustrates the frequency of published materials related to medical strategies adopted by the University of Cape Town's website month by month.

**Chart 1.** News related to the medical strategy-University of Cape Town



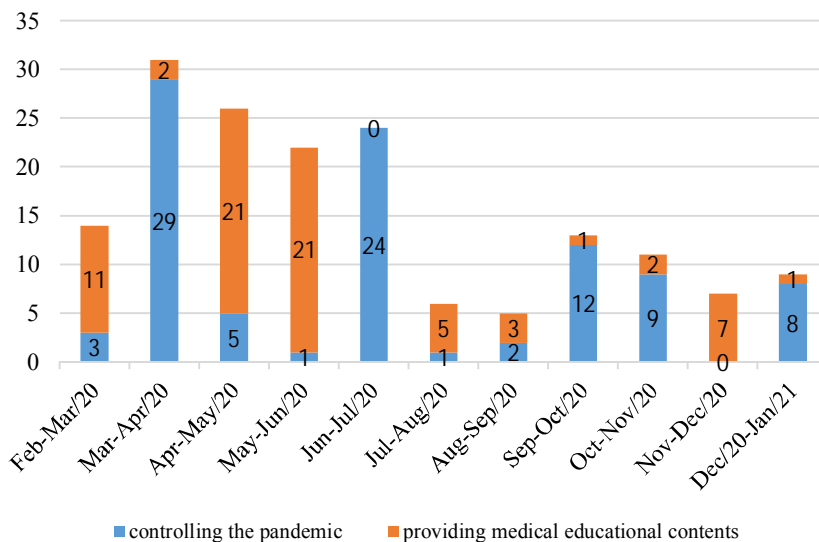
Source: Authors' Data

To explore the medical strategy in the University of Tehran's website, the frequency of news related to "controlling the pandemic" and "providing medical education" was examined. With regard to the "controlling the pandemic" category, all the news and medical advices were aligned with the standards of the World Health Organization, I.R. of Iran's Ministry of Health and Medical Education and Iran's Corona National Head quarter. In particular, news related to preventive actions, treatment, strengthening the defiance and the immune system, distribution, sanitation and disinfection (masks, alcohol and antiseptic solutions), Covid-19 test and medical advices, visits of the officials of the health department, providing medical services, holding various classes on the prevention and control of the coronavirus were covered. In

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"providing medical educational content" various news and subjects in the form of questions and answers (especially on medical rumors), educational brochures, animation, motion graphic and educational videos were provided. In general, the website of the University of Tehran published 168 news and articles about its medical policies and approaches, 94 news pieces were about pandemic control and 74 news pieces were about providing medical educational solutions and recommendations. Chart 2 illustrates the frequency of content related to medical strategies on the University of Tehran's website. In the last 6 months, the amount of medical news on the University of Tehran's website, like the University of Cape Town website, has been declining.

**Chart 2.** News related to the medical strategy-University of Tehran

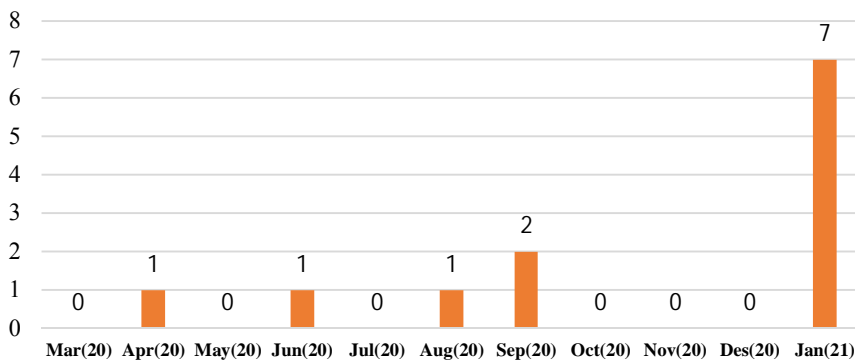


Source: Authors' Data

### 3. 2. Universities' Approach to the Covid-19 Vaccine

Another important issue that can be closely related to the previous issue is the approach of the official website of the universities towards the Covid-19 vaccine. The question was whether the university website encouraged the advent of a national vaccine or supported its import from other countries. Major news and content on the University of Cape Town's website emphasized the importance of vaccination, vaccine purchase, contribution of South Africa in the testing process to receive more than its quota in a faster way, etc.; no specific encouragement or emphasis on the necessity of producing national vaccine based on domestic scientific capacities was observed. In sum, the website of the University of Cape Town published 12 pieces of news regarding the Covid-19 vaccine, more than half of which were published in the last month (January 2021). The increase in news related to the vaccine in the last month has been due to the production of the Covid-19 vaccine and the beginning of its use in some countries. Chart 3 illustrates the frequency of vaccine-related news on the website of the University of Cape Town.

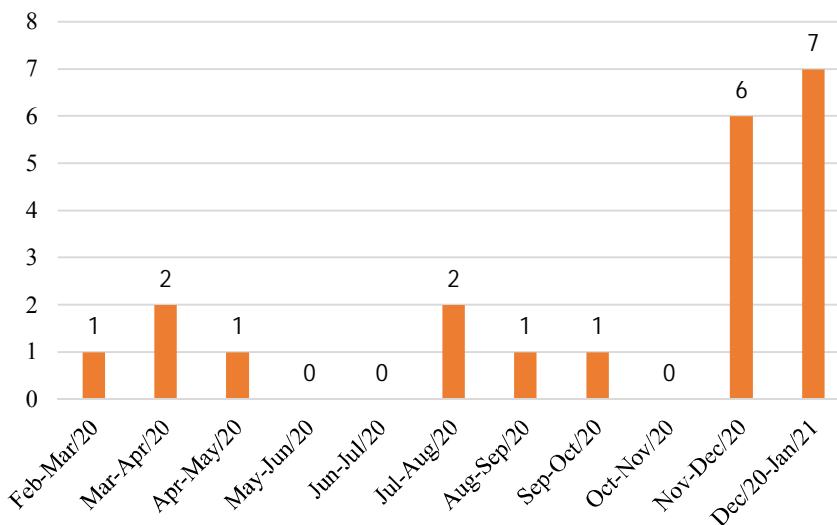
**Chart 3.** News related to Corona vaccine-University of Cape Town



Source: Authors' Data

News related to the Covid-19 vaccine on the website of the University of Tehran was mainly dedicated to topics such as vaccine preparation, vaccination and procedures, vaccine purchase and distribution, as well as specialized medical opinions about vaccines and vaccinations. Similar to the website of the University of Cape Town, there was an increase in the news related to the Covid-19 vaccine on the website of the University of Tehran in the last two months (December and January). The special news was dedicated to the efforts of the school of Medical Sciences to make a national Covid-19 vaccine. In general, the University of Tehran's website published 21 news and articles about the vaccine, from which more than half (13 pieces of news) were released in the last two months of the period under study in this research. Chart 4 illustrates the frequency of vaccine news month by month, published on the website of the University of Tehran.

**Chart 4.** News related to Corona vaccine-University of Tehran

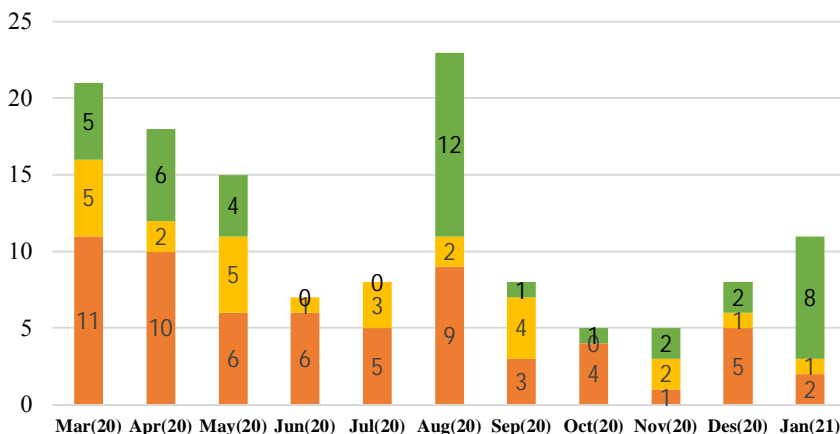


Source: Authors' Data

### 3. 3. Strategy of Giving Different Services during the Pandemic

Another key issue for universities during the Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine period consists of providing different services to students, academic staff and administrative personnel. This part, in fact, accounted for a significant portion of the news and content on the websites of both universities under study. News and information in this section may be divided to three general categories: services to students (such as financial services, enrollment and graduation, exams, libraries’ especial services and working hours), services to academic and administrative personnel (such as official announcements and especial regulations, especial facilities and support for the personnel), advisory and mental health services (such as materials related to mental health management during the Coronavirus pandemic and quarantine). In general, the website of Cape Town University published 112 pieces of new about its diverse services, including 62 pieces of news on student services, 14 pieces of news on personnel services, and 36 pieces of news on mental health services. Chart 5 represents the monthly frequency of these news and materials on the website of Cape Town University.

**Chart 5.** News related to the strategy of services -University of Cape Town

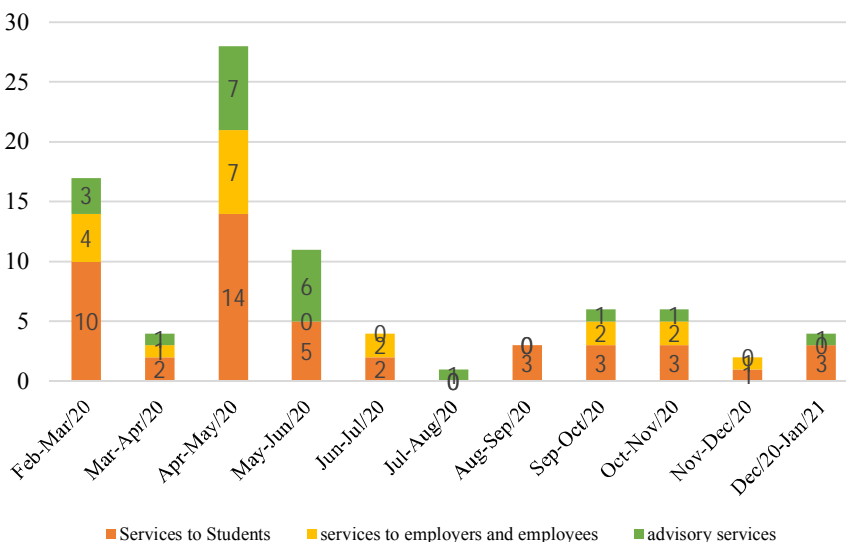


Source: Authors' Data

The above statistics illustrate that news and materials related to students services had the highest frequency within the first three months of the outbreak of the virus, but due to the continued quarantine and online learning, as well as online working (personnel had to stay at home and continue their work online) in August and January, advisory and mental health services was the most frequent news to be published on the university's website.

Similar to the University of Cape Town, there was a significant amount of news related to services on the University of Tehran's website, with 86 pieces of news and articles about its various services, among which, 46 were related to student services, 19 were related to staff and personnel services, and 21 were related to advisory services. Chart 6 illustrates the monthly frequency of this type of content on the University of Tehran's website.

**Chart 6.** News related to the strategy of services -University of Tehran



Source: Authors' Data

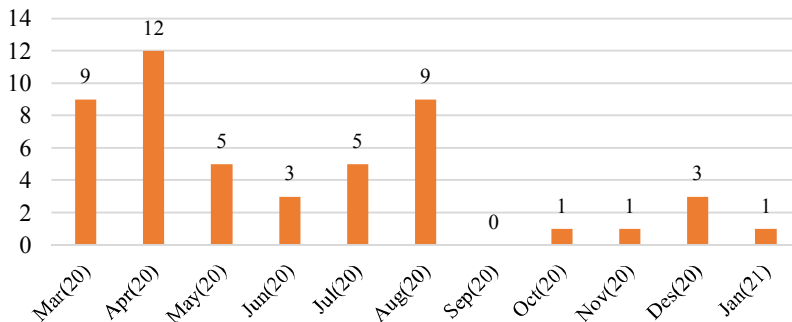


A noteworthy point in the above statistics of both universities' websites is the declining trend in the number of news related to student and staff services. However, news and materials related to the advisory services at the University of Cape Town (especially in August and January) showed an increased, while at the University of Tehran, such growth was not witnessed.

### 3. 4. Educational Strategy

Although the most important part of information on the universities' website was related to education and educational activities, in terms of news coverage and released materials, education was not truly prominent. Only 49 pieces of news at the University of Cape Town's website and 23 pieces of news at the University of Tehran were related to education strategy. In particular, news and media content such as announcements related to educational policies in the period of quarantine and Corona pandemic, procedures for continuing classes, deadline modifications for the exams, new term schedule, and infrastructure related to online learning were the major content in this strategy. Chart 7 illustrates the frequency of content related to educational strategy on the University of Cape Town's website.

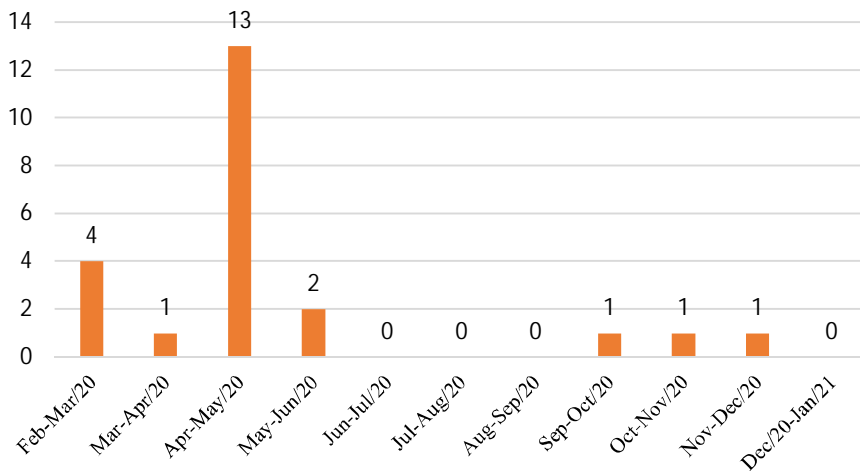
**Chart 7.** News related to educational strategy-University of Cape Town



Source: Authors' Data

At the University of Tehran, issues such as the absence of face-to-face classes, the need to use online educational services, the online administration of exams, the online evaluation of professors' academic performance, and guidance on the procedures regarding the university's online system were the main media content in this section. Chart 8 illustrates the frequency of content related to the educational strategy on the University of Tehran's website. Notably, in both universities a decreasing trend at the later months was noticeable.

**Chart 8.** News related to educational strategy-University of Tehran



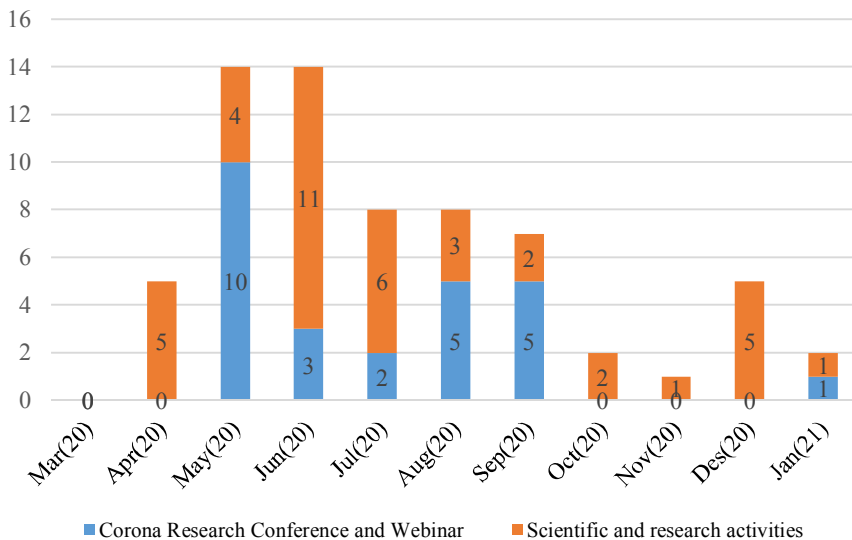
Source: Authors' Data

### 3. 5. Research Strategy

Another topic that is directly related to the nature of the university is research and scientific activities, that is, the way in which universities continued their scientific and research activities during the quarantine and the pandemic. Both websites published

scientific articles and research reports on various topics related to the Coronavirus and propagated academic webinars and conferences about COVID-19, which were all counted under research strategy. Other research results and reports on the social and economic (non-medical) dimensions of the virus/disease, were also included under this topic. In general, the University of Cape Town’s website published 66 news media materials in this regard, from which 26 were about general research conferences and webinars, and 40 were about specific research and scientific activities related to the Coronavirus. Chart 9 illustrates the amount of material published on the research strategy on this website. It is noteworthy that most of the news and content in this section have been related to conferences and webinars on the effects of the pandemic on the education and society.

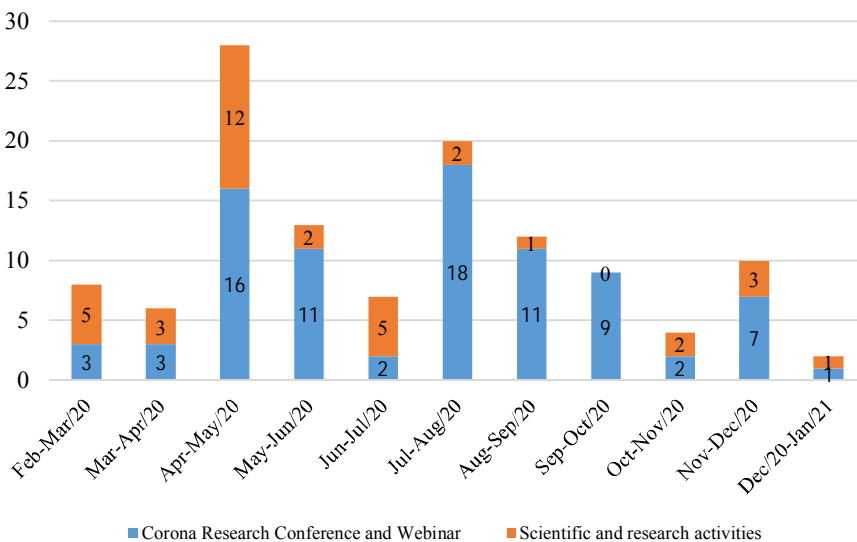
**Chart 9.** News related to the research strategy-University of Cape Town



Source: Authors’ Data

Unlike the University of Cape Town's website, which published a relatively low number of news and academic materials in this section (only 66 items), the website of the University of Tehran published 911 pieces of news, reports and media coverage about scientific and research activities, from which 82 news were particularly about conferences and webinar on COVID-19. The specific topics of the Corona webinars were mainly about diagnosis, prevention and treatment of the disease, its different economic and social impacts on the society, and procedures for managing and controlling it. These conferences and webinars were mainly held at universities, sometimes with the participation and cooperation of specialized and international hospitals. Chart 10 illustrates a month by month frequency of this type of news on the website of the University of Tehran.

**Chart 10.** News related to the research strategy-University of Tehran



Source: Authors' Data

As illustrated in both charts above, in the early months of the Coronavirus outbreak, research activities did not receive much news coverage, which could indicate that research activities were halted or reduced due to the outbreak of the virus. This decrease in research activities (or at least in publicizing) can also be a side effect of the universities' focus on monitoring health conditions and structural adjustment training with e-learning in the first months of the disease outbreak. As the need to know this virus raised scientifically, both universities' (especially the University of Tehran) academic and scientific activities grow accordingly. However, after a few months in peak, (like news on education and medical strategy) the amount of news in this section on both universities' websites witnessed a steady decline.

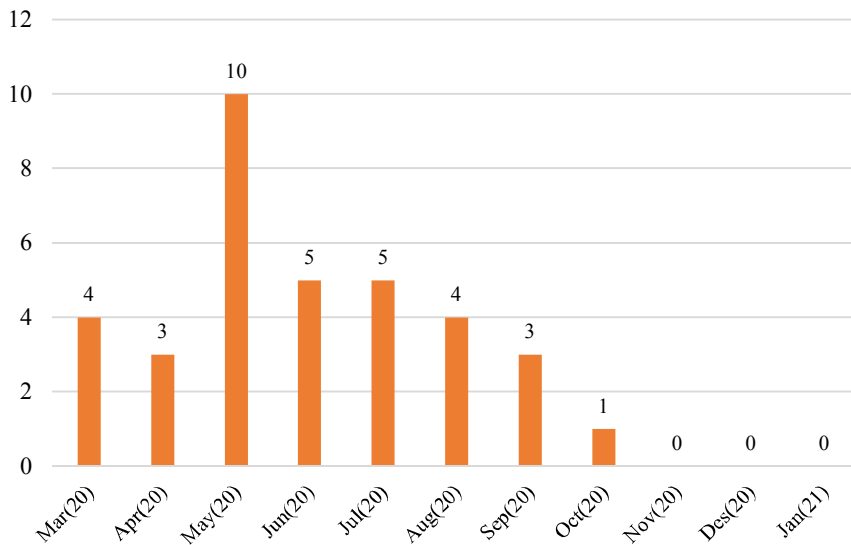
### **3. 6. Social Responsibility Mission**

Since university is a place where knowledgeable youth gather, a sense of responsibility to play a positive role in society is always remarkable in this type of institutions. The sense of social responsibility is one of the important missions of the new generation, especially those benefiting from academic training in universities. Indeed, the outbreak of the Coronavirus, which affected all aspects of human life, provided universities a fruitful opportunity to fulfill their social responsibility. In this regard, both websites' news and materials related to social and voluntary activities associated with the Coronavirus were analyzed. In particular, charitable activities, help to control the pandemic in the community, and help to improve the online education in some schools were among the items that were categorized under this heading. On balance, the University of Cape Town's website had

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35 news and articles in this regard. Chart 11 illustrates the amount of materials published about the social responsibility mission on the University of Cape Town's website.

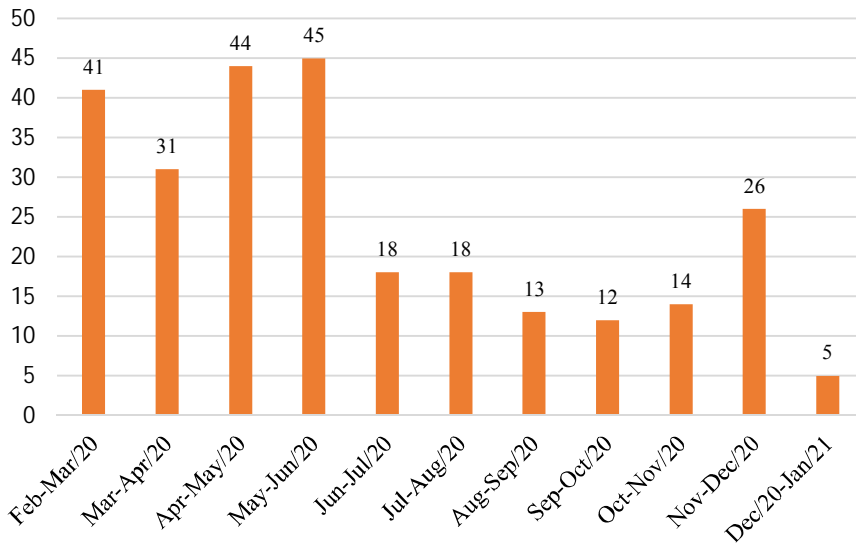
**Chart 11.** News related to The social responsibility mission-University of Cape Town



Source: Authors' Data

On the University of Tehran's website, most of these voluntary activities were performed by student groups, university affiliated institutions, and affiliated medical centers (such as specialized hospitals and health centers). In sum, the University of Tehran's website has published 267 news and articles in line with its social responsibility mission. Chart 12 illustrates the month by month frequency of these news and materials.

**Chart 12.** News related to The social responsibility mission-University of Tehran



Source: Authors' Data

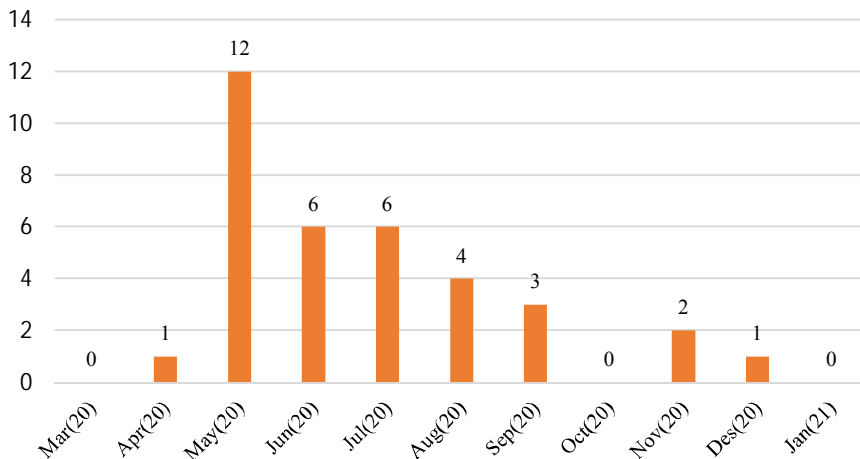
A critical point in this regard is that the higher attention of both websites (especially the University of Tehran's website) to issues associated with the social responsibility in the early months of the Coronavirus outbreak, and their decline in the later months. Like previous strategies, the media materials about social activities at the University of Cape Town reached zero in the three final months of the period under study in this paper, and at the University of Tehran it reached its lowest point in the final month.

### 3. 7. Stress Management and Cultural Activities

One of the fundamental measures taken by universities to reduce the negative consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic, as well as to reduce the anxiety of students and university staff, was cultural

activities. The University of Cape Town's website published a variety of news and content in this regard. For example, in order to adapt to the quarantine conditions and instill a sense of interaction and empathy, notes from university students titled "Cape Town University Lock Down Letters," with the special hashtag "Lock Down Letters<sup>1</sup>" were published in May, June and July. These pieces of writings contained students' thoughts, stress management methods, and experiences of hardship during the quarantine. There was also a call for sharing the experiences of staff and students affected by the Coronavirus, entitled "Recovery Diaries<sup>2</sup>" which were published in August. Grief sharing and the announcement of the condolences on the occasion of the death of members of the University were other elements under this topic. Chart 13 illustrates the monthly frequency of these news and activities.

**Chart 13.** News related to stress management and cultural activities -University of Cape Town



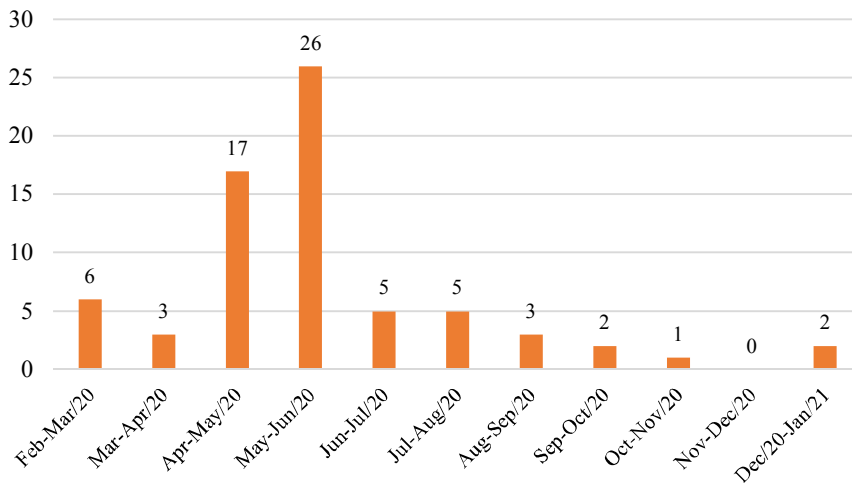
Source: Authors' Data

1. # UCTLockDownLetters
2. # RecoveryDiaries



The website of the University of Tehran also dedicated some news and content to stress management and cultural activities. These news and activities included competitions and non-face-to-face sports activities (such as chess, plank, darts, etc.), book reading competitions, art and entertainment competitions, such as stand-up comedies, children's painting and story writing, etc. There was also a specific competition on making documentaries about the efforts of the medical staff fighting against the virus. Chart 14 illustrates the monthly frequency of these news.

**Chart 14.** News related to stress management and cultural activities-University of Tehran



Source: Authors' Data

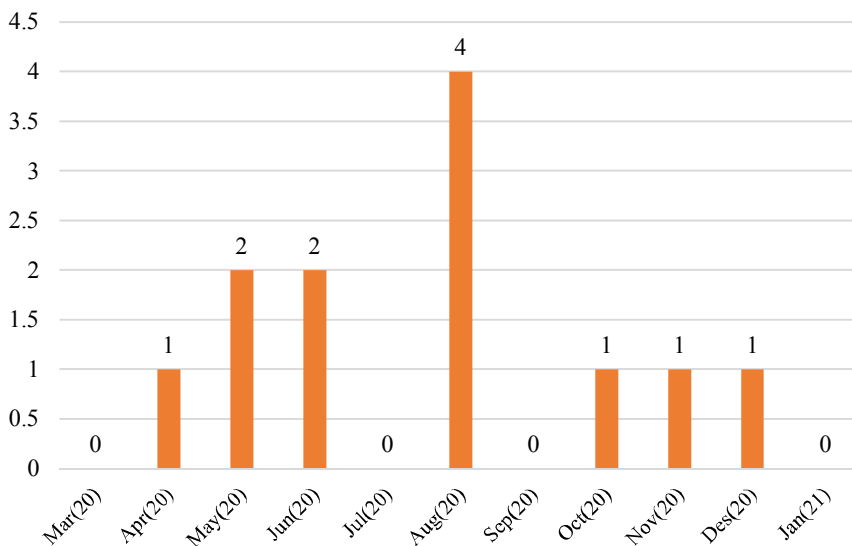
### 3. 8. Student Initiatives to Fight against the Coronavirus

Another piece of news related to the Coronavirus was student activities (either at the university or outside of university) to combat the Coronavirus. This depicts the active role of students in

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this regard and the way in which their efforts and contribution to the wellbeing of the society and community mitigation were encouraged and valued by their host universities. Chart 15 indicates the frequency of these news on the University of Cape Town's website.

**Chart 15.** News related to student initiatives-University of Cape Town

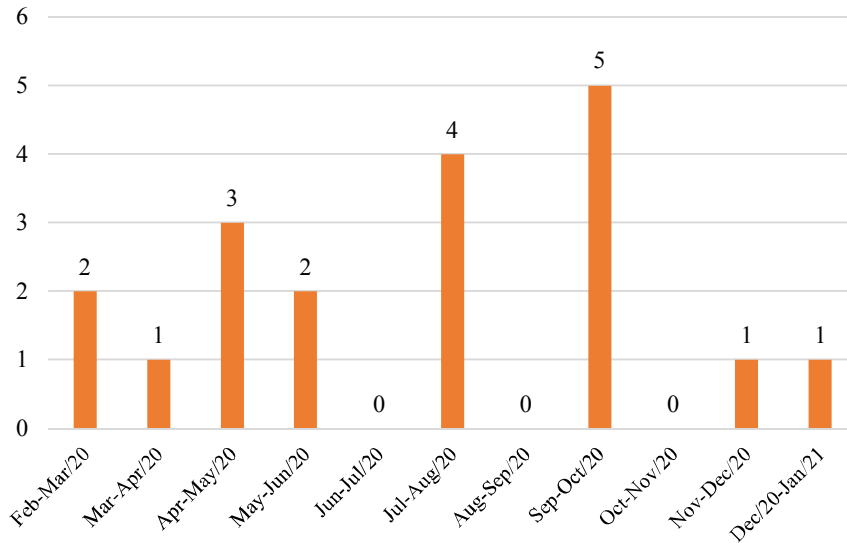


Source: Authors' Data

A decent amount of news about students' scientific and research activities (in fighting the Coronavirus) on the campus or on the knowledge-based start-ups outside of the university, was observed on the website of the University of Tehran as well. Designing and making diagnostic kits, making oxygen devices, and trying to make different diagnostic methods and vaccines were among the most important initiatives and activities performed in this regard. Chart

16 illustrates the month by month frequency of this type of news publication.

**Chart 16.** News related to student initiatives-University of Tehran



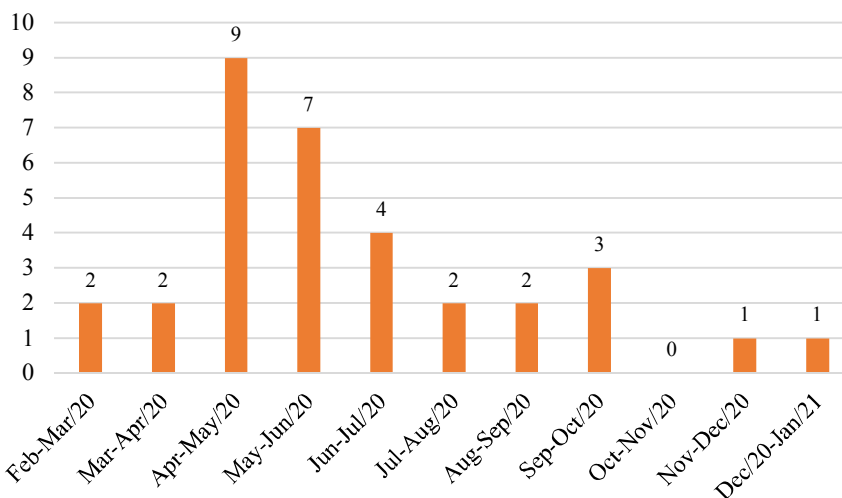
Source: Authors' Data

### 3. 9. Appreciation of Health Defenders

The last identified category was the news about appreciating the great efforts of the medical staff (who were honorably named as 'health defenders') in mitigating the community. It has to be noted that, this category was seen only on the website of the University of Tehran, but due to its importance, it was necessary to mention it alongside other categories. Specifically under this category, one can see news and materials related to an appreciation of the medical staff and honoring the first hospitals and health centers to

fight Coronavirus for taking care of its victims. Appreciating the efforts of the officials in the National Corona Headquarters was also counted under this category. Visits by government officials or university officials to thank the medical staff and making a documentary to record the efforts of medical staff were other examples of this type of news. Chart 17 illustrates the month by month frequency of these news.

**Chart 17.** News related to appreciation for medical staff-University of Tehran



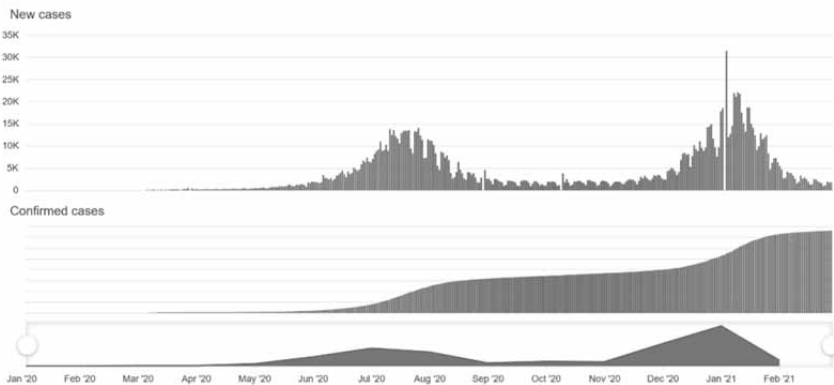
Source: Authors' Data

#### 4. Discussion

The findings presented in this research indicate that in terms of most frequent news coverage, the websites of both universities discussed similar issues and adopted similar strategies. These similar strategies or items were classified into eight categories: medical strategy, vaccine manufacturing/import, service strategy,

educational strategy, research strategy, social responsibility mission, stress management, and student initiatives. This could indicate a common concern between the two universities during the Coronavirus pandemic. Another important common trend was the reduction of news coverage in many of categories in the later months since the outbreak of the disease in January 2020. This was despite the fact that the rate of infection of certain Coronaviruses heavily increased from the second half of the year in both South Africa and in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Graph 01).

**Graph 1.** Incidence of Qovid-19 in South Africa based on dates

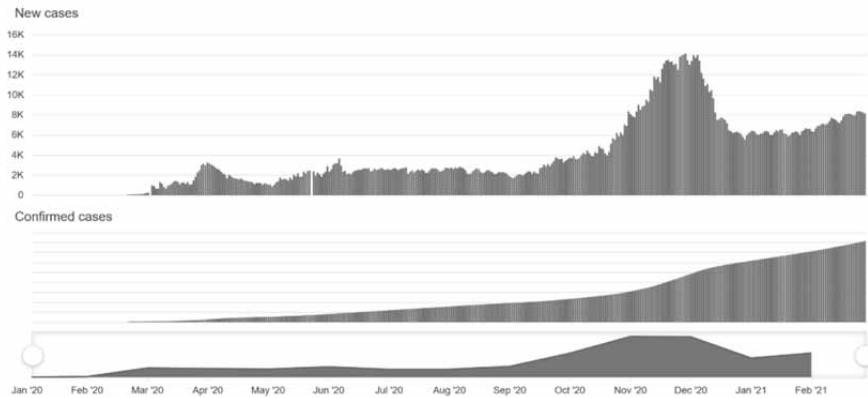


Source: World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/countries/zaf/>)

The similar trend of rise of infection in the later months (since the outbreak of the disease) was also evident In the Islamic Republic of Iran. Graph 02 highlights this rise.

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**Graph 2.** The level of risk in the Islamic Republic of Iran based on dates



Source: World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/countries/irn/>)

The decline in Coronavirus-related news and content in later months could be due to increased public awareness about this unknown virus. In earlier months, as there was little or no public information about the virus, there was a high demand to know more about it and to learn the procedures for mitigating its impact; but gradually with raising awareness, the public anxiety (caused by a lack of awareness of transmission and the risks of being infected by the virus) was reduced. The national and international media coverage about the Coronavirus made people significantly aware of the virus and learn ways to prevent it, and thus manage their worries. In consequent, there was declining demand for more information about the Coronavirus. Furthermore, many of the news published on universities, such as medical advices and university regulations had consistent content and did not need to be repeated. In general, it can be said that the gradual normalization of life with the Coronavirus pandemic and the initial preparations for managing

this crisis may be marked as one of the main reasons for the decrease in Coronavirus-related news on the websites of both universities.

Commenting on the most frequent categories, the medical strategies (with 128 news), services (with 112 news), research strategies (with 66 news) and educational strategies (with 49 news) were the most frequent items at the University of Cape Town's website (the table below). More abundance in the medical sector was predictable, but more news in the service sector indicates the high determination of the university executive management to provide better conditions for students and staff in this hard time. The third and fourth highest frequencies are the research and educational strategies. To analyse lesser news coverage on education and research strategy, it can be said that in the shadow of pandemics and the rapid and global quarantine, educational issues have been marginalized to some extent because of medical necessities and emergency services. Another reason for the third and fourth place for research and education can be the fact that in these two universities, the infrastructures and the research and educational system were consistent with online learning and with these new changes, the educational system did not face many difficulties, although a detailed exploration of more news is necessary for clarifying that notion. The subsequent ranks are related to social responsibility of university (with 35 news), stress management (with 35 news), general affairs (with 30 news), university's vaccine approach (with 12 news), and students' initiatives (with 12 news) (see the Table 1). Considering the economic aspects of the Coronavirus and the economic involvement of all countries in the consequences of severe lock down policies, it can be forecasted that there would be more talks

on the most logical and most appropriate ways of managing the economic and social effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. According to the passive approach of South Africa in the manufacturing of national vaccines, little news coverage on this category was also predictable.

**Table 1.** University of Cape Town News Categories

	Main Categories	Total News Covered
<b>1</b>	<b>Medical Strategy</b>	<b>128</b>
2	Universities' Approach To Corona Vaccine	12
<b>3</b>	<b>Strategy Of Giving Different Services During Pandemy</b>	<b>112</b>
4	Educational Strategy	49
<b>5</b>	<b>Research Strategy</b>	<b>66</b>
6	Social Responsibility Mission	35
<b>7</b>	<b>Stress Management And Cultural Activities</b>	<b>35</b>
8	Student Initiatives To Fight Against Corona	12
<b>9</b>	<b>Appreciation Of Health Defenders</b>	<b>0</b>

Source: Authors' Data

Commenting on the most frequent categories on the University of Tehran's website, the first and most important category was social responsibility mission (with 267 news). The University of Tehran, as one of the major universities in the country, therefore paid the highest attention to its social mission, which was unpredictable. News related to medical centers affiliated with Tehran University of Medical Sciences (with 223 news), medical strategy (with 168 news), research strategy (with 119 news), and service strategy (with 86 news) were ranked second to fifth in



frequency (table below). A remarkable point in the most frequent news of the University of Tehran’s website was the inclusion of academic articles and research reports related to the Coronavirus pandemic in the list of the top topics. This can indicate the importance of research in resolving the Coronavirus pandemic crisis for the University of Tehran. The University of Tehran’s website’s emphasis on the manufacture of an Iranian vaccine (with 21 news) and students’ initiatives (with 19 news), which was approximately two times more than the University of Cape Town’s website) indicates the deeper commitment of the University of Tehran with a national mitigation strategy. News related to cultural affairs (with 70 news), general affairs (with 34 news), appreciation of the efforts of the medical staff (with 33 news), education strategy (with 23 news), vaccine manufacturing (with 21 news), student initiatives (with 19 news) were in the next ranks, respectively (see table 2).

**Table 2.** University of Tehran News Categories

	Main Categories	Total News Covered
<b>1</b>	<b>Medical Strategy</b>	<b>168</b>
2	Universities' Approach To Corona Vaccine	21
<b>3</b>	<b>Strategy Of Giving Different Services During Pandemy</b>	<b>86</b>
4	Educational Strategy	23
<b>5</b>	<b>Research Strategy</b>	<b>109</b>
6	Social Responsibility Mission	267
<b>7</b>	<b>Stress Management And Cultural Activities</b>	<b>70</b>
8	Student Initiatives To Fight Against Corona	19
<b>9</b>	<b>Appreciation Of Health Defenders</b>	<b>33</b>

Source: Authors’ Data

## 5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it should be noted that during the period under study in this paper, the website of both universities periodized medical and emergency services over other issues. This represents the importance of the wellbeing of the students and staff for both universities. This responsibility was more evident in Tehran University's website with its deeper commitment to its social missions and its contribution to vaccine manufacturing. Regarding the media strategy of these universities for reducing the negative consequences of Covid-19, it can be said that the University of Cape Town's website emphasized on reducing anxiety and aiding relaxation and the University of Tehran's website emphasized on increasing public awareness and warning against the dangers of being infected by the Coronavirus.

The communication strategy adopted by the website of the University of Cape Town was a combination of "supportive and ego-centered" strategy. By applying this strategy, it sought to provide the required information (supportive), but refused to publish its audiences' comments and feedbacks (ego-centered). In other words, in the vast majority of published content, there was no place for the audience to comment, and even if there was a comment, it was not published or released on the website. This website, in its ego-centered approach, however, tried to rely on students' updated experiences to provide attractive and intimate contents for its audiences. In this regard, the most released news and materials on this website were about students' experiences or their narratives of the Covid-19. By adopting a professional method (for example in releasing news, photography and graphics) these news and materials were published to draw their audiences' attention as much as possible.

The University of Tehran's website applied a "supportive and selective" strategy for releasing and reporting its news and materials. The main objective of this combined strategy (which the first part was similar to that of the University of Cape Town) was to provide more efficient news and information needed to manage the different dimensions of the Coronavirus. The University of Tehran's policy to fight the Coronavirus was in line with the principles and policies of the National Headquarter of the Corona Disease. Unlike the website of the University of Cape Town, there was a place to comment under news or materials published on the website of the University of Tehran. Accordingly, at the end of some news, the comments and opinions of audiences and users were published; Yet, the number of the published comments was rather limited and, the content of these comments were often in support of and approval of the website's policies. This indicates that the website's communication strategy seems to have been rather selective. The selective strategy adopted by the University of Tehran may best be explained by the website's attempt to prevent the spread of fake news. The public opinion in the Islamic Republic of Iran has always been targeted by many foreign news agencies and most recently in the case of the Coronavirus, pandemic they tried to distort the Coronavirus-related news in Iran (Kharazmi & Mohammadi, 2020, p. 1). The University of Tehran's websites (especially Tehran's University of Medical Sciences) as a governmental and official institution that has been the reference of many people in the community, had to make sure that its messages are conveyed with the utmost care and accuracy. Selective publication of user's comments and feedbacks might be due to the prevention of unreliable or false news. Perhaps this is the reason for which the University of Tehran's website avoided a conversational and interactive approach and adopted a selective approach.

Finally, it should be noted that the strength of Cape Town University's communication strategy was its focus on students' narratives and experiences, which can make the website's news more appealing. The significant point of the communication strategy adopted by the University of Tehran was its attention to its audiences' comments and feedbacks, which, of course, should be presented with more diversity and profusely. The attempt for making news coverage more attractive for having the trust of audiences in recounting their problems and concerns, would make media messages significantly more influential.

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