RESEARCHERS BOOTCAMP

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Education Researchers Respond to The COVID-19 Pandemic

RESEARCH REPORT

Theme 3:

The role of culture in alleviating the spread of COVID-19

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1. Background to JET's Research Bootcamp

Since January 2020 COVID-19 has menaced China and laid a path of destruction in Europe and North America while making inroads in the Middle East, South East Asia and a wide swathe of countries elsewhere around the globe. The onset of COVID-19 on the African continent is still reportedly small though statistics are probably underestimated. There is a window of opportunity for developing countries in Africa to further their preparation and to consider the tactical options for countering COVID-19.

JET Education Services initiated a Researchers' Bootcamp at the beginning of the lockdown in South Africa, and concluded it on 30 April 2020. The outputs produced by the Bootcamp are based on the contributions of more than 150 educational researchers, comprising a combination of seasoned local and international experts, government and university representatives, and a pool of volunteers from all parts of South Africa as well as a few currently based abroad in countries such as China, the United States, Japan, Ethiopia, Hungary and the Netherlands. A capacity building element is also included to allow novice researchers from various backgrounds seeking experience in the research field to meaningfully contribute.

This particular report has been compiled for Theme 3 of the Bootcamp, which explored the role that culture plays in alleviating the spread of COVID-19. The report, along with the other 11 themes' reports, represents a real-time contribution to influence and support the decisions of policy makers and funders at a time when evidence-based and agile decision-making is paramount. This document represents a work-in-progress, and as such, the research team welcomes contributions and comments on, and even active participation in, any of the 12 themes currently in motion.

We also know that this real-time contribution is very necessary, and while it may not be perfect, it will provide an invaluable reference point when important policy and funding decisions are being made, right now. This is also a time when quick fixes that are not solidly grounded may be put forward as silver bullets. The Bootcamp represents a collaborative effort from the education sector to mitigate this risk.

2. Introduction

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus. At least 180 countries across the globe have reported confirmed cases of COVID-19 with increasing numbers of deaths associated with the virus. The widespread nature of this infectious disease compelled individual countries to implement strategies that have been shown to produce positive results in contexts that are ahead of the fight, such as China and Italy.

Such strategies may not always fit across cultures neatly, especially when they are not adapted to fit the context of a particular country. Thus, it is important that we are cognisant of this when implementing strategies. As with any solution, we should learn from other contexts but avoid a cut-and-paste approach and be sensitive towards the cultural nuances that exist across countries.

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In the context of this research, culture is defined as the way of life, including the customs, beliefs, and traditions, of a particular group of people at a particular time. Culture also encompasses religion, food, art, fashion, language, patterns of work and leisure and social habits all learned through socialisation. Importantly, the education system in a country is representative of the prevailing culture in a specific context and entrenches a certain culture within society. Education systems are one of the crucial venues through which individuals engage society, and schools form avenues for cultural engagement as community institutions. Given the interconnected world that we live in, culture is a fluid concept that changes as our interactions progress.

Education in its broad form transcends formal learning activities and goes beyond formal schooling to include a plethora of extracurricular activities most of which are socio-cultural in nature. The advent of COVID-19 and associated containment measures adopted by governments across the globe has consequently affected the education sector in its diversity. Thus, learners, parents, educators and other stakeholders at basic and higher education levels of the education sector have been affected differently by COVID-19. Shay (2020) has argued that the entire global higher education sector is in trouble due to the pandemic, and this interpretation can be extended to basic education. In many contexts across the globe, especially in the developing world, including Africa and South Africa in particular, COVID-19 has exposed deeply entrenched legacies of inequalities in class fault lines within societies.

Itoro, Akpabio and Effiong (2020) have reported that, as part of widespread efforts to curb community spread of the pandemic, African cities and countries have instituted school closures and lockdowns. They argue that whilst virtual learning is being instituted by a few private schools, that have the capacity to do so, the majority of schools are not equipped to use online platforms for learning. They further report that many parents are struggling to 'home school' their children or cope with their repeated pleas to be allowed to participate in outdoor activities such as playing with friends or visiting relatives. Whilst this is said to largely explain the situation of children from the middle and upper classes, those from the lower end of society have faced challenges of food insecurity and hunger.

Reflecting on the inequalities prevailing in South Africa's higher education sector, particularly in relation to interventions such as the introduction of virtual learning, Shay (2020) also highlights the injustices of the past in terms of which students who have been left behind for decades now face diverse academic challenges. She argues that this is reflected in the issues of high dropout and low throughput rates especially among those from poor backgrounds. Such deep-seated inequalities have also been reported in the basic education sectors of other African countries such as Nigeria, where middle class schools, parents, teachers and learners, unlike most of their less privileged counterparts, are often able to transition to an online environment (Itoro, Akpabio and Effiong, 2020).

Shay (2020) nevertheless cautions against adopting a simple binary between the 'haves' and the 'have not's', or between privileged and underprivileged institutions and groups of learners. According to information received from some parents, learners across the class divide, in all countries, have suffered some form of social disruption, missing out as they have on various school-based, extra-mural and cultural activities and sports (such as soccer, 'bulletjie-rugby'- a programme of introducing rugby to children aged 6-12 years, cycling, playdates, singing in school and church choirs, and going out to socialise and eat). Apart from various proposed academic catch-up plans, the social distancing

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associated with COVID-19 means that learners and educators are set to return to totally transformed education spaces with new ways of interaction and learning.

Educationists need to pay attention to the aspect of school closures since the COVID-19 crisis has severely curtailed the previously held vantage position of schools being structures or spaces through which vital information could be transmitted to learners and communities in which the schools are located.

Society is defined as people who share a community and culture and may also contain many subcultures, that is, smaller groups of people with shared identities, values and beliefs within a larger culture. While Little (2014) cautions against seeing culture and society as the same thing, Itulua-Abumere (2013) explains that there are close connections between the two concepts:

> *a society is a system of interrelationships which connects individuals together. All societies are united by the fact that their members are organised in structured social relationships according to a unique culture. No cultures could exist without societies. But equally, no society could exist without culture* (Itulua-Abumere, 2013).

Societies are thus made up of people with different cultures, but which all culminate into one larger collective who have a shared set of values, norms, beliefs and practices. Throughout history epidemics that have killed millions of people have important social impacts which in turn influence and shape culture.

This research is interested in understanding the following: What role has culture played in affecting responses to the crisis by both governments and the governed? How have cultural practices been adapted in response to the spread of the pandemic? What means and avenues were leveraged to initiate social responses?

To answer these questions, the theoretical frameworks that will be adopted are those of structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism as well as individualism and collectivism. Each of these theories and the framework that they provide for this research is laid out in the following section.

3. Framework and Fundamental Concepts

3.1 Structural functionalism

The Parsonian theory of structural functionalism construes society in terms of interrelationships between institutions ranging from government and related structures to families and religious and social practices. Structural functionalism is useful for a study of this nature in that its macro focus approaches culture from a holistic perspective, with norms and values seen as interconnected and working together for the development of society. The social structure is made up of different, functionally interrelated elements, and relationships between members of society are governed by a set of rules, with values providing general guidelines for behaviour in terms of roles and norms (Little, 2014).

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As Archibong (2016) explains, society in this view is the sum total of social relationships governed by norms. Accordingly, in this research, institutions understood to have interconnected roles include: the political system, where governance is located; the health system, which deals with the medical aspects of the pandemic; the education system, which includes the conventional means of acquiring education within the school system, research and innovation in higher education institutions as well as informal channels of learning or means of sourcing information; and the family and religious systems where social and cultural practices are embedded.

3.2 Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory which focuses on interpreting people's experiential realities in both the natural and symbolic environment. In contrast to the macro-level institutional and social structural focus of structural functionalism, which emphasises how institutions and structures act upon and often constrain individuals and define their societal obligations, symbolic Interactionism adopts a micro-level focus. It seeks to understand how society is shaped and maintained through a repetition of interactions among individuals. "Central to symbolic interactionist thought is the idea that individuals use language and significant symbols in their communication with others"; on this basis, symbolic interactionists focus on "the interpretation of subjective viewpoints and how individuals make sense of their world from their unique perspective", and hence are concerned primarily with "subjective meaning – how repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals come to define the makeup of 'society'" (Carter and Fuller, 2015: 1).

For ease of understanding and application, this research will be guided by the four main tenets of Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism, as presented by Carter and Fuller (2015: 1-2). These can also be linked to the visualisation figure adapted from Redmond (2015), presented below.

The four tenets are as follows:

> *(1) individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them; (2) interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings; (3) meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society; and (4) meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others* (Blumer, 1969, as cited in Carter and Fuller, 2015: 1-2).

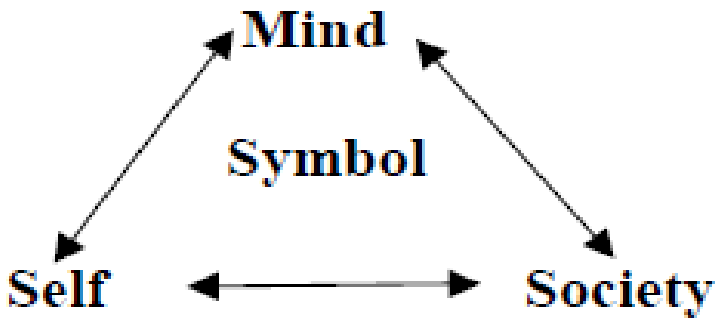

Figure 1: Visualisation of the Symbolic Interactionist Theory (adapted from Redmond, 2015)

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As highlighted by Figure 1, the presence of symbols is crucial for the existence of societies, individual persons and their minds. Moreover, "[b]ehavior is simply an actor's idiosyncratic way of reacting to an interpretation of a situation. It is therefore not to be examined or predicted from antecedent knowledge about how actors generally respond to given situations. This is impossible since each encounter is different from others (and therefore unique)" (Carter and Fuller, 2015: 2). This therefore implies that understanding social behaviour requires an interpretive approach that acknowledges the freedom endowed to an agent's role in society (Carter and Fuller, 2015: 2). Such a framework ought to aim to understand issues from a position that appreciates the uniqueness, unpredictability and fluidity of every social encounter (Carter and Fuller, 2015: 2).

While bearing in mind the macro perspective provided by structural functionalism, this research largely uses a symbolic interactionist vantage point to understand how culture has influenced measures taken to prevent COVID-19 in the identified countries. This vantage point enables an understanding of both the challenges and the opportunities that have been created by cultural practices; it permits the exploration of how cultural practices have themselves been adapted by different societies in response to the spread of the pandemic; and it promotes reflection on the means and avenues that have influenced cultural practices and responses.

4. Methodology

The Bootcamp commenced on 26 March and concluded on 30 April 2020. This gave the research team just over a month to complete the study. A qualitative case study approach was adopted, and five culturally diverse countries and societies were examined: Japan, Iran, South Africa, Italy and the USA. Particular emphasis was placed on the avenues leveraged in these societies to generate social and cultural change. The different challenges faced by political and social structures in response to the pandemic were investigated, as well as the means through which these challenges were mitigated.

The choice of countries was influenced by the following factors:

- Japan is an interesting study in culture because essentially the Japanese practice "social distancing" all the time - no handshakes, washing hands three times as often as in western cultures, wearing masks when feeling ill, and using sanitisers at supermarkets even before the pandemic (Powell and Cabello, 2019).
- Iran was chosen as an example of a non-secular government which can give particular insight into how culture interacts with governance.
- The USA is a highly individualistic society and its culture and development could be quite different to other contexts.
- South Africa is an example of a multicultural developing nation with unique risk factors (such as the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis), apart from being highly unequal given its history of apartheid.
- Italy provides a good example of a western democratic culture that is more collectivist in nature, given that family is a central aspect of their culture (Glover and Gibson, 2017). The different regions (north and south) of the country might also bring up cultural distinctions that will be of interest: the north is more industrial, modern and wealthy, while the south struggles with a 40%

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unemployment rate (Glover and Gibson, 2017). The rapid pace at which the disease has spread through Italy despite strong measures being put in place raises the issue of the role of culture in Italy's struggle to flatten the curve.

The research team (Appendix A) comprised of a thematic lead, a co-lead, ten researchers, two peer reviewers and a sociologist/anthropologist at the University of Johannesburg who served as a culture expert on the team.

Two researchers were assigned to each country, first profiling its political, health and labour systems and then exploring its social, cultural and religious practices. This was followed by examining the country's coronavirus response, with specific attention given to government measures aimed at altering cultural and societal practices in order to curb the spread of the disease, and also broader cultural responses, by examining popular social media and blog posts, political cartoons and op-ed articles.

Given the online nature of the Bootcamp, the study was limited to desktop research. Sources included but were not limited to academic journal articles, books, published reports and working papers; government websites; online newspapers; COVID-19 education and awareness materials; social media (including prominent Twitter hashtags, memes and widely shared posts on Facebook and Instagram); blog posts; op-ed articles; and political cartoons.

Regular communication with the research team was maintained via a number of remote platforms. Team meetings took place via Google Hangouts, with a total of five meetings being held using this online facility. To further aid open communication, a WhatsApp group was set up in which various resources were shared, updates on progress were provided and challenges faced by researchers were addressed. Furthermore, each country report was populated in a Google Doc to which the thematic lead, co-lead and peer reviewers had access and on which they regularly commented and edited. This final report is the consolidation of findings across the countries and was jointly written by the theme lead, co-lead, culture expert, and a number of the researchers who had worked on the country reports.

5. Findings

5.1 COVID-19 timeline

Table 1: COVID-19 country timelines.

	Country				
	Japan	Iran	Italy	South Africa	United States of America
First case	16/01/2020	19/02/2020	31/01/2020	05/03/2020	20/01/2020
First death	13/02/2020	19/02/2020	22/02/2020	27/03/2020	6/02/2020
Total cases*	16 285	120 198	225 435	15 515	1 527 664

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	Country				
	Japan	Iran	Italy	South Africa	United States of America
Total active cases*	4 388	18 746	68 351	8 245	1 090 297
Total recovered cases*	11 153	94 464	125 176	7 006	346 389
Total deaths*	744	6 988	31 908	264	90 978
State of emergency/ disaster declared	07/04/2020 16/04/2020[1] (countrywide)		31/01/2020	15/03/2020 (state of disaster[2])	13/03/2020 (national emergency)
Lockdown declared		04/04/2020	09/03/2020	27/03/2020	

* Source: Worldometers, 2020.

5.2 Country snapshots

5.2.1 Key country statistics

Table 2: Key country statistics

	Country				
	Japan	Iran	Italy	South Africa	United States of America
Population*	126.5 Million	82.9Million	60.4 Million	57.78 Million	328.2 Million
Political system	Democratic constitutional monarchy[3]	Theocracy and presidential democracy[4]	Democratic republic[5]	Constitutional democracy[6]	Constitutional democracy[7]

[1] Legislation restricted the central government in Japan from declaring a nationwide state of emergency earlier, hence some prefectures declared a state of emergency on 7 April 2020 (Sugiyama, 2020).
[2] A state of disaster is still subject to the principles of a constitutional state and the rule of law. In a state of emergency, state officials may disregard constitutional rights (Alberts, 2020).
[3] Neely C. (2020) The Japanese Political System. *Japan Industry News*. Retrieved from: https://www.japanindustrynews.com/2016/06/japanese-political-system/
[4] Rose M. (2020) The political system of Iran. Our Politics. Retrieved from: https://ourpolitics.net/the-political-system-of-iran/

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	Country				
	Japan	Iran	Italy	South Africa	United States of America
Average life expectancy (years)*	84	76	83	63	78
Total expenditure on health as % of GDP*	10.9	8.1	8.9	8.1	17.1
Average hours worked/week	40	44	40	45	40
Minimum wage/annum[8]	11 254 USD	6700 USD	Not fixed	2 471 USD	15 080 USD
Major religions	Buddhism and Shintoism	Shi'a and Sunni Islam	Christianity	Christianity, tribal, ancestral	Christianity
Average no. of people per household[9]	2	4	3	3	3

* Source: UN Data (http://data.un.org/en/index.html)

5.2.2 Culture, society and government response to COVID-19

The following section provides a summary of each country outlining the major elements of culture, that is, what culture and society looks like in each country, including some of the main challenges facing the leadership in each country as this would shape society as well as the unique cultural practices. Furthermore, an explanation of how different governments responded to COVID-19 in their countries, as well as what measures were put in place to curb the spread of the disease.

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[9] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). Household size and composition around the world 2017 – Data Booklet (ST/ESA/SER.A/405).

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Japan

Japan reported its first case of coronavirus on 16 January 2020 and its first death on 13 February 2020. As of 1 May 2020, Japan's total number of confirmed coronavirus cases stands at 14 311 with 3 466 recoveries (or 24% of total cases) and 455 deaths (Worldometers, 2020). Japan has a long standing mask-wearing culture that pre-dates the current pandemic. It is both accepted and encouraged to wear a mask when one is unwell or to avoid becoming sick in Japan (WHO, 2020). The earliest initiative taken by the government of Japan to limit the spread of COVID-19 was on 27 February 2020, when Prime Minister Abe called for the closure of all elementary, junior high and high schools (Society, 2020). Unfortunately, the majority of businesses, bars and restaurants remained open, regardless of advice from the government. However, major Japanese companies such as Toyota, Nissan and Honda began to ask staff to work from home (Denyer, 2020).

Japan's government reinforced the need to practice self-restraint and for citizens to avoid going out for unnecessary reasons, by 'requesting' the limitation of activities such as karaoke and visiting bars, clubs, restaurants and movie theatres. Japan's use of the term 'request' is closer to the term 'demand', meaning that a high expectation of compliance is attached; however, no legal penalties are in place for disobeying these directives (Kantei, 2020). Japanese are known for their compliance culture, and show a reluctance to openly defy or question authority; at the same time, after-work drinking is a common part of the Japanese work culture and seen as a way of climbing the corporate ladder. Businesses that adapt to and permit remote work will help ease the Japanese mindset that one ought to show up in person for work, stay in one's office and put in overtime to show one's dedication. Japan's Government Pandemic Prevention Response statement does not explicitly call for residents to practise self-restraint by not going to work, but prefectures are urged to strongly promote teleworking. The government offered grants of up to $77 000 to help small and medium sized companies set up teleworking (Sugiyama, 2020).

The Japanese government supports the healthcare sector by increasing worker awareness and protection throughout the pandemic. Healthcare workers are encouraged to wear masks, wash and disinfect hands regularly, disinfect shared facilities, maintain social distance when eating or drinking, track their health daily and stay home if their physical condition is not perfect (Kantei, 2020). The Japanese government declared a one-month state of emergency on 7 April 2020 (McCurry, 2020).

Japan has been criticised for waiting too long to take strict measures against the virus. In a survey of 140 leading firms in Japan, around half of the businesses said that they had switched to teleworking partially or completely (Takeshita, 2020). As part of the economic stimulus, six trillion Yen in direct cash payments will help better the economy. In addition, three million Yen in cash will be given to each household whose income has decreased (Kyodo News, 2020). Prime Minister Abe further announced an expansion of the plan to give stimulus funds of 100 000 Yen ($930) to each of the 120 million citizens of Japan (Booker, 2020). Japan's strongly health-conscious culture and highly compliant citizens have helped reduce the transmission and spread of COVID-19 (Sugiyama and Johnston, 2020).

Iran

Up to 89% of Iran's population are Shi'a Muslims, with another 10% being Sunni Muslims, and the remainder being Christian, Zoroastrian, Baha'i or Jewish. Islam and its prescribed codes of behaviour

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thus deeply influences Iranians (Price, 2001). Iranians' loyalty and cohesiveness towards family and close friends are distinguishing features of their culture (Adams, 1973). Although conservative Muslims avoid shaking hands or kissing unrelated individuals from the opposite sex, it is otherwise normal practice for individuals of the same sex to greet each other by kissing on both cheeks, and holding and hugging each other, whether they are relatives or not (Price, 2001).

Iran reported its first cases of the virus in the form of an announcement of the resulting two deaths, on 19 February 2020. The outbreak of COVID-19 caused massive panic among government officials and in religious communities and industry. At the onset of the pandemic, the Washington Post (2020) described the situation in Iran as a "different and worrying scenario: a government in denial, a people cynical and distrustful and a burgeoning infection". The Iranian authorities initially denied that there was a coronavirus outbreak in the city of Qom but later had to confirm this. Their silence around the virus was out of fear of unsettling people ahead of the parliamentary elections, which were subsequently postponed (Behravesh, 2020).

Iran was one of the first countries outside of China to see an exponential increase in the number of coronavirus cases. The pandemic and its control has since become a top priority for the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MHME). Iran formed the National Committee to Combat Corona and has decided to control the infection using all the resources of the country, especially knowledge, equipment and skilled personnel. The MHME has initiated actions to combat the disease, including raising awareness , recommending protective measures proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO), practising social distancing, closing schools and restricting movement, amongst others (Duddu, 2020).

Due to sanctions imposed by the US which disallowed access to test kits and drug imports, Iran did not immediately start rapid testing for the coronavirus following the first suspected cases in the country (Murphy et al, 2020). The rapid increase of cases and deaths led the Iranian government to strengthen measures to limit further transmission and control the situation: tourist spots and other places attracting large crowds, such as museums, mosques and other places of worship, palaces and historical places, had their operating hours restricted. The Central Bank of Iran approved a $5 billion emergency fund, to provide cheap loans to businesses impacted by the coronavirus outbreak (Duddu, 2020).

Iran is working closely with the WHO COVID-19 Incident Management Team in providing support to strengthen technical and operational networking and collaboration, and support operational coordination of the global response (WHO, 2020). To strengthen day-to-day operations, key agencies are embedded in the global team, including UNICEF, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The major partner coordination mechanisms are the Emergency Medical Team (EMT) Initiative, the Global Health Cluster (GHC) and the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), which includes technical agencies, major NGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International, United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the IFRC and other international organizations. On 1 May 2020, the total number of confirmed cases for COVID-19 in Iran stood at 94 640 with 75 103 recoveries and 6 028 deaths. The recovery rate for Iran stands at 79% (Zandifar et al, 2020). The virus has plunged the country into its biggest crisis since its war with Iraq. Iran's economy has suffered under the strain of sanctions and this

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has limited its government's ability to purchase essential medical equipment and supplies (Vakil, 2020). The recovery rate against the coronavirus in Iran can be attributed to high compliance by citizens with social protocols instituted to avoid the spread of the disease.

Italy

The first case of coronavirus in Italy was reported on 31 January 2020, and the first death on 22 February 2020. On 1 May the total number of confirmed cases stood at 205 463, of which 75 945 had recovered and 27 967 had died. Italy has a recovery rate of 37% (Worldometers, 2020). Italy has the third highest number of infections after the US and Spain. On 31 January 2020, Italy suspended flights to China and declared a national emergency after two cases were confirmed in Rome (BBC, 2020a). On 21 February, strict proactive measures such as closing of restaurants and cafes were put in place, while local health authorities traced and quarantined the contacts of all patients who tested positive for the virus. On 10 March 2020, the Italian government imposed a national lockdown (BBC, 2020a). This stopped people from leaving their homes except to go to work, shop for food or necessities, exercise or walk dogs for brief periods, and perform essential tasks like caring for an elderly relative.

In Italy there is an active joint force of government, society and businesses to limit the spread of the virus in the country. The Regional Health System, Local Health Authorities (ATS: Agenzia di Tutela della Salute), the Lombardy Reference Virology laboratories and the National Health Institute (ISS: Istituto Superiore della Sanità) collaborated to introduce coordinated actions to limit the spread of the infection. These actions include isolation of cases, contact tracing, intensive testing and the definition of a "red" quarantined area around the most affected towns.

Family underpins the Italian culture and legislation and regulations have always been supportive of family ties (Glover and Gibson, 2017). Three-adult living arrangements are very common due to the presence of an adult child or a grandparent living at home (Gianesini, 2014). A study found that in 2005, 82% of Italian men between the ages of eighteen and thirty were still living with their parents (Alesina and Giuliano, 2007). Italy's strong family culture also has an effect on the health care system: Italians spend less money than any other European country on day care, geriatric care and hospital care because people in need are regularly cared for by family members (Glover and Gibson, 2017). Italy is officially a secular state; however, its religious and social landscape is influenced by the Roman Catholic tradition (Nina, 2016).

Social distancing measures have restricted or prevented ordinary socialising activities such as going to church or comforting friends and family during times of bereavement. Due to the pandemic, as the elderly lie sick, safety measures prevent their families from being able to see them (Pietromarchi, 2020a), while public funerals are outlawed under current emergency legislation.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced that his government has spent some 25 billion Euro ($28.3 billion) on stimulus measures to shield the economy from what is Europe's worst outbreak of the coronavirus (Ellyatt et al, 2020). These funds are to help workers faced with temporary layoffs, boost a guaranteed fund for loans to small- and medium-sized companies, compensate firms whose turnover has plunged more than 25% and provide some form of moratorium for business and personal mortgage repayments (Follain et al, 2020).

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Notwithstanding all these measures disrupting social and cultural practices, Italy was unable to flatten the curve or even to slow down the infection rate (Pietromarchi, 2020b). The country's greatest strength, their united families, are now seen as their biggest weakness during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bocchi, 2020). Italy is a country known to value extended families living together, and grandparents are considered to be the backbone of the family; as a result it was very easy for an asymptomatic coronavirus child to pass the disease on to its vulnerable grandparent (Bocchi, 2020). This has seriously burdened the healthcare system. However, some initiatives have shown elements of success with regard to changing cultural practices: according to the ECDC (2020), social distancing has received spontaneous mutual support and has also promoted social solidarity among citizens.

South Africa

South Africa reported its first case of the virus on 5 March 2020 and reported the first death 22 days later on 27 March 2020. As of 1 May the total number of confirmed cases stood at 5 647, with recoveries at 2 073 and reported deaths at 103 (Worldometers, 2020). The recovery rate for South Africa is 37%. South Africa has the highest rate of reported cases in Africa.[10] On 23 March 2020 President Ramaphosa announced a 21-day lockdown, starting from 26 March and later extended until the end of April, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown has been enforced by the South African Defence Force and South African Police Service. According to Wasserman et al (2020), South Africa's lockdown has been one of the world's strictest, banning alcohol sales and all forms of outside activity including dog-walking and outdoor exercise. Exemptions were given to services categorised as essential; these include the distribution and supply of food and basic goods, essential banking services and laboratory services, amongst others.

In addition, most ports of entry were closed and citizens and residents arriving from high-risk countries were being placed under quarantine for 14 days. The government deployed 10 000 Community Health Care Workers on a door-to-door screening campaign in vulnerable communities. Social distancing was reinforced by the government through social and mass media. Private corporations and civil society organisations such as the Tiger Brands Foundation, the Gift of the Givers Foundation and Massmart have been assisting with food parcels. All types of social assistance grants were increased for a period of six months starting from the official lockdown. President Ramaphosa also launched the Solidarity Fund, a platform for the general public, civil society and the public and private sectors to contribute to the consolidated effort to fund various initiatives to ease the social and economic burden related to the pandemic. The Solidarity Fund works closely with government and business, but it is independent of both of them.[11]

[10] https://africanarguments.org/2020/04/30/coronavirus-in-africa-tracker-how-many-cases-and-where-latest/
[11] https://www.solidarityfund.co.za/about.html

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Figure 2: Solidarity Fund contributions as at 28 April 2020 (Source: Solidarity Fund website)

South Africa, with its diverse and multi-ethnic culture, is affectionately called the "Rainbow Nation", but it also has a substantial number of largely impoverished urban, peri-urban and rural communities. South Africa has a number of religions which include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, traditional African religions and Judaism. Greeting by shaking hands is a cultural norm. Although the crossing of provincial boundaries was prohibited except for essential services, this rule was later amended to allow travel to other provinces for purposes of attending immediate family funerals that should not exceed 50 attendees (Nicolson, 2020).

President Ramaphosa more recently unveiled a R500 billion Economic Stimulus Package, which amounts to 10% of the country's GDP. The South African Reserve Bank (SARB) has cut the repo rate by 200 basis points, in effect unlocking at least R80 billion in the real economy.[12] Despite South Africa having the highest number of reported cases of COVID-19 in Africa, social interventions by the government and citizens are starting to bear fruit. The daily reported number of cases has been declining,[13] raising hopes that the proposed easing of lockdown restrictions from 1 May won't result in a spike of reported cases.

United States

As of 1 May the reported cases of COVID-19 infections in the US stood at 1 070 032, with 155 737 having recovered and 63 871 dead (Worldometers, 2020). The recovery rate is 15%, and the US now has the highest number of reported cases and deaths in the world. The US also has the highest number of

[12] https://www.forbesafrica.com/current-affairs/2020/04/21/coronavirus-south-africa-announces-r500-billion-economic-stimulus/
[13] https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6

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COVID-19 tests (6 231 182) (CSSE, 2020). American values are based on individualism, privacy, equality, liberty, self-government and time (Youth Voices, 2017). It is a society in which an individual's needs outweigh those of the group and every individual feels entitled to a high degree of self-determination (Hyun, 2020). Based on the premise of "personal liberty" there has been some resistance to implementing social distancing (US News, 2020).

The US COVID-19 interventions have very high government, private sector and Institutions of Higher Learning participation (Washington Post, 2020). The US government response so far has not produced the intended results at a national level. That being said, it is important to note that the US has 50 state governments, as well as a varied number of churches, civic associations, businesses and other groupings, which brings variegated responses and results to the pandemic which is clearly having a considerable impact (Burke, 2020). A notable response by the government with considerable participation from the private sector and civil society is the US Department of Energy and IBM collaboration to increase the speed at which the Department could analyse drug compounds that could be used to address coronavirus. Another response is the COVID-19 Open Research Dataset, initiated by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, the Allen Institute for AI, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology, Microsoft, and the National Library of Medicine (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2020).

Facing shortages in medical supplies such as medical masks, ventilators, gloves, testing swabs and other essential equipment, President Trump finally deployed the Defense Act to compel manufacturers to support ventilator production, thus boosting the supply of much needed protective gear for health professionals on the front lines of the crisis in hospitals, stores and testing centres (Dzhanova, 2020). President Trump has unveiled guidelines with specific criteria for "Opening Up America Again", in three phases, based on the advice of public health experts. These guidelines will help state and local officials when reopening their economies and getting people back to work, while continuing to protect lives (White House, 2020; Dutta, 2020).

5.3 Shifting sociocultural practices

Business, lifestyle, cultural and family practices, interpersonal interactions and religious practices have changed in response to the virus. The sections below explore what these changes are and how they may have contributed to the success or lack thereof of the government measures put in place to curb the virus.

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 many governments put in place restrictions on movement of their citizens except for those deemed essential workers. The restrictions included limiting the number of people who are allowed to gather for events, or travelling in order to go to school or work. In actual fact life as we have known it has changed to what some have termed the "new normal" (Duncan, 2020). What is significant in all countries is the increased level of communication by the government to its citizens in announcing any changes in the laws governing the country during this time and to reassure citizens that the government is doing the best to stop the spread of the virus. Some countries have gone as far as inviting the public to comment on proposed restrictions before they are put into law. In the USA the National Coronavirus Recovery Commission was formed in April. The Commission requested

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submissions from citizens to help it formulate recommendations that governments, businesses and civil society could use to combat both the health and economic effects of COVID-19. To enable citizen participation and dissemination of correct information governments have relied on the use of television, radio, social media and other digital platforms. The Iranian Society of Radiology COVID-19 Consultant Group (ISRCC), for instance, has created educational videos regarding the radiologic features of the novel COVID-19-infected pneumonia (NCIP) based on current articles and proven cases in Iran (Mahdavi et al, 2020). These videos have been widely distributed through social media and medical-related websites, providing easy and fast access for all physicians, particularly radiologists, and have received more than 100 000 views on social networks so far (Mahdavi et al, 2020). Similarly, in South Africa, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (MAC-COVID 19) was formally established on 25 March 2020 and aims to assist the Minister of Health by providing guidance on critical health issues. The committee comprises 50 experts who work together to bring the Minister scientific evidence and experience. South Africa also has a dedicated online resources and news portal for COVID-19 in the form of a website, as well as a dedicated WhatsApp Support Line which provides critical information on the novel coronavirus, thus minimising the spread of misinformation.

5.3.1 Business life

The Japanese government has not asked businesses to close but has requested that strict health regulations be put in place at business places and that citizens limit unnecessary activities. In other countries like South Africa, Italy and Iran (albeit briefly), businesses have been asked to close, except for those providing essential services such as food or medical supplies. The rest have been encouraged to operate virtually where possible. In Italy this is not a problem; most people continue doing their work remotely at home and there are no challenges of access to technology devices or data/WiFi, with up to 90% of Italian households having access to fast broadband (European Commission, 2019). However, in developing nations such as South Africa many people who work in the informal sector have not been able to continue with business as usual and those who can work from home face high data costs. In Japan it has been said that employers can gain a competitive advantage by being able to hire talented workers who might otherwise not have joined the labour market such as women raising small children and people with disabilities and who might have innovative business ideas (Sekiguchi, 2020). South Africa on the other hand has experienced the opposite of this as many people face the possibility of either being retrenched, losing their jobs, not receiving their salaries or receiving half payment. The Premier of Gauteng (South Africa's economic hub), David Makhura, said that "at best the province is predicting about 250,000 jobs … are likely to be shed. At worst half-a-million jobs will be shed" (Zama, 2020). The county as a whole expects to lose about one million jobs due to COVID-19 (Omarjee, 2020). People who are likely to be affected are those who do not offer essential services and who are not able to continue working from home. Many small businesses are also likely to close down.

5.3.2 Lifestyle

Restrictions on movement also affect ordinary everyday routines. These include visiting family, hosting celebratory events or participating in religious activities. In Italy some residents tried to keep their normal activities, such as hosting a happy hour, but this is now done virtually. New activities include balcony communications, such as the clapping of hands at 12:00 each day for healthcare workers who

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are on the frontline of the pandemic (Hindustan Times, 2020), and online concerts from celebrities in their homes (Savage, 2020). In Japan, entertainment venues have no doubt seen a drastic decrease in activity yet they are still allowed to stay open without penalty from the government.

One of the requirements of lockdown has been to practice social distancing by staying at home and trying to self-isolate if any signs of infection appear. In South Africa this has been a particular challenge for communities living in small shacks in informal and overcrowded settlements. Such communities also have difficulty meeting the required hygiene standards, in that they often lack proper sanitation, clean water, soap or hand sanitizers and disinfectants. The pandemic has exacerbated these and other inequalities in a country where the vast majority of people live below the poverty line. Poor people, having no other means of making a living, are left feeling vulnerable; and some have refused testing or isolation. For example, residents of the Setjwetla informal settlement in Alexandra were reported as saying that they were prepared to disobey the government's testing and treatment efforts: despite having a fellow community member test positive, one resident was recorded as saying, “I am not going anywhere, positive or negative. I have a small child who I have to look after and who will look after him if I am taken away” (Seleka, 2020). Other people may refuse to be tested because they fear being taken to isolation, or dying and being cremated rather than having their bodies returned to their families to be buried according to their cultural customs. In the US, President Trump has shown support for protestors who are calling for the opening of their state economies and the easing of social distancing restrictions (Shear and Mervosh, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020).

Restrictions of right of movement and business operations had a negative impact on the economies of all countries studied, with some countries having applied for loans to the International Monetary Fund and relying on donations made by businesses and individuals. The Iranian government has applied for a loan because international sanctions are hindering its ability to cope with the situation; for the first time in 60 years Iran has asked for a loan ($5 billion) from the IMF (Zabeh, 2020). The Iranian government has also invited NGOs to cooperate in managing the crisis alongside the Coronavirus committee. Institutions like the Mostazafan Foundation are helping by setting up a 50 000 000 000 Iranian Rial fund to provide protective equipment for persons in need; it also announced, on 16 March, that it will give one million tomans (around €66) to 4 000 street vendors in the south of Tehran (Zabeh, 2020).

There has been a great response by communities globally, through both monetary and food donations to help support those who are in need. In South Africa some organisations provide food parcels to vulnerable citizens across the country to ensure people stay at home. The South African government under the auspices of the Department of Social Development provides social relief of distress during the lockdown period to households in need. Governments have also been using crowdfunding platforms; and in South Africa the government launched the Solidarity Fund where individuals and businesses have donated R2.6 billion so far (Forbes Africa, 2020). Members of the cabinet each donated 33% of their salaries while business people such as the Motsepe Foundation and the Oppenheimer and Rupert families each donated R1 billion. Ordinary citizens have also donated towards the fund. To encourage further donations the government has announced that all donations will qualify for tax deduction. Giving to the needy is not foreign to the South African community that is knitted by the spirit of Ubuntu, which means “I am because we are”. Taking care of the population at large, making sure the whole population works together with government to stop the spread of the virus, has been the direction

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taken by the government during this time, with a public healthcare system structured for all citizens to receive attention and care at no cost. However, countries like the USA, which are more individualistic (Rosenbaum, 2018), have been hit hard by the virus because their approach failed to acknowledge that the response to the pandemic needs to be collective, orientated more towards the concept of community-centred care (Nacoti et al, 2020). These scholars argue further that the solution to the pandemic requires a whole population intervention, not a more limited healthcare system or hospitals only intervention.

The extension of support by communities has not been limited to giving money and food but has extended to how people behave during this period. Many have been encouraging people to stay at home, emphasising that staying at home is not only for individual benefit but also for the benefit of others such as the elderly who have been identified as the most vulnerable group during the pandemic. Japanese culture, for example, respects its elders and has a collective approach to the support of the group and the whole. Care homes have been taking extreme measures to protect the elderly from COVID-19 infection: care workers in Wayoen, a home for the elderly, were instructed to wear masks, take their temperature readings, wash their hands and gargle while on duty, to avoid bringing the virus in to the elderly. Humidifiers and alcohol disinfectant have been installed across the home, and staff were also encouraged to avoid crowds (Jiji, 2020).

In some countries, lifestyle changes have included the wearing of face masks. In Japan, wearing of masks was already widely practised and accepted, when one is ill or wishes not to get ill and for protection against pollution (MacIntyre and Chughtai, 2018). The Japanese government has further encouraged this behaviour through the initiative to deliver two face masks to each household (Society, 2020); and innovative businesses have come on board by designing a new recyclable mask (Christophe, 2020).

Across the globe, schools were among the first institutions to be closed, in part because parents feared for their children but also because schools have large populations and the gathering of large numbers of people was prohibited. There has been rising concern among parents in South Africa who feel that their children should not return to school until either there is a cure or the numbers of new infections are low (May, 2020). On the other hand there are worries about the possible loss of the academic year, since parents largely lack the skills, time, resources and conducive circumstances to teach their children themselves while at home. E-learning is being introduced or expanded (for example, in South Africa, through a partnership between the Department of Basic Education and the SABC), but this does not always benefit poorer and more rural communities.

In South Africa, several universities have introduced online lectures and classes for their students, although some institutions have not been in a position to do so (Shay, 2020). Students, many of whom are from poor socio-economic backgrounds and lack access to the internet and other resources, have been provided with data (30GB), USBs, printed materials, zero-rated (or free to access) educational websites and smart devices to help them access learning resources and lessons (Friedman, 2020).

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5.3.3 Religious, cultural and family practices

Churches, mosques, temples and synagogues had to be closed, although some citizens felt that the government could not limit their religious practices. In Italy, for example, Pope Francis voiced displeasure over the closure of churches in March 2020, stating that 'drastic measures are not always good', which led to the reopening of churches at a time when Italy's death toll had passed 1 000 (Times Live, 2020). Other churches have moved their services to online platforms. Churches in South Africa convened special sermons to raise awareness about COVID-19 amongst their congregants.

Iran was the first country to ban Friday prayers, on 4 March, while Turkey and Indonesia continued with prayers but coupled them with social distancing (Ozalp, 2020). The closure of places of worship has not been achieved without challenges: following the Iranian announcement, protests erupted with worshippers chanting objections (Sherwood, 2020). The Hashem (2020) argues that the decision presented a challenge to the government because shrines are engraved on Iranians' collective cultural identity. According to Hashem (2020), "closing cities and locking down the country isn't as sensitive as the closing of shrines in a country [like Iran] where relations between the general public and rituals have greater cultural than religious importance". Resistance to such restrictions was seen in South Africa as well, when a court application was made to declare unconstitutional the regulations closing down places of worship (Jeewa, 2020).

One aspect of coronavirus prevention that comes naturally to Muslims is personal hygiene. The Quran instructs Muslims to maintain cleanliness: "God loves those who are clean"; and to the extent that Muslims practice Islamic cleanliness rituals and pray more often, their religion may help them survive the virus both physically and mentally (Ozalp, 2020). Nevertheless, common Muslim practices such as visiting the sick and holding gatherings of extended families, not to mention shaking hands and hugging (those of the same gender), are not allowed during this time of COVID-19; instead, people are encouraged to check up on the sick using phone calls, messages and social media (Ozalp, 2020).

Limitations were also placed on funeral services. In South Africa the number of people permitted to attend a funeral was limited to 50, with the service expected to last only an hour; common practices such as the viewing of the body and the dressing of the deceased at the mortuary were cancelled. Among some African communities, it had been normal practice to visit the bereaved family throughout the week leading up to the day of the funeral, and to host evening prayers to comfort them; on the day itself the immediate and extended family as well as neighbours, colleagues and church members would attend, and the service might take hours, including time spent in the family home viewing the body (PowerFM, 2017). To stop the spread of COVID-19, citizens worldwide have been asked to keep a distance of 1.8 meters between each other, also known as social distancing (Worldometers, 2020). This, along with injunctions to avoid physical contact and keep hands clean, has been a challenge for some people with disabilities, their families and care givers. Moreover, it is difficult for people living in households of three or more people to practice social distancing, so that if one member contracts the virus the rest of the household is at high risk of being infected. This is often the case in South Africa's townships, where families of five or more may share a single room with no running water or proper toilets (Harding, 2020).

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Governments have encouraged those who can work from home to continue to do so. Parents of school-going children have nevertheless found this very challenging, even for parents who have been working from home for years. Some parents have opted to start their work early in the morning before everyone gets up, while others have opted to work shifts so that there is always a parent present to take care of the children (Homayoun, 2020). Homes are also not designed to be classrooms or offices and it can be difficult sharing space when everyone has to work from home; back and neck aches also attend the lack of appropriate furniture for working at home (Churchill, 2020).

6. Interpretation and analysis

Despite the cultural diversity of the countries that were explored in this research, it is interesting to note that most adopted similar measures, albeit in varying degrees of strictness and length. Social distancing measures were put in place across the countries, non-essential businesses usually shut down for the duration of the lockdown, and places of social and cultural importance such as schools, churches, mosques and universities all shut. One possible explanation for this adoption of similar measures could be that countries, unsure of what they were dealing with, tried and tested or adapted measures already put in place in countries slightly ahead in the battle. However, it is important to note that the success of these measures strongly depends upon each country's existing cultural and social practices.

6.1 Individualism vs collectivism

In many Asian cultures, there is an insistence on seeing oneself as a part of a greater society. There is thus a strong connectedness between individuals and society as a whole, with emphasis on "attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence" (Markus and Kitayama, 1991: 224) amongst individuals. In contrast, American culture places a stronger emphasis on the self and independence, thus there is value in discovering oneself as an individual, as opposed to in the context of a greater society (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In such societies, individuals act on their own accord and their personal preferences take precedence over the wellbeing of the group (Hyun, 2020).

The range of countries that were analysed provide a mix between collective and individualistic societies. The US is a prominent example of an individualistic society, in that independence is highly valued and encouraged. Tan (2020) points out that it was the drive to preserve individual and civil liberties that underpinned decisions in the US not to implement stricter measures to contain the virus; in the absence of such measures the number of cases rose dramatically. This individualism was bolstered when President Trump encouraged protestors calling for the re-opening of their state economies and the easing of social distancing restrictions (Shear and Mervosh, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020).

In contrast to the US, the less stringent measures implemented by Japan were as a result of the governance structures in the country such that the central government and the governors of prefectures were legally unable to initiate a national lockdown (Okutsu, 2020). Instead, the government relied on civil obedience by citizens, and also leveraged existing cultural elements such as the wearing of face masks and high levels of hygiene. These cultural practices appear to have gone a long way towards ensuring the success of measures put in place (Khaliq, 2020). Similarly, Iran's majority Muslim population already practices a high level of cleanliness, which may have helped reduce the spread of the

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disease. However, this practice alone could not ensure the flattening of the curve, and Iran has amongst the highest number of cases in the world.

For Iranians and Italians alike, family forms an integral part of the individual's life, with extended family including grandparents making up the basic social unit. With extended families in close contact with each other on a daily basis, social distancing measures are more difficult to implement. The situation in South Africa was similar, given that the vast majority of the population lives in overcrowded townships with many people residing in one household. Thus it could be said that the practising of social distancing in such collectivist societies is more difficult than in individualistic ones. However, at the same time these very collectivist characteristics found in such societies have had a positive impact in nurturing solidarity and unity during this crisis. Such examples include the practice of Ubuntu in South Africa. In keeping with social distancing in the Western Cape in South Africa, in one community people who are in need of groceries are encouraged to put a yellow tag at their gate and those donating food can leave it by the doorstep with no need to meet each other. NGOs and many other organisations are providing food parcels to those in abject poverty in the country. Likewise in Italy, communities are finding inventive ways of maintaining their social lives by singing and playing musical instruments from their balconies (Dettmer, 2020). This is said to have boosted morale, reassuring citizens that they are not alone during this crisis. Such citizen responses to the crisis and consequent restrictions imposed indicate that collectivist societies have adapted their usual cultural practices so that they comply with the measures, but are still able to safely practice that which is important to them as individuals and societies.

6.2 Social media usage

Across the five country case studies, it was noted that individuals often took to some form of social media when addressing issues linked to the virus. These interactions often used humour to communicate shock, disappointment or confusion.

Humour

The use of memes across the different settings is indicative of how individuals make sense of their surroundings, and how they use coping mechanisms such as humour during crisis times. From the sharing of the two mask memes in Japan, to communicate dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Abe's decision to supply each household with two masks (taken to imply that other individuals in the household would be left without masks) (Haasch, 2020), to the quips directed at President Ramaphosa in South Africa, we increasingly see individuals turning to social media to express their emotions, and in particular voice their opinions of the leadership and the measures put in place to combat the virus. Below (Figure 3) are some examples of how South Africans made use of memes when an extension to the national lockdown was announced by President Ramaphosa.

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Figure 3 Memes produced after a further extension to the 21-day lockdown was announced by President Ramaphosa

A cruder example of the use of social media to spread a certain opinion was the term "Boomer Remover" (Figure 4) used in the US to refer to the coronavirus. Terms such as these may be indicative of the individualistic culture that prevails in the US, with there being less of a social responsibility towards the older generation such as parents.

Figure 4: Example of humour

6.2.1 Misinformation

Given that the novel coronavirus is a relatively unknown virus, with limited scientific evidence available on its causes, prevention and treatment, it was inevitable that misinformation would spread widely about the disease. The main mechanism through which misinformation was communicated was social media platforms such as blogs, WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube (as indicated by the cartoon in Figure 5). Iranians ingested industrial-strength methanol as a home remedy to cure the coronavirus, on the basis of a false claim that spread across social media (Scarlett, 2020). This left nearly 300 people dead and over 1000 ill as a result of the misinformation.

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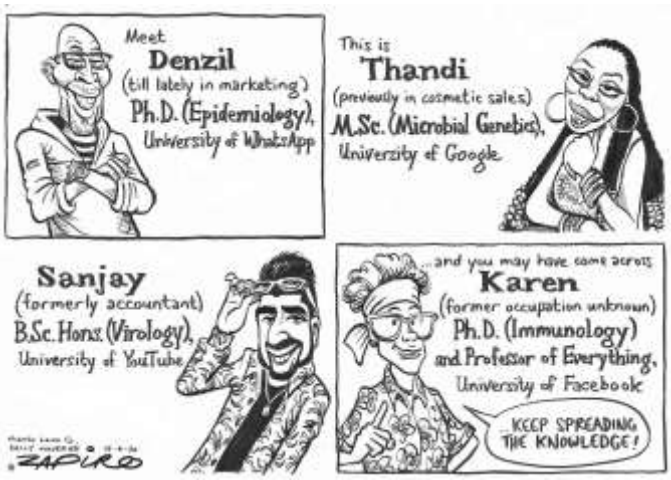
In Italy, misinformation spread via Twitter about the presence of the military on the streets in some cities, and was falsely associated with prison disturbances in the area (BBC, 2020b). In fact, the military regiment in question was merely returning from an exercise and had nothing to do with the containment of prisoners nor was it a mechanism of dealing with the virus. Another false claim that spread was that a vaccine for COVID-19 was available for the price of 50 euros via an email address supplied in a leaflet (BBC, 2020b). Messages advising people to gargle with disinfectant in order to stop the virus from entering the lungs also spread via Whatsapp (BBC, 2020b).

Two well-known social media personalities and supporters of President Trump, Diamond and Silk, took to social media and spread false claims, unproven medical advice and conspiracy theories (Ross, 2020a). Such misinformation included claims that the coronavirus was a ploy to ensure that Trump will be unsuccessful in the November elections, and that the virus was a means of wreaking havoc on Americans' lives.

Conspiracy theories regarding the virus have abounded on social media, with many claiming that the disease is manmade in a laboratory or is caused by radio waves emitted by 5G cellphone towers. Other claims state that tech billionaire Bill Gates engineered the virus and is using it as a population control mechanism (Ross, 2020a). Such claims are interpreted and misconstrued very differently by different groups of people, as they attempt to make sense of it all. According to Ross (2020a), it is an underlying distrust in governments and institutions that lead people to believe that such wild claims could actually be true.



Source: Daily Maverick

Figure 5: A political cartoon indicating the various social media channels through which misinformation spreads

6.2.2 Myths

Some dangerous myths that have spread across social media include the comparison of the coronavirus to a seasonal flu (see Figure 6), and that lemon juice, garlic and vitamin C are capable of killing the virus

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in one's body (BBC, 2020b). Another extremely dangerous myth on social media claimed that black people are immune to the virus (Ross, 2020b). Similarly, a claim spread that South Africans need not worry about contracting the virus because they have been given a BCG vaccine which helps to protect one against the coronavirus (Le Grange, 2020).

The spread of such misinformation and myths has an extremely negative impact on the fight against the disease, and may even reverse any progress being made. But such occurrences are important to understand as they often explain how an individual or group within society makes sense of the events which are taking place around them. In some instances myths are applied to new encounters to which individuals or groups have no previous frame of reference. While myths can be used as a coping strategy, myths are often deeply embedded in day to day experiences and thus cannot simply be relegated to wishful thinking; instead they could make or break individuals or groups, especially in crises as is the case with the pandemic. This implies that it is important to understand the myths that individuals or groups hold in order to understand their interpretations of the situation around them and subsequently come up with the relevant interventions.

Source: Sunday Times, 3 March, 2020

Figure 6: A political cartoon

The cartoon above depicts American President Trump and Brazilian President Bolsonaro downplaying the seriousness of the coronavirus, whilst British Prime Minister Johnson asks to speak to South African President Ramaphosa who has taken a more serious approach to tackling the virus.

7. Further areas for research

There is a need for further research to understand how sociocultural practices affect, develop, sustain and/or resist the reconfiguration of governance, educational, religious, cultural and family structures in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This would assist leaders, governments, institutions and ordinary citizens across the globe to be more aware of and sensitive to cultural nuances in different settings and help make their actions and interventions more effective.

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Further research is also required to explore the educational experiences of learners, parents and educators under the COVID-19 pandemic, so that requisite transformative practices can be rendered culturally sensitive. It would be useful to develop mechanisms through which measures and approaches from other countries can be learnt, contextualised and applied in local settings.

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Annexure A: Research team

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Phefumula Nyoni	Culture expert	University of Johannesburg
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Tertia Swart	Researcher	
Mbuelo Laura Mashau	Researcher	University of Johannesburg
Tadiwanashe Murahwi	Researcher	Rhodes University
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