DE+AFRIKA+4IR+

DESIGN EDUCATION | AFRIKA | 4TH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Measures by an advertising company to mitigate the impact of COVID-19: A case study and the Next Normal for design education

Sean Kreusch, *Tshwane University of Technology*
Selma Schiller, *Tshwane University of Technology*
Rudi W de Lange, *Tshwane University of Technology*

Abstract

This study aimed to identify the measures taken by a large international advertising company to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, and how these measures could be applied to design education. We interviewed a senior business partner of the company and determined the measures they took and their business variables affected by the pandemic. The results show how the pandemic affected interaction between design professionals; how they develop and present their creative solutions and how they brainstorm, collaborate, and remain inspired. The company will not be returning to their previous way of operating, and neither do they see the need to do so. Applying these measures to design education, we must prepare students to work in an isolated online work environment where strong self-management skills are essential. Design education must further consider small online didactical practices and must endeavour to develop students' self-motivation and self-management skills. Furthermore, students will need a comprehensive knowledge of digital platforms, design software, and workflow systems. Rapid technological changes make it even more critical to prepare students to be active, effective, and independent lifelong learners. Moving design education online will not be without challenges – a digital divide exists, sharply delineating those with and those without readily available access to the internet.

Keywords: Advertising agency, design education, mitigating COVID-19, Next Normal[31]

Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, more commonly known as COVID-19, reportedly originated at a live wildlife market in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The virus has subsequently spread to most countries around the world and, at the time of writing, has already caused an estimated 4,9 million deaths globally (as of 18 October 2021).[32] Relying on the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002

---

[31] The term next-normal or Next Normal is a widely used term in the business world to refer to how a business envisions the post-pandemic reset. McKinsey and Company shared some thoughts on their website: https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/coronavirus-leading-through-the-crisis#

[32] Johns Hopkins University, 18 October 2021, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

(South Africa, 2002), the South African State President declared a Level 5 lockdown, commencing on 26 March 2020.

Due to the threat of infection and the varying levels of lockdown, consumers now spend more time indoors. As a direct result, they have increased their online social behaviour, purchase online items geared to their new normal, and embrace digital communication technology (Sheth, 2020). The lockdown furthermore reduces the demand for services and affects service industries such as hotels and restaurants and the hosting of sporting events (Arndt, et al., 2020). This reduced demand, in turn, affects business revenues and ultimately design, marketing and communications budgets. The shrinkage of marketing budgets results in fewer design briefs, billings, staff compliments and remuneration within the design industry.

The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), for example, reports that the effects of COVID-19 spared no sector of the South African media. The most visible casualty is the magazine industry. Other casualties include online news, radio, and television with reduced revenue due to advertising loss. The estimated drop in advertising ranges between 40% and 100% (Rumney & Balliah, 2020).

COVID-19 and its related effects have a considerable impact on a country's economy. An analysis of the pandemic's impact on the creative industry in the United States of America, for example, estimates a loss of 2.7 million jobs and more than $150 billion in the sale of goods and services. The aforementioned study spanned 1 April 2020 to 31 July 2020 (Florida & Seman, 2020). The United Nations assessed the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in South Africa. Their impact assessment suggests that the South African economy may not even fully recover by 2024. The GDP may fall 7.9 per cent under a pessimistic scenario, and the economy may take at least five years to recover to the pre-2019 levels (UNDP, 2020, p. 21).

The study aim

This aim of the study was twofold. The first was to determine the measures taken by a large international advertising company to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The second aim was to discuss and propose how one could apply some of these identified industry measures to design education.

The method

The first author interviewed a senior business partner to determine the company's measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The interview took place via an online meeting in Fourways, Johannesburg, and used a series of open-ended and probing questions regarding the company's response to COVID-19. A faculty ethics committee from the Tshwane University of Technology granted ethical clearance. The application for ethical clearance requested permission to list the interviewee and the international company by name. The interviewee, Nicole Dickens, a managing partner at Ogilvy South Africa,[33] kindly agreed to the interview and

---

[33] Ogilvy, a New York-based British company, is one of the largest advertising, marketing and public relations networks in the world. The company, according to their website, has 900 staff members employed in its South African office, http://www.ogilvy.co.za/about-us.

did not object to her or the company being identified by name in the conference paper, thus significantly adding to the validity and integrity of the results.

The interviewee received a detailed information letter and a copy of the ethical clearance before the interview. The response from a senior partner of a large international company, likewise, adds to the validity of the results. We transcribed the interview and followed a qualitative interpretive analysis to evaluate the interview results. Afterwards we supplied a copy of the transcript and our analysis to the interviewee. We allowed the interviewee an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcript and to respond to our interpretation thereof; due to the busy nature of her work portfolio, she regrettably had to decline our invitation to respond.

The process of analysing the transcription, obtaining an overview of the answers, thematically summarising the results, and supporting the themes with an extract from the transcriptions was guided by an approach followed by Elliot and Elliot (2005). In addition, the paper also leaned on a thematic framework theory proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001). A copy of the application for ethical clearance, the ethical clearance letter, and a copy of the transcript is available from the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/8a4nd/?view_only=87539cda3a 97490f9 ae065996c4e3d0d).

The results

We were able to identify five themes. The pandemic, first and foremost, visibly affected interaction between design professionals. The pandemic furthermore changed how the company develops and presents its creative solutions, how brainstorming and other collaborative endeavours are approached, and highlighted questions on how exactly one is to maintain an inspirational working environment. The pandemic influenced the company's working environment in that they will not be returning to their previous way of operating. Neither do they see the need to return to their pre-COVID approaches, strategies, and methods. Here we clearly encounter a situation that has been aptly termed the Next Normal.

Interaction between design professionals

The interviewee indicated a significant shift in how the creative individual engaged their peers and how they engaged client service and ultimately the client. The hard lockdown, during which no one was allowed free movement unless to perform an essential service, meant that planning and operating alternative workplace solutions required an innovative response from management.

Creative teams generally work in close-knit groups and primarily on desktops. South Africa received a week's notice from the lockdown announcement to prepare for physical isolation. Online meeting platforms, which were generally reserved for corporations and teams working remotely, became mandatory for design professionals. Overnight 'Zoom', 'Microsoft Teams' and 'Cisco Webex' became buzzwords and go-to platforms for day-to-day meetings. Creative teams broke up and individual team members started working in isolation. This change created an immediate need for laptops, as well as short-term insurance to allow for home and remote work. This sudden, unexpected and unprecedented demand on employers also impacted our interviewee:

> *We've had people who are on desktop computers that we've had to arrange to have laptops; our business wasn't equipped for that.*

Greater demand for information technology support

The shift to laptops meant that the isolated creatives needed access to a stable data network that was fast, affordable and preferably uncapped. Assuming most creatives already had internet access at home, the question centred more on the stability and the cost of internet access. The need for quality internet access created a logistical challenge. The company had more or less ten creative teams consisting of five persons each. There were also art directors and creative heads that required internet access. Logistically IT departments became stretched as they needed to connect employees and had to ensure that all the hardware was integrated. Software issues relating to licences, upgrades and conflicts of programs at a cost to the company presented further challenges.

> *Our strat [sic] and the way we gather insights, um, especially in the beginning of lockdown where everyone really couldn't go out, from a production perspective, the way we shoot on set has changed and the financial implications of that have been quite huge for us.*

The initial lockdown also brought about workflow and idea exchange challenges. What initially was an interactive boardroom meeting with a creative team, a client director, a service provider and a client, now became an online platform where participants would see a few faces and hear a few voices. Individuals could log in but nonetheless busy themselves with other responsibilities and activities and not actively participate in the meeting. Online meetings became unmanageable as conversations would run over each other. Brainstorming sessions excluded the creative connection that is only possible where everyone is present in the same room. Work rate became a major issue as designers and art directors would decide for themselves when they would work and engage each other. This flexible but incongruent work style meant that some members of a creative team may still be in bed while others worked through the night. Accountability and work ethic became a risk, and management needed a way to control this. However, the design and integrated marketing and communications industry have project management and workflow systems in place. It became about synchronising the workflow to ensure time was not wasted while the team relied on absent and unavailable personnel.

> *I think the traffic delivery programme people have really suffered and I think any of the creative leads like a creative director in ECD, they battled because they … they constantly … trying to do these creative reviews online without being able to sit and engage and interact and I think they've battled with that.*

The hard lockdown effectively lasted for six months, and gradually, with an array of restrictions and precautionary measures still in place, people were once again allowed to more freely venture into the outside world. By this time, however, the organisation had settled into a new way of working, or the Next Normal. The current thought is that the staff would return for two days a week to improve interpersonal interaction and increase work accountability and throughput. The increase in email and digital communication increased exponentially, which meant more time was spent sifting through emails. It also resulted in some content potentially being overlooked and becoming open to misinterpretation. Work descriptions and thus boundaries were blurred. This meant that more meetings could be slotted into the workday, robbing staff of actual creative work time and later hours to execute. It also meant that the more responsible co-workers would pick up the slack as some others retreated behind their screens. Creatives were even more challenged as they needed more engagement and time to evaluate briefs. Administrative functions were less impacted as these were already desk-bound.

The price of COVID-19

While the dissonance of new work methods and approaches played out, the hard lockdown sharply impacted consumer and buyer behaviour. Specific industries came to a complete standstill while others grew comprehensively. Flight and travel and the hospitality industry shut down while FMCGs, i.e. fast-moving consumer goods like basic foodstuffs, grew in demand. The impact of this found its way into the design and integrated communications industry. Some work dried up, while others grew in revenue. The result was thin creative teams in areas where work dwindled and redeployment to where workloads increased.

Staff downsizing was the most significant COVID-19 response as product sales shrank, negatively impacting the commensurate retainers linked to these sales. The respondent indicated that one of their fast-food clients lost 30% sales, and thus their work retainer shrank contractually by the same percentage. This client decided to insource digital expertise at half of the outsourced cost, thus forcing Ogilvy to rationalise its digital capacity. Fee structures were similarly negatively affected. Clients interrogated the hours and rates, looking where they could reduce their costs. Nicole Dickens observed that:

> *We had to reduce our fee and our staff compliment … still in the processes of negotiating what that team looks like now … We've had to rationalise … it's not just from the initial lockdown and initial fee cut, it's everyone is going to the next fee discussions with huge trepidation because now they are not on thirty per cent fee, they are thirty per cent sales down.*

Payment terms also became an issue. Where traditionally 30 days were allowed for payment, 60 or even 90 days suddenly became the norm on invoices. Liquidity became a shared challenge between what the client had in the bank and what the organisation had to pay its staff. Costs linked to courier services, internet access, cellular phones and short-term insurance also increased.

The effect on human resources and the mental and physical health of staff

The pandemic took its toll on human resource management. Contracts and job descriptions were at stake, while working hours and staff attendance were closely scrutinised. A good example was the traffic manager, whose traditional function was to chase work briefs through the various layers of the organisation. In most cases, this was done physically by moving paperwork and briefs from one desk to another. With the advent of COVID-19, these roles were redefined as that of project managers who worked as remote facilitators bringing together the various skills within the organisation on a particular project.

The pandemic and the promulgated protocols for meeting in person meant that any public gathering to execute creative work would have to comply with the necessary and prescribed requirements, precautionary measures and formalities. The number of individuals working on a television commercial, generally requiring 75 people, was reduced if the venue had restrictions on occupancy.

> *The shoot costs now are … are becoming a little bit prohibited because what the … the, you know, the directors need to provide for a medic on shoot, um, all the protocols need to be followed … which adds an extra day to the shoots … which adds an extra day's worth of costs.*

Medical staff needed to be present to check temperatures and keep record of all the participants. This meant adding extra days to shoots to manage all the procedures that needed

to be adhered to. Other challenges faced by the organisation related to the sourcing of music and other rights to use copyrighted material. Whereas normal timeframes would span six weeks, it now became ten weeks and longer as the organisation needed to deal with other organisations globally who were also fundamentally locked down. Sony Music, as an example, had lain off staff. Although they had skeleton staff in place, some business relationships simply no longer existed, and new people had to deal with the paperwork. The organisation eventually resorted to using stock footage, stock imagery and stock music to reduce the standard production length of a television commercial.

The next normal

The impact of COVID-19 meant that clients began to direct their attention to their relationship with customers, marketing, and e-commerce to deliver their products and services. Clients also began to insist on using their in-house social media platforms to avoid traditional marketing platforms like print and radio and television. This meant the organisation could not rely on the commissions obtained by placing advertisements in these media channels. Direct email campaigns increased, and e-commerce as a marketing tool accelerated. If anything, COVID-19 accelerated the migration to digital communication strategies as both a cost-saving device and a way to reach the intended target market.

Nicole Dickens acknowledged that staff can and do work well offsite, and this could be structured to offset expenditures, but that human contact was still critical. As such, partial attendance at the office would be implemented going forward. Workflows will be thoroughly interrogated to speed up workflow and delivery.

> *We are also looking at implementing a workflow system to be able to help us get the stuff out and done and approved quicker online without the tons of emails going backwards and forwards.*

The pandemic certainly has made a lasting impact on the way forward in the design and integrated marketing and communications industry. The respondent indicated that their organisation will not be returning to the way they operated before lockdown and that it will definitely be managed as a hybrid or in a Next Normal-format as the circumstances may necessitate. On the question whether they would consider returning to their previous mode of operation, the interviewee stressed that:

> *No, I don't think we will … We certainly don't see a need to. We see how well people work offsite so we haven't lost productivity. My only concern is that we've lost our sanity. So, it's really affected our mental health because people battle with boundaries.*

Discussion of the results

It is evident from the results that the Level 5 lockdown and the subsequent levels thrust a tremendous amount of dissonance on management and staff within the organisation that had to adapt to and rely on a whole new set of skills. These were altogether mental, emotional, and physical in their experience and required both creative and time-management solutions. Money also became a critical issue as the organisation grappled with identifying and subsequently navigating the best way forward. Additional money on hand was necessary to navigate crises through additional data, call time, courier, insurance, and technology solutions. The creative individual was forced to take a hard look at their time and ethical management

principles, realising that ethically no one was watching over their work ethic and time management.

Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 would have impacted the organisations' leadership structure with business direction and management being strained and, in some instances, performed in a less than optimum manner. The employee would have felt the impact of less than perfect management skills, and the manager would have felt the impact of less than perfect employee compliance. Some of the challenges faced by the employee and employer can be summed up in a number of key areas, namely mental health, time-management, quality of work execution, technology adaptation, teamwork abilities, client management, cost containment, workflow management, the impact of the employee and employer's home life on work, and delays. Traditional design and integrated marketing and communications organisations rely heavily on face-to-face engagement, especially on creative development and workflow management. Client engagement that traditionally used email and telephone had now become more remote.

A golden thread that ran through all that was observed was the move to and strong reliance on technology. Cyberspace was the common variable in communication, brainstorming, and collaboration and that is why the company decided to move to the Next Normal. The United Nations even went on to define technology and digitisation as a 'human right' during COVID-19 lockdown periods (UNDP, 2020:22).

The next normal for design education

This study has shown that design students, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, had to and will for the foreseeable future need to master specific, additional skills to succeed in work. However, these requirements can change rapidly, just as the skills requirements changed with the outbreak of COVID-19. How do we as design educators prepare our students for an unpredictable, ever-changing work environment?

1. First and foremost, we must prepare students to work in an isolated, online work environment. This demands strong self-management skills. Design education must further consider small online didactical practices and endeavour to develop students' self-motivation and self-management skills. Furthermore, students will need a comprehensive knowledge of digital platforms, design software, and workflow systems. Rapid technological changes make it even more critical to prepare students to be active, effective, and independent lifelong learners (Schiller, 2013, p. 185). However, moving design education online will not be without challenges – a digital divide exists, sharply delineating those with and those without readily available access to the internet (James, 2021).

2. Design students who seek to enter the industry must change their, traditionally speaking, accepted and established perception of what joining an organisation would entail. According to Eraut (2004), one of these perceptions is that most learning happens at the workplace. However, following the outbreak of COVID-19, creative companies went from being a tight-knit team where mentorship is face-to-face, skills are transferred by looking over an experienced shoulder and having the creative director glance at work to provide input to a situation where the newly employed student could very well be working unaccompanied and, to a certain extent, unsupervised. The physical business culture, work ethic, and critical work environment where learning occurs are no longer there (or is only available in a much-altered configuration). A student seeking employment must have remote work experience before joining their first organisation. Such a student needs more self-confidence and is more proactive by nature. He or she will have to manage their own

time and deal directly with the client and even be involved in cost containment, which traditionally was not the responsibility of a junior designer. These requirements place greater demands on design educators to rethink conventional and long-established educational approaches. The intention of this paper, however, is not to suggest nor champion a specific teaching method, but rather to encourage design educators to develop lifelong learners capable of functioning in a design industry with demands dissimilar to what has gone before, to what many has become accustomed to, and which may again change at a moment's notice.

3. Design educators must provide design students with resources and processes to explore, discover, construct, and develop within different situations (Rooth, 2000). Design educators can achieve this by initiating learning, thus getting students involved in experiencing a design challenge that would include all the industry challenges discussed in this study. These challenges would create a need to learn through searching for meaning. Design students must engage in the learning process, and design educators must, concomitantly, encourage them to construct meaning. After that, learning must be maintained by ensuring that students continue to learn until they reach the best quality of learning (Slabbert, et al., 2009, p. 102).

4. A few years ago, educational experts stated that it is of utmost importance that we design productive learning environments and learning tasks (Slabbert, et al., 2009, p. 105). This observation is still valid, but COVID-19 drastically changed our learning environments, and we did not have any control over the design thereof. We intuitively turned to technology, and interactive video communication became prevalent during this time, seeing as video communications offer plausible communications systems that convey image formation faithfully to ensure personal expression (Kodama, 2020). We now have to take control of and embrace these new learning environments to secure and build on the newfound connectivity with our students. However, we cannot rely on technology alone to develop and sustain this newfound connectivity. We also have to design online environments with the authentic context in mind. In other words, it is not enough to give examples of real-life situations when we educate. We also need to provide the purpose and motivation for learning in this new complex learning environment by encouraging students to collaborate and reflect on their own learning in the online environment – only in this fashion can we properly construct meaning. Conversely, research also revealed that learning management systems like Blackboard and Brightspace could be ineffective for learning since these platforms are used to place information and not to initiate or encourage learning (Herrington, 2006). To steer clear of this pitfall and achieve the desired learning outcomes as described in this study, one thus needs to design appropriate, meaningful and authentic learning tasks.

5. The learning task is a crucial component to ensure authentic online learning, and it requires persistence, competence and experience from the educator. The educator must design activities as close as possible to real-life tasks and briefs. These tasks must be open to multiple interpretations to allow the student to examine the problem from various theoretical and practical viewpoints. Activities must encourage collaboration through promoting interdisciplinary perspectives. These tasks furthermore need to equip and empower learners to make decisions and reflect on their learning as individuals and as social beings (Herrington, 2006).

COVID-19, in conclusion, has had and continues to have a significant effect on the design industry and design education. Design educators now have a duty to apply these newly established industry requirements to ensure design education's long-term, continued and sustainable relevance to the design industry. However, the way design educators convey these requirements is crucial since they have a tendency to change continuously. COVID-19 set in motion a rapid and enormous change, as indicated by this study, but the industry has and will

continue to constantly adapt itself due to technological developments and shifts in cliental demands. Something as drastic as COVID-19 can and in all likelihood will happen again. If not, however, design educators still need to ensure that they help create independent lifelong learners that can comfortably and quickly adapt to changes in the work environment.

References

Arndt, C, Davies, R, Gabriel, S & Anderson, L et al. 2020, 'Impact of COVID-19 on the South African economy: An initial analysis', SA-TIED Working Paper 111, https://sa-tied.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/SA-TIED-WP-111.pdf

Attride-Stirling, J 2001, 'Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 385-405, doi: 10.1177/146879410100100307

Elliot, R & Elliot, C. 2005, 'Idealized images of the male body in advertising: A reader-response exploration', *Journal of Marketing Communication*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 3-19, doi: 10.1080/1352726042000263566

Eraut, M 2004, 'Informal learning in the workplace', *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 247-273, doi: 10.1080/158037042000225245

Florida, R & Seman, M 2020, *Lost art: Measuring COVID-19's devastating impact on America's creative economy,* A report by Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/research/lost-art-measuring-covid-19s-devastating-impact-on-americas-creative-economy/

Herrington, J 2006, 'Authentic e-learning in higher education: Design principles for authentic learning environments and tasks', *E-Learn*, https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/24193/

James, K 2021, 'Advanced technologies #AI #3D #AR #VR #MR #5G #XR exploring the future applications of AI, ML, virtual reality, augmented reality, 3D printing, #digital identities, 5G, #virtual production and the future of digital consumption in the #metaverse', A Zoom presentation by Kadine James to staff and students from the Department of Visual Communication at Tshwane University of Technology, 27 January 2021.

Kodama, M 2020, 'Digitally transforming work styles in an era of infectious disease', *International Journal of Information Management*, vol. 5, no. 12172, doi: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020,102172

Rooth, E 2000, *An investigation of the enhanced relationship between participants in lifeskills courses and the environment*, Pretoria, HSRC Press.

Rumney, R & Balliah, D (eds) 2020, *SANEF'S COVID-19 impact on journalism report* (Interim, https://sanef.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SANEF-COVID-Impact-Research-Final-Report9-optimized.pdf

Schiller, S 2013, *The acquisition of essential characteristics required for a contemporary graphic design career,* inpublished doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria.

Sheth, J 2020, 'Impact of COVID-19 on consumer behavior: Will the old habits return or die?' *Journal of Business Research*, 117: 280-283, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2020,05.059

Slabbert, JA, De Kock, DM & Hattingh, A 2009, *The brave 'new' world of education: Creating a unique professionalism*, Cape Town, Juta and Company.

South Africa 2002, *Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002*, https://www.gov.za/documents/ disaster-management-act

UNDP, see United Nations Development Programme in South Africa.

United Nations Development Programme in South Africa 2020, 'COVID-19 in South Africa', *Socio-Economic Impact Assessment*, Pretoria, United Nations Development Programme.