



Social Media & Risk Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

It is a massive challenge to communicate for all threats, especially significant public health emergencies. The most important factor is to quickly reach and cover as many individuals as possible. Risk and crisis communication are critical for better preparedness and response because they increase citizens' knowledge and capacity to take preventative measures. Radio, television, newspapers, and other traditional forms of communication were effective for disseminating messages, but the advent of social media has increased public communication and awareness since it allows for real-time communication. Social media has an impact on people's perceptions of illness exposure, decision-making, and risk behaviors. The usage of social media could improve public health authority openness and confidence, as well as lessen public mental noise. Policymakers and risk communicators can increasingly use social media to create risk communication, taking a bottom-up approach to communication. The Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) has created a spate of information, education, and communication (IEC) resources on COVID-19 risk awareness and prevention strategies. Social media, in addition to print and electronic media, was heavily used to connect with the public; the MoHFW's website even included a COVID-19 section. The government has also set up a Facebook page to boost public awareness and persuade people to take precautions such as wearing masks, social distancing, hygiene, and, most importantly, vaccination. Several celebrities and social media influencers are now speaking out in support of the government's anti-corona virus efforts.

Keywords: COVID-19, social media, risk communication, mental noise, awareness.

Introduction

In 2019, a disease outbreak that originated in China, was identified as coronavirus. On March 20, 2020, the coronavirus was declared as a pandemic by World Health Organisation¹ (WHO). The pandemic has created new difficulties that require collective answers and global coordination from international leaders. Because there was no vaccine or treatment available in the medical world, many governments instituted a lockdown to contain the pandemic. As a global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic affected various aspect of life. As the number of cases increased, so does the quantity of sources of information. Unlike earlier worldwide pandemics, individuals are now more networked, thus not only the virus but also information

¹World Health Organisation (WHO). (January 12, 2020). *Novel Coronavirus – China*. World Health Organisation. <https://www.who.int/csr/don/12-january-2020-novel-coronavirus-china/en/>



or misinformation about the pandemic quickly spread this time. Technical information concerning the risk must be given properly and efficiently during any public health crisis that affects public health and livelihood. The challenge of risk communication during a pandemic is that it must be done on time, the message must be straightforward and concise, and it must provide information about the health system, the death rate, the threat, the deadlines, and the economic loss, most importantly, leave no one behind and attend to the audience's emotional and psychological requirements.

Covid-19 pandemic is the most affected by misinformation because of the digital age and it must also deal with infodemic the term infodemic refers to the overabundance of information or false or misleading information in digital and physical environment during a disease outbreak. The infodemic leads to mistrust the public health authorities and undermines the public health response.² Though half of the globe lacks internet connection, the situation can be researched more thoroughly under the term "digital divide", this has widened the gap between rich and poor. Given the gravity of the situation, the WHO issued a joint statement with other UN agencies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) urging member countries to develop and implement an action plan that will reduce the impact of the infodemic and promote the timely dissemination of accurate information.³ It said that to build the effective strategies and tools to fight with infodemic. The civil society and media influencers to collaborate with UN system to further strengthen the plan. The goal of this study is to analyse the role of social media in risk communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. The role of social media influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic will also be discussed in the article.

Meaning of Risk Communication

Risk Communication is a way for effectively communicating about acts that threaten health, safety, or the environment that is methodical, structured, and scientific. During any health crisis, the message must be clear, concise, and effective. Authorities' message mapping must increase public awareness and understanding of the hazard, encouraging people to adopt preventive behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. The objective of risk communication is to enable everyone at risk to make an informed decision and mitigate the effects of a disease outbreak and take protective and preventive behaviors.⁴

Risk communication and social media

²World Health Organisation (WHO). *Health Topics*. World Health Organisation. https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1

³joint statement by who, un, unicef, undp, unesco, unaids, itu, un global pulse, and ifrc. (2020, september 23). managing the covid-19 infodemic: promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation. retrieved november 21, 2020, from world health organization website: <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promotinghealthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>

⁴ World Health Organization. (2018). *Managing epidemics: key facts about major deadly diseases*. Geneva. World Health Organization

Since the beginning of COVID-19, social media has become a more important medium for information creation, dissemination, and consumption. Risk and crisis communication are important for improving preparedness and response because they help to boost citizens' awareness and capacity to take preventive steps. Radio, television, newspapers, and other conventional forms of communication were useful tools for communicating messages, but the emergence of social media has accelerated communication and awareness among the public because it allows for real-time communication. People's perceptions of disease exposure, decision-making, and risk behaviors are all influenced by social media. The use of social media could promote transparency and trust in public health authorities, and mental noise among the public could be reduced. Policymakers and risk communicators can now design risk communication using social media, adopting a bottom-up approach to communication. Every social media user is a communicator and the content shared on social media can have a real-world consequence in the time of pandemic⁵.

Social media and risk communication during Covid-19 pandemic

In the context of COVID-19, many countries have started to use social media such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram etc. in their risk communication strategies. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of India (MoHFW) has a Facebook page with approximately six million followers⁶, an Instagram account with 405,000 followers, and a Twitter account with approximately seven million⁷ followers. Because of the popularity and reach of social media, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and communicators can use it to urge the public to adopt COVID-19 preventive health behaviors. Graffigna (2020) designed a social media campaign aimed at improving citizens' health engagement toward behavioral change for preventing the spread of COVID-19 was promoted in Italy in the early months of the pandemic. The first implementation was conducted on Facebook with the hashtag #I-am-engaged (in Italian: #Io-sono-engaged) along with Facebook posts, live videos, and video testimonies. The campaign went live on Facebook on March 10, 2020, and preliminary data shows that it reached 33.390 people. Only 10% of the audience expressed active participation with the campaign by like (n=697), commenting (n=102), or sharing its content (n=253). These findings revealed that Facebook looks to be a better medium for engaging with audiences and delivering dynamic public health information.⁸

⁵ Utami D. (2021). *The use of social media in risk communication during Covid-19: An analysis of stakeholder's Messages of social media*. (Master of Public Health, University of Columbia). https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3958684/Volkmer-Social-Media-and-COVID.pdf

⁶Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/page/357021754457238/search/?q=april%202021>

⁷ Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/MoHFW_INDIA?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

⁸ Graffigna, G., Bosio, C., Savarese, M., Barello, M., & Barello, S. (2020). "#I-Am-Engaged": Conceptualization and First Implementation of a Multi-Actor Participatory, Co-designed Social Media Campaign to Raise Italians Citizens' Engagement in Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 Virus.

Major social media campaign in India during Covid-19 pandemic

Multiple communication channels, including print, social, and mass media efforts, were employed to reach out to the population because to the virus's rapid spread. The possibility that the target audience would receive enough risk awareness messages to understand and respond to them rises with the use of numerous channels. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched the campaign on social media named #Unite2FightCorona in March 2020. The campaign majorly focused on the COVID-19 preventive health measures, like social distancing, and mask and hygiene later the vaccine drive was also included in the campaign. As the data shows 67-k people have posted about the campaign on Facebook. On the other hand, the #unite2fightcorona# followed all the constructs of risk communication messages during COVID-19. The risk communication messages must be unambiguous, with simple and straightforward language. For example, keeping 2 meters of physical space, using a mask, avoiding crowded places, and maintaining hygiene. Though the messages on the Facebook page were delivered in the form of photographs, videos, or audio, the messages were clear, and the language was straightforward and understandable. The animated figures in the messages are used to urge the public to adopt preventive behaviors.



⁹ Source: PIB PRESS RELEASE

Transparent and scientific communication is the key to successful risk communication. The COVID-19 pandemic is unique in that it exposed all the shortcomings in government preparedness during health emergencies. Lack of information will promote worry among the public and increase mental noise. So, to eliminate mental noise among the population, the government must supply transparent information that includes scientific values. The interactive

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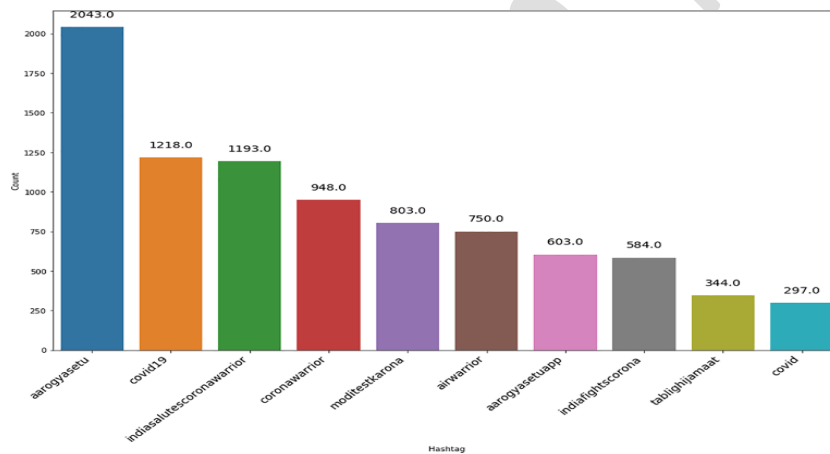
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.567101/full>

⁹Press information bureau. PIB Bulletin's on COVID-19. Retrieved from:

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1710709>

live phone-in- programmes¹⁰ on COVID-19 information with some of the prominent health experts helped the masses to clear all the doubts, myths and to adopt the preventive measures. The scientific messages or conversations also made it apparent that the present accessible information about COVID-19 is current, and that they will update them if scientific knowledge about the virus advances.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) created a wide range of information, education, and communication (IEC) resources on risk awareness related to COVID-19 and methods to keep safe and stop the virus's transmission. Social media was heavily utilised in addition to print and electronic media to reach out to the public; the MoHFW's website also built a special COVID-19 section. To educate people about COVID-19, the Health Ministry collaborated with a variety of partners, including the postal and telecommunications departments, as well as the National Council for Science and Technology Communication. Due to time constraints and the size of the population, the Indian government also partnered with private parties to reach out to remote areas of the nation. For instance, to speed up the risk communication process, the MoHFW worked with mobile firms. Private mobile service providers produced ringtones to spread awareness of the virus and advised consumers to visit the closest hospital if they had COVID-19 symptoms. The ringtones had messages in the local languages and were intended to dispel rumors, lessen people's dread of the virus, and inform them of the manners of the "new normal."



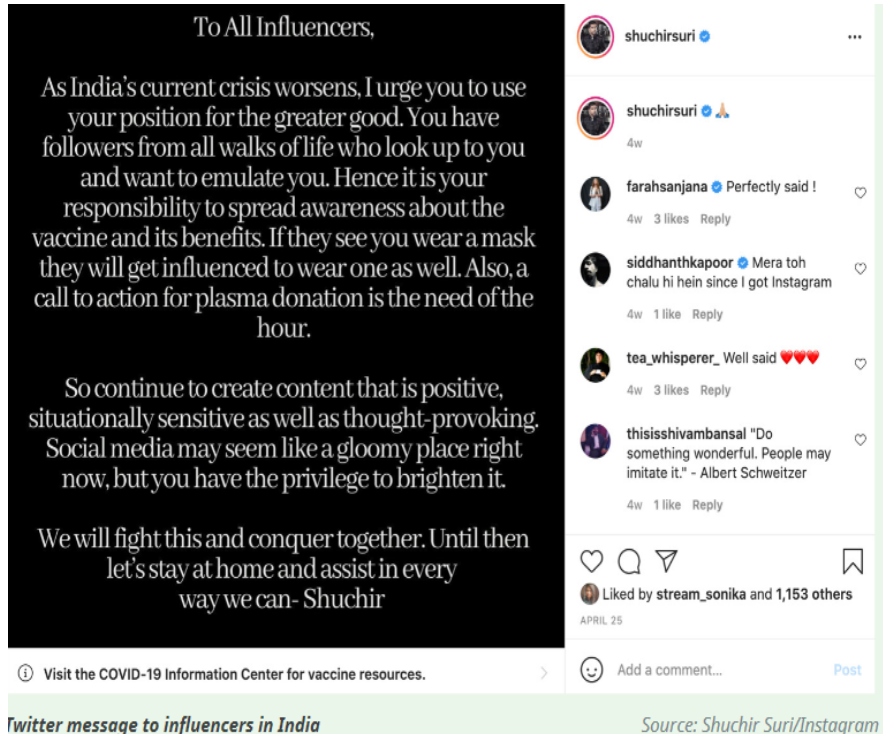
Source: Chehal et.al¹¹

Chehal *et.al*, in their paper has shown the top ten trending hashtags on twitter in India during lockdown 2.0. was Aarogyasetu app promoted by the health officials during the pandemic was

¹⁰ Aarogya Bharat based on Interactive LIVE Phone -in Programme on COVID-19 Vaccine. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3UaFFzp7JQ>

¹¹ Chehal, D., Gupta, P., & Gulati, P. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic lockdown: An emotional health perspective of Indians on Twitter. *The International journal of social psychiatry*, 67(1), 64–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020940741>

trending on the. In their paper they have also shown the negative hashtags trending like, #say, #islamphobia, #bjpcoronacorrup etc.



Twitter India¹² (figure 3) has also urged social media influencers to raise awareness about the vaccine and its advantages. Influencers were also requested to generate content while wearing masks in order to persuade their followers to do the same. The public will be convinced to adopt corona virus prevention behaviours thanks to the positive and sensitive material. During pandemic the influencers of social media have played vital role in sharing public health information, respecting government institution, and entreating their followers. Influencers began to rally behind the lockdown and advocate vaccination through audiovisual content. MoHFW posted a video message from many celebrities, including Sugandha Mishra and Amitabh Bacchan, to promote vaccination on their official page.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a one-of-a-kind impact that the world has never seen before. During any health crisis, communication is critical, and it is critical that the public has access to accurate information from sources they can trust. This trust-building relationship with the public could not be created in a short period of time, years of fieldwork, communication, and transparent and beneficial policies are required. The epidemic has shown us that social media

¹² Utami D. (2021). *The use of social media in risk communication during Covid-19: An analysis of stakeholder's Messages of social media*. (Master of Public Health, University of Columbia). https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3958684/Volkmer-Social-Media-and-COVID.pdf

allows for real-time connection with the public, which decreases anxiety and improves risk perception. In addition to disseminating information, the government has used social media to dispel myths and misconceptions about the virus, its treatment, and vaccination. The behaviors of the people is most important to reduce the spread of the virus, especially in the absence of vaccination or any pharmaceutical advancement.

During Covid-19, the bottom-up model of communication was demonstrated to have an impact and a high success rate. In health communication, a participatory approach is critical. It is critical that communication is built on a participatory model of communication in order to persuade the masses to accept a behavioural change. The #unite2fightcorona or #Indiafightscorona campaigns, as well as the promotion of the #aarogyasetu app, all require a bottom-up approach to communication. Various stakeholders like social media influencers, celebrities, governmental organisations, health officials and the general public who has the access to internet becomes the part of the health communication through hashtags.

The government's restrictive measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus have given internet groups the chance to grow and establish themselves in the realm of health communication. The public has come to trust the health professionals because of real-time communication, interactive phone sessions, and chats. From a psychological standpoint, social media has served as a buffer, reducing the worry that the public has felt as a result of the pandemic.

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