Crisis Communication: Creating Health Awareness during Covid-19 through Social Media

Dr. Hemangini Ameta[1] | Rachna Vaswani[2*]

[1]Assistant Professor, Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India.
[2]Research Scholar, Pacific Academy of Higher Education and Research University, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India.

[*]Corresponding Author: rachna.vaswani@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In late 2019 Coronavirus (Covid-19) also popularly known as the "Wuhan Virus" surfaced in China and soon spread around the world. This caused a worldwide lockdown due to a pandemic crisis situation, where on 11th March 2020, WHO declared Covid-19 a worldwide pandemic. A week later, precisely on 19th March 20202, the Prime Minister of India - Shri Narendra Modi addressed the issue officially by announcing a #JantaCurfew with effect from 22nd March 2020, which was followed by a lockdown. The influence of Covid-19 was vulnerable on each group of individuals and organizations. Strategic planning on standard communication regarding health risk was focused through digital media i.e. social media websites like "X" (previously known as Twitter), Facebook and YouTube. by our government bodies. Impactful communication is crucial in managing situations, building trust, and ensuring effective decision-making. Alongside conventional communication, social media played a significant role in spreading awareness, reducing mental anxiety, clearing myths and curbing the spread of misinformation. This research explores best practices and lessons learned from recent Indian events, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper identifies key strategies like use of digital platforms, audience segmentation, and cultural sensitivity. The findings emphasize the need for adaptive communication strategies tailored to India's diverse landscape. References are made to enhance communication frameworks for industries, and society. The use of social media for the government has been beneficial in terms of preventing the spreading of the "Wuhan Virus" and even other similar situations in future.

***Keywords**: Covid-19, Pandemic, Communication Strategies, Crisis Communication, Digital Platforms, social media, Indian Context, Government, Sentiment Analysis.*

Introduction

COVID-19, a highly contagious infectious disease, emerged from Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and rapidly spread across the globe, reaching 210 countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on 11 March 2020, raising significant international public health concerns. By 15 July 2020, more than 13 million cases had been reported worldwide, with approximately 0.6 million deaths, reflecting a casualty rate of 1.4%. The virus, also named SARS-CoV-2, was identified on January 7, 2020, and its genetic sequence was shared with the global community. WHO officially named the disease COVID-19 on February 11, 2020, due to its genetic similarity to the SARS virus that caused the 2003 outbreak. The disease primarily affects the respiratory system, with symptoms ranging from mild cough and fever to severe respiratory failure. In addition to lung damage, COVID-19 has been linked to thromboembolic conditions, myocardial infarction, and kidney failure in some patients. It spreads through droplets, airborne transmission, and contact, with the virus remaining viable on surfaces for hours to days, contributing to its rapid spread and fatality.

In such pandemics, controlling disease transmission is crucial, and public awareness plays a key role. Lockdown measures were put in place with different degrees of restrictions in every state. This heavily crippled the economies with travel limits to travel inter-states and inter-city as well. Media, including traditional and digital platforms, serves as a primary source of information for the public. The effective broadcasting of health information is essential for early symptom recognition, diagnosis, prevention, and management. Previous outbreaks, such as H1N1 in 2009, demonstrated the significant influence of media in shaping public behaviour, both positively, by encouraging protective measures, and negatively, by fostering stigma toward infected individuals. This two-fold effect highlights the critical role of media in disease control. The structure on the media impact model developed after the SARS outbreak, this paper aims to examine the role of the government agencies through social media in the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how media influence has shaped public responses and contributed to the broader efforts in controlling the spread of the disease.

Communication plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, influencing behaviour, and ensuring efficient crisis management. Recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and political campaigns have highlighted the importance of timely and effective communication. However, challenges such as misinformation, cultural diversity, and lack of preparedness have also emerged. The government was also in the race to develop a vaccine, just like other countries all over the world. The development of vaccines is traditionally a time-consuming process, often needing years of research, testing, and governing approval. However, the extraordinary urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic applied immense pressure on global healthcare systems, prompting the implementation of exceptional measures to accelerate vaccine development. In India, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in January 2020. Remarkably, within approximately a year, the country launched its first vaccination drive, signalling a fundamental step toward recovery. This swift action marked the beginning of a large-scale effort to check and put a stop to the spread of the virus and reduce the number of COVID-19 cases nationwide.

While global communication strategies have been studied extensively, there is limited research on how these lessons apply to India, a country with unique challenges such as linguistic diversity, varying levels of digital literacy, and a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Objective and Research Methodology of the Study

The fundamental objective of this study is to analyse the effect of social media communication during Covid-19 pandemic crisis. To accomplish this study, the research relies on secondary data sources. These sources include data that are obtained from journals, articles, newspapers, online resources, books, and official organizational websites.

Literature Review

D Wang (2021) reviewed the COVID-19 pandemic that was a significant global public health crisis, intensely disrupting normal life functions of humankind due to widespread fear, uncertainty, and stress. The pandemic challenges demonstrated difficulty to manage, even with virtual coping mechanisms. The pandemic also had a distinguished impact on marital relationships, particularly among couples, and presented unique challenges for women during the health emergency. Furthermore, it significantly affected the quality of life for healthcare professionals, including nurses and medical experts, as they navigated the demands of the crisis. Lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings, implemented to curb the spread of the virus, contributed to mental stress and disrupted daily routines worldwide. The lengthy vagueness and threat perception during such a global health crisis escalated fears and mental health concerns, underscoring the need for further studies to examine coping mechanisms during pandemics.

The scale of the COVID-19 outbreak was extraordinary, with the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting over 106.6 million confirmed cases and 2.3 million deaths globally as of February 7, 2021. This infectious virus emerged as one of the deadliest health calamities of the century, posing challenges similar to the global crises of World War II. The pandemic triggered widespread economic instability, social stigmatization, environmental challenges, and severe health emergencies, disrupting social interactions, economic activities, and international relations. Third-world countries, heavily reliant on low-wage labour, faced severe repercussions, including hunger, unemployment, heightened anxiety levels, and psychological disorders due to city-wide closures and economic standstills. Spatial-time analysis of emergency medical requests during the pandemic has highlighted critical insights for policy-making and crisis management. In Europe, Italy emerged as one of the hardest-hit nations, exceptional China's reported cases and exposing significant shortcomings in government responses to the outbreak.

These systemic failures underscore the urgent need for improved strategies to mitigate and manage future global health crises.

B. Liu, J Lhim& D Shi (2021) the COVID-19 pandemic carried extraordinary challenges to higher education in the United States, impacting the 4,298 degree-granting postsecondary institutions as reported by the National Centre for Education Statistics. These institutions include both 2-year and 4-year private and public colleges and universities (National Centre for Education Statistics, n.d.). The pandemic's sudden onset disrupted admissions, curtailed additional activities, limited research opportunities, and created significant financial strain due to unexpected expenses and reduced revenue. As a result, some colleges face uncertain futures, with potential closures looming (Carlson & Gardner, 2020; Whitford, 2020).

On average, enrollment across all higher education institutions in the U.S. dropped by 2.5%, with community colleges experiencing an even sharper decline of 10% (Amour, 2020). To adapt to these challenges, institutions swiftly transitioned to online education, leading to significant changes in the delivery of academic programs. Many universities implemented staff reductions, and some eliminated programs or majors altogether. Additionally, occupancy rates for campus housing plummeted as students moved off-campus, and large-scale events—including athletic competitions, theatre productions, music performances, and even graduation ceremonies—were either cancelled or shifted to virtual platforms (Marinoni et al., 2020; Polikoff, 2020).

In response to these challenges, adopting best practices in crisis communication became essential for universities. The institutions adopted strategies which helped institutions effectively navigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic and progress with resilient responses to future crises. This analysis underscores the importance of collaborative planning, clear communication, and flexibility in addressing the difficult interruptions faced by higher education during this historic crisis.

M. Montesi (2021) the role of statistics in helping adaptation during changing circumstances has been extensively documented, highlighting its importance in managing transitions, ambiguity, and emergencies. In circumstances like natural disasters, information serves as a critical resource, allowing individuals and communities to navigate disruptions, adjust to new information channels, and cope with uncertainty and collective stress (Baillergeau&Duyvendak, 2016; Pang, Karanasios, & Anwar, 2020). Interpersonal and community-driven information exchanges, often mediated by social networks or informal channels, complement centralized communication efforts, strengthening social cohesion and resilience during crises (Lopatovska& Smiley, 2013; Maldonado, 2017). Social media platforms, though invaluable for real-time data and community outreach, are sometimes more beneficial to authorities for tracking and decision-making than to individuals (Muniz-Rodriguez et al., 2020). However, grassroots social media messages can play a vital role in certain contexts, highlighting the adaptive functions of information sharing during crises (Ryan, 2018).

Information behaviour (HIB) also supports reworking in everyday transitions, such as starting college, coping with a job loss, or managing chronic illnesses. These situations, though routine, require individuals to seek and process information to make decisions, manage stress, and redefine personal circumstances (Fourie & Julien, 2014; McKenzie & Willson, 2019). In health-related contexts, diverse information sources and peer-to-peer communication foster coping strategies and psychological well-being, helping individuals navigate uncertainty and reconstruct a sense of normalcy (Genuis & Bronstein, 2017; Erfani et al., 2017). Social media interactions further facilitate these processes by combining information exchange with emotional and social support, enabling communities to collectively redefine norms and adapt to new realities (Gomula, 2019; Naveh & Bronstein, 2019).

Information also facilitates behavioural change, especially in health and sustainable development contexts. While traditional "information deficit" models assume that rational decision-making follows access to authoritative information, research shows that behaviour is influenced more by emotions, social norms, and contextual factors than by knowledge alone (Kelly & Barker, 2016; Luetz et al., 2020). Effective information practices often integrate emotional and social support, experiential knowledge, and expert insights, fostering changes in habits such as smoking cessation or disaster preparedness (Abunyewah et al., 2020; Meadowbrooke et al., 2014). These findings underscore the interplay between information and social dynamics in shaping human behaviour and adaptation.

Analysis and Findings of the Study

During a crisis such as a pandemic, distrust can escalate if governments fail to engage in active, transparent communication with citizens. Extant literature underscores the importance of responsive, transparent, and open communication in fostering citizens' confidence and trust during crises (Kim & Chung, 2018). Although governments cannot always prevent crises, they play a critical role in ensuring that citizens are informed about both preventive and reactive measures. Proactive dissemination of timely and actionable information by government agencies can mitigate the impact of crises by preparing citizens for effective responses and reducing public losses (Chatflet et al., 2013; UNEP, 2012). To achieve effective crisis communication, three key conditions must be met: rapid dissemination of information (Chatfield &Brajawidagda, 2013), extensive reach to a broad audience (Starbird & Palen, 2010), and high-quality, actionable content (Meissen & Voisard, 2008). A failure in these areas can foster citizen distrust, as seen during the 2003 SARS outbreak in Hong Kong, where inadequate government communication led to perceptions of negligence, ultimately eroding public trust (Lee & Xu, 2018).

Crises such as pandemics heighten situational uncertainty, which can elevate public anxiety and distrust, adversely affecting emotions and behaviours (Smith & Ellsworth, 1987). Nevertheless, trust and distrust are dynamic constructs that evolve based on situational factors and government-citizen interactions (Kang & Park, 2017). Interactive crisis communication plays a pivotal role in addressing citizens' concerns, reducing anxiety, and rebuilding trust. Auger (2014) emphasizes that prompt, interactive governmental communication during health crises is crucial for controlling public anxiety and enhancing trust.

Beyond communication, participatory citizen engagement is essential during crises to address resource constraints and complexities in public service delivery. Scholars argue that civic engagement fosters collaborative efforts between governments and citizens, thereby enhancing crisis management capacities (Agostino &Arnaboldi, 2016; Wimelius & Engberg, 2015). This participatory approach promotes mutuality, allowing governments and citizens to appreciate their interdependence and work collaboratively toward crisis resolution (Guo et al., 2021).

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have emerged as vital tools for participatory engagement during crises, enabling two-way communication and fostering civic attitudes and behaviours (Hagen et al., 2020; Neely & Collins, 2018). These platforms support openness, transparency, and knowledge sharing, thereby building citizens' resilience and encouraging active participation in crisis management (Bonsón et al., 2019). Unlike traditional one-way communication methods, social media facilitates interactive, citizen-driven information exchange, enhancing the effectiveness of government-citizen collaboration (Brainard & McNutt, 2010).

Given the instrumental benefits of interactive communication for citizen engagement, especially during crises, this study seeks to examine the effects of interactive crisis communication on citizens' participatory engagement with the government and its impact on reducing distrust in government during pandemics. This inquiry builds on the existing scholarship to explore strategies for fostering trust and collaboration in times of crisis.

Conclusion

Social media creates a seamless and user-friendly channel for broadcasting of communication and falsehood updates about the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of misinformation has been publicized to create anxiety and doubt surrounding public health to the common man. The results of this review may help us better understand the effect that COVID-19 misinformation on social media has on a population's thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Sources of misinformation about COVID-19 included 'X" (previously known as Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook. Findings of this review highlight the sources and impact the government agencies created over social media related to COVID-19 along with potential strategies to control the spread of the disease. Additionally, it may help guide future efforts in the fight against COVID-19 as well as other public health threats.

COVID-19 was a global crisis that has spread across the world at a dangerously fast stride, disrupting lives and crushing healthcare systems with shortage of oxygen supplies and hospital beds. Social media, as a powerful communication tool, plays a pivotal role in spreading information, influencing public behaviour, and possibly limiting the spread of disease. While the media has demonstrated its ability to inform and educate the public, its role has also been linked to certain challenges, including the spread of misinformation and heightened public anxiety. In this article, we explored the positive and

negative impacts of media during the COVID-19 pandemic and proposed actionable steps to optimize its use during health crises.

One significant outcome of this learning is the serious part of government agencies in efficiently interacting with crisis related information. Strong, reliable, and realistic communication is essential to counter misinformation and ease any fear and anxiety among the public. Administrations must make sure to safeguard that authorized networks of communication are accessible, timely, and engaging to build trust and maintain public confidence during outbreaks.

The government made sure to share knowledge and update the citizens about several information in context with the ongoing pandemic. For example, daily status updates, regular mindful videos by the authorities.

Moreover, an emotional analysis of public sentiment on social media revealed high levels of fear and surprise within the population, stressing the influence of media in shaping emotional responses. Findings also highlight a negative correlation between the positive sentiment of tweets and public reactions, suggesting that the frequency of alarming or pessimistic content on social media may worsen public distress and reduce hopefulness.

Given these observations, it is imperative to develop strategies to manage media narratives during health crises. This article recommends creating a comprehensive model to evaluate the media response at the conclusion of each epidemic or pandemic. Such evaluations can serve as valuable feedback, helping media outlets and government agencies refine their strategies to ensure accurate information dissemination, reduce emotional distress, and foster public cooperation in future outbreaks.

By addressing these challenges and implementing effective media practices, we can harness the power of media as a tool to not only combat misinformation but also foster resilience and collective action in the face of global health threats.

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