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## CHALLENGES IN EFFECTIVE HEALTH COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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### Abstract:

Health and well-being are of utmost importance to everyone. The United Nations recognises good health and well-being as one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, Health Communication assumes enough significance. Health Communication disseminates essential information to promote health and well-being among people. The recent pandemic has emphasised that health communication must be effective in order to influence the health behaviour of people. Effective health communication is one that uses communication strategies to design health campaigns and educational programmes to promote good health and improve public health literacy. However, communicating with a larger public poses a challenge, especially in effective health communication. This paper evaluates studies on health communication during COVID-19 and the challenges in effectively communicating health. These challenges have questioned the efficacy of health communication campaigns used during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the factors that contribute to successful health communication. Most of the studies on effective health communication during COVID-19 point out that a persuasive approach with the adoption of visual aids and tailor-made communication strategies proves more effective, and achieving health targets became easier.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, health, health communication, pandemic, strategy.

### Introduction

Health is one of the most important factors in life. A healthy individual is an asset to society. The significance of health is rightly recognised by the United Nations by making good health and well-being one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines Health as “a

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state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought health back into focus. While health is important, communicating health is equally significant. In this regard, health communication is of prime importance. Health communication is a field of study that includes communication strategies to promote information and influence health behaviour among people. It is a discipline in the broader field of public health education and health promotion. It is the responsibility of the governments to educate the people about health. Health information can vary from communicating about symptoms of diseases to precautions to stay safe and remedial measures to cure the diseases. Sometimes, a lot of misinformation about a disease is spread that leads to panic among the people. It is the responsibility of health communicators to disseminate correct information. Effective health communication goes a step forward in having a positive influence and persuades them to make positive changes in their health behaviour. Such effective health communication needs to take place every day and not be confined to creating awareness only about certain epidemics or pandemics. Public health experts have now come to recognise that health communication is critical to public health programmes and campaigns. However, many studies have documented the challenges that effective health communication faced during COVID - 19.

Effective health communication emphasises knowing the target audience including their social background, attitudes and beliefs, cultural setup and so on. These insights help health professionals to assess any barriers that people may have in accessing health information and implementing the same. Sometimes, it is important to evaluate the audience individually to understand them deeply.

Communication models and theories can help understand the audience better and also decide on a suitable communication strategy. Various communication channels are now at the disposal of health professionals including digital media and social media. While it is promising to make use of a communication strategy, it is important to test the strategy with a smaller audience to evaluate its effectiveness and then implement it at a larger scale. The health communication process does not end with communicating health information or promoting health. The last step is to analyse the results of the campaign in order to verify whether the strategies were effective or if they need modifications for better results. Effective health communication is thus a joint effort of health professionals and communication specialists.

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the challenges in effective health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is one of the deadliest diseases of recent times. The entire world was affected, and all the countries in the world shut themselves from the rest of the part of the world to keep their people safe. International travel had a blanket ban. Many tourists were stranded in foreign countries unable to travel back to their home countries. Lockdown was imposed within the countries and public movement was severely restricted. All these strict measures were in place to bring the positivity rate. What brought the rapid spread of the virus under control is extensive and effective health communication. Several strategies were experimented with and adopted as part of communication campaigns to address the pandemic. This paper is thus an attempt to evaluate the various challenges faced in designing effective health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has caused since late 2019. Millions of people have been affected by COVID-19, and a few million even lost their lives to this pandemic. Some common symptoms of COVID-19 include mild to severe respiratory illness, fever, and loss of taste or smell. Other less common symptoms are headache, diarrhoea, and skin rashes. People with medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and chronic respiratory disorders are more at risk. The virus spreads through an infected person's nose or mouth in small liquid particles that come out into the air when they cough, sneeze, breathe and talk. Some precautions that were available at the beginning of the outbreak include maintaining a distance of one metre, wearing well-fitted face masks that primarily covered the nose and the mouth, and washing hands using a hand sanitiser. Vaccines were developed months after the virus spread across the world. Various countries in the world have countered this outbreak and reduced the spread of the virus. However, due to the diversity of the population and the varying socio-economic factors, effective health communication faced several challenges in communicating preventive and precautionary health measures.

#### **PERSUASION AND NOT INFORMATION**

The authors of this research article are of the opinion that health communication during COVID-19 is mainly intended to persuade people than to inform them about the pandemic (Oxman et al, 2022). They cited the example of messages that asked people to wear masks to save their lives during the pandemic. They have argued in their article that instead of providing enough information about the pandemic and the rationale about using masks to enable people to make

an informed decision about whether to wear masks or to comprehend the logic behind using masks, people were simply bombarded with messages that persuaded them to wear masks. Basically, they meant that the people were not being informed and educated. People were not given a choice to make. While the aim of health communication is to both inform the people and persuade them, the COVID-19 health communication was mostly persuasive, and not informational. They have evaluated the potential conflicts that arise between persuasion and information. They conclude by saying that it is acceptable to make decisions to persuade people provided such decisions should be transparent and backed by evidence, and that evidence should not be distorted to serve the purpose. They also suggest some ways that health professionals and health communicators can use to decide if they should persuade or inform. One of these ways is to provide people with options and educate them about the advantages and disadvantages of those options. The authors believe that such a provision enables people to make informed decisions.

### **EVIDENCE-BASED COMMUNICATION**

de Campos-Rudinsky TC and Undurraga E (2021) in their article, counter the perception that information available during the COVID-19 pandemic was inevitable, even though there is enough empirical evidence to prove this. The authors believe that COVID-19 data along with the free-flowing misinformation has instead only increased uncertainty among people, created more confusion and reduced trust in the authorities. They question the consensus that the availability of enough empirical data and scientific evidence do not amount to good decision-making, and COVID-19 has proved this like never before. They argue in their paper that good decision making especially with regard to health policies depends more on sound ethical reasoning that attributes to value-based judgements, and less on the availability of reliable data, empirical facts and rigorous analyses. They are reiterating the argument that science and data are not sufficient to make good policy decisions. The changing nature of COVID-19 policies led the authors to investigate the problem that empirical evidence alone cannot facilitate policy decision-making. They conclude by stating that considering ethics more than the practical truths, and more transparency among the decision-makers would have reduced uncertainty, confusion and distrust among the people.

While communication plays a significant role during a pandemic, there are certain challenges to disseminating information to people. The authors Guttman and Lev (2021) in their article make an attempt to bring attention to the complexity of ethical challenges that appeared during COVID-19 communication.

They categorise the ethical issues into four sections that include ethical issues involved while informing the public about the pandemic, challenges in communicating uncertainty, use of threats and fear tactics; unintended consequences related to socio-cultural factors, ethical issues in communication mitigating practices such as wearing face masks, hand washing and sanitising, contact tracing, spatial (social) distancing, While they agree that authorities are obligated to communicate to the people about the risk of the pandemic, they conclude that they are aware that such a risk communication also have various challenges that bring out ethical concerns. Some suggestions they provide in their study include avoiding the use of fear tactics because they may increase anxiety even though such tactics may produce short-term effects. Further, they also emphasise on providing information that meets the specific concerns of a diverse population and reduces misinformation.

In this article, the authors Nan et al (2022) review research conducted for decades in the interdisciplinary field of communication science. From the results they procured, they have made a list of evidence-based recommendations to communicate COVID-19 health messages. They have systematically examined the communication process, focused on deciding the content (message), how to convey such a message, and how decisions about all these impact the persuasiveness of the message. They have evaluated the use of science-based principles to design COVID-19 messages. Further, they have also identified the challenges authorities faced in communicating health messages during COVID-19, and have discussed the probable measures to overcome those challenges. Their evaluation led them to conclude that communication science does have effective messaging strategies to address COVID-19 as well as other pandemics that may occur in the future.

One of the ways to combat COVID-19 is the use of the preventive vaccine (Chou and Budenz, 2020). While there is a sizable portion of the population that refuse to get vaccinated for COVID-19, there are enough people who are concerned over the safety and efficacy of the vaccine in the US that indicates a reluctance to get vaccinated. Evidence-based communication is considered indispensable to addressing vaccine hesitancy and fostering confidence in vaccines. In this context, the authors emphasise the role of emotions in communicating health messages. They have highlighted positive and negative emotions that may be considered and leveraged to communicate health messages. They cite examples of addressing negative emotions such as fear and anxiety and appealing to positive emotions by highlighting the importance of family and community. They conclude that acknowledging negative emotions is necessary,

raising awareness about the spread of misinformation, and eliciting positive emotions towards one's community to restore health underpin targeted results.

With the unprecedented challenge posed by COVID-19 for health and crisis communication, health professionals are making use of decades of research and experience as a way forward (Noar and Austin, 2020). In this research article, the authors examine the various communication challenges that came to light during the pandemic, gaining insights from health and risk communication. The focus of this study is on the lack of clarity in the US response to the pandemic. It was incoherent as to what health behaviour the authorities were trying to change, and how they were communicating to initiate such a change. There were inadequate efforts on the part of the authorities to design a national message that could have the potential to keep the people together. However, the lack of such efforts led to a lot of misinformation and led to mixed messages. Messages about wearing face masks and maintaining social distance were contradictory. The damage was already done by the time they realised the significance of these messages, and the time when these messages should have been communicated. There was limited impact on public health behaviour because most of the messages focused on *what to do*, rather than *why*. The authors conclude that a unified national health campaign that could set a communication agenda can fill the health communication void. Further, they add that targeted communication should be designed for a specific population to see effective results. They also recommend revisiting the existing communication strategies and coming up with new strategies that also consider the mental health and social association of the public.

### **USE OF COMICS AND GRAPHICS**

As COVID-19 engulfs the entire world, containment measures are evolving and they demand quick and effective science communication that can influence the public to make behavioural changes to their health on a mass scale (Kearns and Kearns, 2020). Public health authorities including governments and media organisations have opted for comics in a time of high demand for communication. They find comics a natural and capable medium to respond to the challenges in communicating COVID-19 health messages. The authors have found that comics are being used to harness their visual appeal, packaging science in graphic format, and applying storytelling techniques to communicate messages. This paper has explored the potential of comics as a public health tool during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comics are an interesting medium that weaves together images and lets the readers engage in their own imagination about the story at their own pace. They argue that the presentation of statistics and scientifically accurate

information to impose restrictions would not suffice to influence health behaviour. The public needed to be provided information in a way that helps them make a decision and a change in their behaviour. Narration and storytelling have the potential to communicate that way. The authors cite the example of the anti-vaccine movement that did not resort to any statistics or science but appealed to the emotions of fear and anxiety of the people. They state that statistically significant and science-based evidence is not effective by itself since they are impersonal. The study thus recommends the adaptation of narration in communicating health and science information. Collaboration between health professionals and artists skilled in science communication may be an effective health strategy. They conclude by reiterating that comics are a familiar medium that transcends language barriers, age gaps, knowledge and culture. And that stories appeal more powerfully to the emotions of people than data-driven facts.

Public officials use generic and plain messages to communicate health information to the public. However, health crises such as COVID-19 require better strategies to inform and influence the public. Such a situation requires sustained attention from the public, and thus demands visual design and content that can be emotionally relatable (Verma, 2022). The author applies this philosophy through a series of graphic posters to which he adds advisory information within creative parameters. The purpose of this paper was to enhance noticeability using creative design, and using humour to mitigate negativity around the pandemic. The author concludes by concluding his project in the context of health communication.

#### **USE OF ENTERTAINMENT**

Entertainment-Education is a theory. It is also an evidence-based communication strategy (Riley et al, 2021). This strategy makes use of entertainment to disseminate educational messages. The article discusses three case studies where EE (Entertainment-Education) has been used to communicate has been used as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first case study included the use of radio dramas to communicate health messages including social distancing, quarantine and hygiene. The study revealed enough audience engagement. The second case study also made use of audio dramas to communicate health messages. Some community radio stations also posted audio-visual messages on social media. Audience testimonials demonstrated that listeners could recollect most of the information provided to them. In the third case study, a non-profit organisation collaborated with local creators and researchers to integrate local culture. They used info graphics and tailor-made

messages to communicate about health. Looking at the success of the EE strategy the authors conclude that EE should continue to focus on storytelling while taking into consideration the emerging media formats.

### **USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Public authorities face a major challenge in communication health crises. COVID-19 is a recent example of how health professionals and governments found it difficult to choose the right strategy to communicate health messages effectively, (Poyry et al, 2022). The Prime Minister of Finland involved social media influencers in health communication campaigns. The researchers conducted a qualitative study on how influencers communicated messages about the pandemic and how their followers perceived such communication. They evaluated Instagram posts, stories and comments using the two-step flow communication model and social influence theory. The results of this study showed that social media influencers customised the health messages to suit the needs of their followers, and they did not stick to the exact format of the campaign. They did share the general guidelines, and also demonstrated how they followed the guidelines. This has a greater impact because the followers could then understand how to behave during the pandemic. The study revealed that most of the comments to such posts by the influencers were either positive or supportive. The influencers too responded positively to the comments. The results of the study reveal that most of the health messages shared by social media influencers originated from health campaigns. Although some influencers who are doctors by profession shared detailed information, the followers reacted positively by asking them questions. Looking at the results from the perspective of the two-step flow communication model, the social media influencers acted like opinion leaders. Further, the results stressed the factor that though the influencers had informational influence, their personality and brand factor was evident in their presentation of such information.

### **MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

COVID-19 is one of the biggest health crises in recent times. The pandemic has posed a massive challenge to the medical fraternity as well as the authorities in addressing it. Uncertainty and concern among the public with regard to the virus are palpable throughout the world. This has necessitated the utilisation of health communication and has also created many difficulties in health communication due to the severity and contagious nature of the virus, and the absence of consensus about the evolving science around it (Rains et al, 2020). The authors through this article make an attempt to examine the health promotion



efforts put in during the pandemic, at the community level. They emphasise the need for a trans-disciplinary approach to communicating health messages and that expertise in health communication is indispensable to developing tailor-made messages to influence health behaviour. While they contemplate the challenges faced due to COVID-19, they also discuss features that are critical to making community health promotion more effective. Their study also presents the health promotion campaign they developed immediately to address the pandemic in the state of Arizona. They conclude on a positive note that the pandemic has drawn the attention of health researchers and professionals to the lessons imparted by the pandemic. The viral outbreak has made them rethink their health communication strategies and health promotion at a community level.

### **HEALTH LITERACY**

Health literacy has become a major challenge in the last twenty years (Finset, 2021). The author discusses the importance of health literacy to understand risk since it is crucial to communicate any information about the pandemic. Emphasis is laid on collaborating with communication experts and citizen groups in order to improve the health literacy of the key influencers. This helps promote a better understanding of the information. Referring to the evaluation of some studies, the author notes that health literacy was acknowledged only in a few studies conducted on earlier outbreaks. It is then suggested to consider health literacy in future research on health since it enables a better understanding of the correlation between health literacy and infection control. Further, it is important to consider people's emotions and reactions at different stages by those involved in public health communication. COVID-19 also brought a major transition in clinical communication by shifting the focus from face-to-face communication to remote communication.

### **CONCLUSION**

As this research paper makes an attempt to evaluate a wide range of literature on health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is observed that all the articles cited above agree that COVID-19 presented one of the biggest challenges to effective health communication. Decades of research and communication models and theories could not adequately enable the authorities including the governments and health professionals to successfully communicate essential health information during COVID-19. While the viral outbreak posed a challenge about its nature and spread, another major challenge was to contain the uncertainty. A lot of mixed messages led to confusion and anxiety among the people. The lack of unified messages led to mistrust in the authorities and

unintentional flouting of the protocol and the guidelines. While evidence-based communication has been seen to be effective, the above-cited studies reveal that persuasion proves more effective than simply the dissemination of health information. Scientific evidence was not sufficient to convince the people thereby leading to reluctance in following the norms. Amidst these, unverified misinformation floated around adding more to the confusion. Communicating messages at a mass scale was challenging because people belong to diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Tailored-made and target communication that appealed to the emotions of the people proved more successful than the data-backed scientific facts. Adopting visual aids including comics and info-graphics as a communication strategy is more persuasive than the statement of facts in the form of news and also collaborating with influencers on social media. The pandemic also laid bare the fact that health literacy is crucial for people to understand health information. This paper thus concludes that effective health communication during the pandemic faced several challenges. However, communication campaigns were later moulded to be more receptive to the people after months of experimentation. Going forward it is indispensable for the authorities to involve communication experts to make health communication more effective by bringing health literacy into its scope.

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