

COVID-19 Health Information Seeking: Knowledge and Vested Interests in Midwest Populations

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ABSTRACT

As we see emerging infectious diseases (EID) and re-emerging infectious diseases (rEID) becoming more prevalent, it has become more important to understand public attitudes about health communication and message sources. Health communication has roots in risk and crisis communication, in which we study the salience and threat severity experienced by individuals during times of distress. Through a vested interests theoretical lens, we aim to identify these attitudes about preventative behavior messaging amid a pandemic.

This study aims to aid in the understanding of the social and cultural environment surrounding early stages of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and sets the tone for further studies which may be done through an inoculation theoretical lens.

OBJECTIVE AND PURPOSE

The objective of this study is to better understand the attitudes of recipients to messages regarding public health crises. In studying the attitudes held by the public concerning health-related messaging and where they are obtaining this information, the further knowledge we have about tailoring messages to fit these audiences and where to address their concerns in the most effective manner. Several variables were measured to gauge these attitudes and sources including standard demographic information, knowledge, vested interests, behavioral intentions, as well as self-reported health information seeking (HIS) behaviors. This research could aid in the development of future messaging systems for EID and rEID, such as our current COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ: Does the amount of health information seeking (HIS) about COVID-19 relate to the vested interests of Midwest populations during the first 3 months of the global outbreak?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND CORE CONCEPTS

EID communication can be viewed as a combination of health promotion, risk communication, and crisis communication. Everyone responds to messages differently, and this study was conducted to understand how and when people disregard calculated risk and instead rely on instinct for preventative behavior. Health promotion is not only delivering messages but also extending to issues of trust and authority in how to operate during times of a health crisis.

Health information seeking is an effort to obtain specific information beyond patterns of normal exposure, often driven by uncertainty. We use these patterns to understand message acceptance from various sources.

METHODS

An online survey was conducted and spread through electronic announcements, circulated throughout university departments, and was promoted online to Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas. All materials and measures were approved through the IRB. Questions were designed to measure knowledge, health information seeking patterns/behaviors, and vested interests. A series of MANOVAs were conducted in SPSS 22 to conclude results and find patterns. There were a total of 222 respondents to the survey, consisting of 67 questions and taking an average of 10 minutes and 20 seconds to complete.

RESULTS

While seeking insight regarding how vested interests were affected by information sources, the data set which held the most results were information received by school systems for 2-4 hours per day, in which these individuals reported lower self-efficacy and personal susceptibility than those who received information regarding the EID elsewhere for other periods of time.

Seeking Information from Schools (2-4 Hours)	
<i>Severity</i>	5.61(1.26)
<i>Efficacy</i>	4.93(1.41)
<i>RESPEFF</i>	5.13(1.31)
<i>Susceptibility</i>	3.66(1.21)
<i>Certainty</i>	3.5(1.15)
<i>Immediacy</i>	3.3(1.14)
<i>Salience</i>	5.14(1.58)

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Further research regarding health information seeking may be considered through a qualitative approach in an ethnographic study of those who are producing these health communication messages on behalf of schools, employers, subject matter experts, etc. as well as interviewing random participants who volunteer to explain their attitudes about these messages and where they come from.

Another consideration may be an inoculation theory-based study in which one could study critical thinking versus influence in health communication.

Regarding limitations, participants were expected to be honest and estimate how long they spent receiving information from these various outlets as opposed to having been monitored regularly for the actual time spent receiving news and information. Another weakness of the study to consider is when the data was first collected, COVID-19 was not as persistent of a threat and not widely circulated in the Midwest region.

CONCLUSIONS

Participants proved to have gotten their information from a variety of sources during the COVID-19 outbreak, though it shows in the findings that those who received 2-4 hours towards the beginning of the outbreak had the most impact to their vested interests in preventative measures for the outbreak. This presentation is a small part of a broader study, which could be continued to compare vested interests now from where our knowledge about the virus was upon first survey.

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