

ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS DURING COVID-19 IN PAKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15790844>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
16 May, 2025	16 June, 2025	27 June, 2025	02 July, 2025

ABSTRACT

Toward the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, people in general were a lot of worried about the updates on coronavirus. Information spread by mass media has contributed a crucial role updating the COVID-19 information. The role of media is providing awareness to the people about prevention behavior to control the COVID-19. But People were misinformed by the bogus data and rumors about coronavirus. Therefore, people are worried that they or their friends and family may be infected by COVID-19 in future, which makes them anxious and emotionally distressed.

This qualitative study was explored the role of media in the development of emotional distress during COVID-19 in Pakistan. Data was collected from 4 adults from different city of Pakistan. The sample data was collected using semi-structured interviews with participants selected through a purposive sampling technique. The collected information was then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed that social media play a significant role in facilitating awareness among people and recommendations for self-protective behaviors but the prevalence of disinformation and rumors about the COVID-19 have bombarded on social media leading to heightened fears and emotional distress among many citizens. Furthermore, this widespread misinformation also confused people to find out the reliable sources of information and guidance about COVID-19. This study recommends that the government should initiate media-based health intervention campaigns to reduce emotional distress among the Pakistani population. Additionally, the study also recommended that the government remove media content containing false information about COVID-19. It is purposed that medical specialists and psychologists may be invited to social media programs or broadcast to share useful pandemic-related information. Moreover, governmental authorities are encouraged to establish Official pages which providing accurate and beneficial information about pandemic on different social web sites for the benefit of the general public of Pakistan.

Keywords: COVID-19, social media, False information, Rumors, Awareness, Fear, Emotional distress.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread globally from Wuhan, China, has significantly impacted both physical and mental health worldwide, triggering widespread anxiety, emotional distress, and fear. Social media has

played a crucial role in disseminating updates and information about the pandemic, facilitating risk assessments, and promoting self-protective behaviors. However, this constant coverage has also had a downside:

repeated exposure to pandemic-related news has fueled anxiety and emotional distress. The fear of potential infection, either personally or among loved ones, has become a major concern, causing significant psychological strain on individuals

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also seen a surge of disinformation and rumors on social media, fuelling unfounded fears and confusion among citizens. This has made it challenging for people to identify reliable sources and trustworthy guidance, ultimately harming their mental health. Furthermore, the widespread expression of negative emotions like fear, worry, nervousness, and emotional distress on social media has created a contagious effect, spreading anxiety and unease through social networks. Therefore, During COVID-19, getting information from social media, can increase emotional distress among people. Numerous studies have explored how extensive media coverage of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic can exacerbate mental health issues. Research spanning two decades has investigated the impact of media exposure on short- and long-term health outcomes, offering valuable insights to inform individuals' self-protective behaviors and guide precautions to curb the pandemic's spread (Brien et al., 2020).

Researchers discovered that constant media exposure to news can amplify perceived threats, trigger a 'fight or flight' response and potentially lead to physical and mental health issues. Studies following past traumatic events, such as natural disasters, have shown that both the nature and extent of media exposure play a significant role in determining psychological and physical outcomes. For example, Studies after 9/11 showed that prolonged TV exposure was associated with increased post-traumatic stress and physical health problems in the years that followed. Moreover, individuals who experienced high stress responses after 9/11 were more likely to develop cardiovascular problems over the next 2 years, particularly those who worried about future attacks (Ali, 2020).

Likewise, research during the 2014 Ebola outbreak found that people who consumed several hours of daily media coverage were more likely to experience emotional distress,

worry, and impaired functioning over time, compared to those with more limited media exposure (Garfin, Silver & Holman, 2020). Individuals with heightened concerns may seek out more media coverage, potentially exacerbating their mental health issues. During crises, people turn to media for risk assessments and guidance on self-protective measures. Uncertainty and lack of control can fuel anxiety, which intensifies when information is unclear or poorly communicated, further amplifying perceptions of risk.

According to researchers, media-driven distress during a global pandemic can lead to behaviors that overwhelm healthcare systems and divert critical resources. Past pandemics have shown that excessive media exposure can trigger a surge in emergency department visits, even in low-risk areas. Similarly, during the COVID-19 outbreak, panic buying of facemasks and essential supplies has deprived healthcare workers and high-risk communities of vital resources (Garfin, Silver & Holman, 2020).

To mitigate media-induced distress, researchers suggest the following strategies: Media should report facts without sensationalism or disturbing imagery. The public should rely on trusted sources like the CDC or WHO for updates, limit repeated exposure to media coverage, and be cautious of unverified social media reports. Health researchers should conduct studies to inform public health decisions during and after the pandemic. Healthcare providers should clearly communicate protective measures like handwashing, sanitizing, and social distancing. Providers should promote calm and rational action, encouraging responsible media consumption to support effective public health efforts against COVID-19. (Yao, 2020).

Research Questions

- What is the role of media during COVID-19 in Pakistan?
- What is the role of media in the development of emotional distress during COVID-19 in Pakistan?
- How can people protect ourselves from coronavirus?

• Method

Research Design

The research design for this qualitative study was exploratory.

Sample of the Study

Participant	Age	Gender	Marital status
1	26	Female	Unmarried
2	24	Female	Unmarried
3	26	Male	Unmarried
4	29	Male	Married

Instrument

The interview questions were designed by reviewing the existing literature. The questions explored the experiences of individuals. The questions were structured to be open ended in order to get information about the experiences of the participants.

Procedure

To conduct this study the permission taken from the department. The participants were selected via personal contacts and purposive sampling. The sample will be consisted of (N=4) Adults age range (18 to 30), the sample will be further divided into (n=2) male and (n=2) female. Only those participants were included who willingly participated in the research. All the queries were answered by the researcher. Oral consent was taken from all participants preceding the interviews. Thorough, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The interview sessions ranged from 20 -30 minutes and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed. The transcripts worked as the raw data for the present study. The transcripts were analyzed by Thematic analysis, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The sample of the present study comprised Four participants (2 male and 2 female). Their age ranged between 18 and 30. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, with participants chosen through a purposive sampling technique. The sample represented diverse cities within Pakistan.

Analysis

Data was analyzed by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was done with the help of six phases suggested by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to produce meaningful patterns. These phases are as follows.

- Familiarization with data
- generating initial codes
- searching for themes among codes
- reviewing themes
- defining and naming themes
- writing up thematic analysis

First interview data was transcribed. After the transcription, the data was arranged and analyzed through coding. Coding is a process which structures the data into analyzable form. The codes were mainly developed by main questions with the help of interview questions which were developed with the research question and objectives of the study. Themes were mainly based on the interview questions; however, some themes also came out as a result of the data analysis process.

Results

With reference to the personal experience of the participants the following themes were derived from the transcribed interviews of all the participants.

Major themes	Sub themes	Key words
Basic Knowledge about Coronavirus	Coronavirus	viral disease, like flue, respiratory illness, Attacks lungs
	Virus Originated	leaked from a research lab in Wuhan (china) from animal market in china drinking soup of Bat, Unknown source. Government conspiracy
	Incubation Period	2-14 days

	Diagnostic Testing	Viral tests from testing lab, holdings one's breath for 10 seconds
	common sign and symptoms	fever, cough, sore throat, headaches
	Severe symptoms	difficulty in breathing, Death, Disease harmful in the west
Factual and factitious Knowledge about coronavirus	Main method of transmission	Coughing and Sneezing person to person, Talk shaking hands, hug
	susceptible person	Children and Adults People with Weakened Immunity
	Treatment	vaccine available, prevention sprays, Strong immunity
	Strong immunity	eating sweet potatoes, taking certain vitamins and supplements, eating garlic.
	Source of information	Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, news channels, Friends
	Frequency of watching media	7 hours per day, almost 12 hours per day, most of time when using phone
	Quarantine	People live in quarantine, 14 days, they have virus or not, inject something, Death
Causes and precautions measures	Spread the COVID-19	Not use precautionary measures, frozen food, ice cream, mosquito, eating chicken
	Stop the spread of COVID-19	Hot temperature, exposure to sunlight, drinking warm water, Hot bathes, heating, steams inhalation, Clear airway of respiratory track, Face mask, drinking water every 15 minutes, use hand sanitizers, maintain distance
	Hand sanitizer	prepared at home, mixing rum, bleach and fabric softener
	Precautions Behaviors	Wearing mask, Wash or disinfect their hands, avoid public places, events, avoiding public transport (bus, train), contact with people, bought larger amounts of essential foods, Storing food
	Perceived risk	Infected with covid-19 in future, Family and friends might infected with covid-19 in future
News about Doctors, government and coronavirus	Role of doctors	Provide treatment, ensuring the best health conditions, injecting and killing the people, taking three lakhs on a dead body
	Role of government	getting donations from outside world, political conspiracy, conspiracy at global level, lock down, exaggerated number of patients
	Update about Coronavirus	Increased number of patients, Increased deaths, Virus is fake, government showing exaggerated picture, didn't saw any covid patient in my area,
Role of media	Pros of media	Updating news about COVID-19, spread awareness, recommendations for self-protective behaviors

	Cons of media	Anxiety, Fear, emotional distress, worry, confusion
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Update about Coronavirus

All participants have different information about coronavirus. All participant reported according to her/his experience.

Participant 1 reported that:

“Coronavirus is a viral disease. It is like flue. The virus can cause Symptoms of the disease are fever, cough, sore throat and headaches”

Participant 2 reported that:

“Coronavirus is fake. I didn’t saw any covid patient in my area”.

Participant 3 reported that:

“Coronavirus is viral disease which damage lungs and cause breathing problems. In Pakistan coronavirus spread rate low but our government is showing an exaggerated picture of this”.

Participant 4 reported that:

“Coronavirus is fake and doctors are injecting and killing the people. Taking three lakhs on a dead body”.

It reflects that some participant have knowledge about coronavirus and its effect on health. But other participant reported that virus is fake and criticize the doctors and government. The extracts also show that participant taken information from different sources of social media. But the information from different source confused the participant like one participant said that Coronavirus is a viral disease other said that coronavirus is fake.

Virus Originated

Participant 1 reported that:

“The virus was manufactured and leaked from a research lab in Wuhan (china)”

Participant 2 reported that:

“Spread from animal market in china”

Participant 3 reported that:

“It can be happened by drinking soup of Bat.”

Participant 4 reported that:

“Coronavirus reveals ongoing political conspiracy and might be conspiracy at global level”

China is very criticized because on social media many rumors about china that the virus was manufactured and leaked from a research lab in Wuhan (china). Also listen that spread

from animal market in china. And it can be happened by drinking soup of Bat. There are many rumors about government that coronavirus is political conspiracy for getting donations.

News about Doctors, government

Participant 1 reported that:

“Heard in the news the coronavirus is fake and doctors are injecting and killing the people. Taking three lakhs on a dead body”.

Participant 2 reported that:

“The government might be doing it for getting donations from outside world.”

Participant 3 reported that:

“Govt take people to the quarantine center and they inject something into them and after some days they die”.

There are many rumors about quarantine center, doctors and government also spread. Govt take people to the quarantine center and they inject something into them and after some days they die. People are scared to go in quarantine center Doctors are injecting and killing the people and taking three lakhs on a dead body. So, people hide the symptoms and not go to hospitals for test due to fear of death. Government shows the exaggerate picture of coronavirus for the sake of donations.

Causes and precautions measures

Participant 1 reported that:

“you can lower your risk of getting coronavirus by boost your immunity. you can boost your immunity by eating sweet potatoes and taking certain vitamins and supplements and eating garlic”

Participant 2 reported that:

“steams inhalation used as the cure of coronavirus because virus does not survive in heat. Therefore, exposure to sunlight, drinking warm water, Hot bathes or heating will kill the coronavirus”.

Participant 3 reported that:

“the chances of having a COVID-19 virus increased through frozen food or ice cream. I am also avoiding frozen food and ice cream ever since the virus came”.

"Animal can carry the virus that causes coronavirus. Last day I have read the news eating chicken will cause coronavirus and mosquito spread the COVID-19 virus"

Participant 4 reported that:

"Drinking water every 15 minutes was claimed to prevent coronavirus infection. There are sprays as the prevention from coronavirus"

It demonstrates that There are many wrong prescriptions prevent from coronavirus such as including ones about how to combat the coronavirus. This virus only affects children and the elderly, or it is advised to "avoid frozen food or ice cream to prevent from Corona virus." You can strengthen your immune system and reduce your risk of contracting COVID by eating sweet potatoes, taking certain vitamins and supplements, or taking garlic. You can also avoid the virus by drinking warm water every 15 minutes and inhaling steam.

There are sprays as the prevention from coronavirus. Few days ago, a message circulated on WhatsApp nobody came out from the house after 12 AM the Government spray as the prevention from coronavirus through helicopter.

Perceived risk

All participant reported that They have perceived risk Contaminated by coronavirus in subsequent period also Family and friends may be infected with covid-19 in future which cause fear and emotional distress among all participants. Participant also reported that they confused about coronavirus news getting from different sources that make it hard for them to find truthful sources and steadfast direction to prevent from coronavirus which increased the risk level of getting infected and cause anxiety and emotional distress.

Role of Media

Participant 1 reported that:

"The news channels effective platform to get information about coronavirus"

"Spend most of time to listen and heard the news about coronavirus"

Participant 2 reported that:

"The information from different source getting me confused like one day heard steams inhalation used as the cure of coronavirus, eat

this this food prevent from coronavirus but the next day I heard that it is fake news like steams inhalation is prevent from coronavirus"

Participant 3 reported that:

"Social media spread awareness about coronavirus and recommendations for self-protective behaviors and spend 12 hours per day watching news about coronavirus"

Participant 4 reported that:

"Disinformation and rumors about the COVID-19 have bombarded on social media which increased the risk of getting infected with coronavirus which cause negative feelings, such as fear, worry, nervous, emotional distress"

It reflects that media have positive and negative role during the covid_19 pandemic. In these days people spend most of their time to watching the news about coronavirus. Updating the news about COVID-19, spread awareness, recommendations for self-protective behaviors like Wearing mask, Individuals should wash or sanitize their hands more frequently than usual, refrain from attending public gatherings or events, and avoid using public transportation such as buses or trains. It is also advisable to minimize contact with other people. Simultaneously, social media fueled baseless anxieties that could mislead individuals, making it challenging for them to identify credible sources and trustworthy guidance, thereby negatively impacting their physical and mental well-being.

These rumors are causing significant issues for the general population. The problem arises when individuals start treating themselves with incorrect prescriptions, leading to various issues

Discussion

The study's findings show that at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the public was particularly concerned about the news of coronavirus and raised awareness about coronavirus because they had been misled by incorrect information. Information transmitted by the media has had a significant impact on public risk perception, causing sadness, anxiety, and emotional discomfort. These findings are corroborated by study

conducted in China. Citizens exposed to social media during the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Wuhan. The study looked into the incidence of mental health issues and their relationship with social media use. A cross-sectional study of 18-year-old Chinese individuals was done. The assessment was conducted using an online survey. Social media exposure (SME), sadness, and anxiety were assessed using the Chinese version of the WHO-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5) and the Chinese version of the generalized anxiety disorder scale (GAD-7). Multivariable logistic regressions were utilized to discover links between social media use and mental health issues. The findings show there are high prevalence of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety which positively associated with frequently SME during the COVID-19 outbreak (Gao, Fu & Dai, 2020).

As the coronavirus illness (COVID-19) pandemic continues to worsen, media outlets are disseminating a variety of information regarding the virus, including more and more false information and rumors. Additionally, the public is eager to hear from the media about the most recent COVID-19 information. Nonetheless, it has been proposed that frequent exposure to public health emergencies, such as infectious diseases, in the media may increase psychological discomfort. Therefore, the current study looked at the relationship between psychological discomfort in the Chinese general population and media exposure to information regarding COVID-19. Chinese nationals who were at least eighteen years old were asked to complete an online survey regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. To assess media exposure to COVID-19, respondents were asked how many hours they spent per day (≤ 1 , 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, ≥ 7) receiving information from various media sources (e.g., television, radio, newspaper, online websites, and social media) in the previous week. Psychological distress was assessed using the PHQ-9 and the GAD-7. The findings demonstrate a link between media exposure to knowledge regarding COVID-19 and psychological suffering in the population. Torales et al. (2020) describe the

harmful consequences of repeated media exposure on mental health in the community. The results show that getting information from social media, can increase people's awareness about the risk. COVID-19 has claimed the lives of numerous people around the world. As the number of deaths from the disease increases over the world. Because the virus has a high transmission rate. People's risk perception of COVID-19 is one of the factors contributing to cause anxiety and emotional distress and it is becoming increasingly important to understand public risk perception. These findings are supported by a research. The aim of this research was to examine risk factors, including the use of social media, for probable anxiety and depression in the community and among health professionals in the epicenter, Wuhan, China. They conducted an online survey via WeChat, the most widely used social media platform in China, which was administered to community and health professionals in Wuhan. The results show that community and health professional reported anxiety and depression. Close contact with individuals with COVID-19 and spending ≥ 2 hours daily on COVID-19 news via social media were also associated with probable anxiety and depression in community (Chao, Yang & Leung, 2020).

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest that the government should pay more attention to mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and emotional discomfort in the general population, while addressing covid-19. The government should provide mental health treatments through various channels, such as online consultation. The next consequence is to combat disinformation and rumors regarding covid-19 by monitoring and filtering misleading material while pushing factual information on social media.

LIMITATIONS

The sample size in the research was small and the results cannot be generalized to general population. The participants of the study were all adults we can investigate the experience of children and old people as well.

CONCLUSION

The current research highlights toward the start of the COVID-19 flare-up, people in general were a lot of worried about the updates on coronavirus as they were misinformed by the bogus data. Data dispersed by media has assumed an essential job in affecting the open hazard observation and cause emotional distress and uneasiness. The social media also play important role in educating people about prevention behavior to control the COVID-19. In the manner, study means to give the rules to the legislature in understanding the components that could lead the emotional wellness issues (Anxiety and emotional distress). These findings compelled the legislators to pay more attention to psychological well-being issues, including emotional distress and tension throughout the entire community while dealing with COVID-19. The legislature ought to give emotional wellness administrations by shifted channel like online consultation. The following ramifications is to battle with disinformation and rumors about the COVID-19 by observing and tracking in hope of curbing their spread.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What do you know about coronavirus?
 2. What are the sources of information about coronavirus? (Like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or News channel etc)
 3. What is the frequency of watching media? (How many hours)
 4. Did you think the role of media is educating people about prevention behavior to control the COVID-19?
 5. Did you think media increasing fear, distress and confusion among people?
 6. Did you trust in what is posted on social media?
 7. How likely do you think that you might become infected with COVID-19 in the near future?
- How likely do you think that your family member and friends might become infected with COVID-19 in the near future?