Chapter 7

Health Communication During the COVID–19 Pandemic in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors are looking for the answer to how novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has influenced health communication in online platforms. The aim was to investigate with a newer qualitative research method (netnography) how the scenes of communication have been changed during the COVID-19 crisis. The content of some popular online public forums was analyzed that came up during the outbreak in Hungary. The participant opinions and attitudes regarding health communication of COVID-19 crisis management were observed. The community acceptance of two measures were investigated: necessity of wearing a mask and the mandatory evacuation of hospital beds. These topics divided the opinion of the citizens. In spite of the efficient COVID-19 outbreak management, there were very extreme and different opinions (skepticism, indignation, accusation, acceptance) in the online community about the accuracy and reliability of health communication. The results may support the future improvement of health crisis management.

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic, which originated from China at the end of 2019 and then became a pandemic, poses perhaps the greatest challenge for the world in the last century. Healthcare systems have the biggest role in the epidemiological control, reducing morbidity and mortality, and mitigating the economic downturn. Communication has a special place in the organization of fast and efficient healthcare and in the preparation of the population. Communication with the general public and health professionals is primarily aimed at strengthening the sense of security and awareness in the coronavirus pandemic, but solidarity also plays an important role.

Epidemiological measures have brought the transformation of communication channels used in health care. One of the important elements of the measures to slow down the spread of the pandemic is the reduction of personal contacts, the minimization of personal doctor-patient meetings, and the introduction of remote consultation. In the current situation, the Internet has become one of the main arenas of communication, and the role of social media in the dissemination of health information and social communication is becoming more and more important. Reaching the most vulnerable population over the age of 65 in the pandemic requires the use of offline communication channels as well. The delivery of short, focused messages (eg. stay at home, wash your hands) can be facilitated by credible professionals.

As the importance of communication in the COVID-19 pandemic increased worldwide, informing the population about epidemiological measures in Hungary also became a priority, and the main channels of this were the media (TV, radio, online press), which sought to reach out to the authorities and institutions. For this collaboration to be successful, credibility, reliability, comprehensibility, and most importantly, trust are required in communication.

Unfortunately, in connection with COVID-19 outbreak in Hungary, a specific, highly centralized, one-channel communication is typical to still this day, so health communication can only be examined in the light of this. Where healthcare institutions could not independently release data on the number of infected, treated and deceased individuals, where citizens could only be informed about the COVID-19 situation in the country through official channels and only by region, and where military commanders have been appointed to healthcare institutions, there have been uncertainties in institutional communication and among the population on a number of issues.

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