

Chapter 1

From TikTok Trends to Pandemic Essentials: A Comparative Analysis of the World Health Organization's Health Communication Strategies on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

This study comparatively examines WHO's utilization of TikTok in health communication during and after the pandemic. Employing content analysis, the research dissects WHO's TikTok account, encompassing engagement, video formats, types, message functions, characters, and emotional elements. Findings highlight WHO's dissemination of instructive and motivational content, predominantly focusing on COVID-19 and other diseases. During the pandemic, WHO educated the public on symptoms and transmission modes while issuing warnings about potential outbreaks. Animated graphics gained prominence, and healthcare professionals conveyed positive messages. Post-pandemic, posting frequency decreased, and content strategies shifted. Optimistic content, increased involvement of public figures, and targeting younger audiences through dance videos characterized this phase.

INTRODUCTION

Health communication is a strategic approach to influence, engage, empower, and provide support to diverse communities concerning health and significant health-related issues (Schiavo, 2013). The evolution of internet technologies has wrought a profound transformation in the domain of health communication, with social media emerging as a pivotal conduit for the widespread dissemination of public health

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information to a diverse and extensive audience. Health organizations and professionals have harnessed the power of social media to distribute true and reliable health information. (Ventola, 2014; Park et al., 2019; Pianese & Belfiore, 2021; Chen & Wang, 2021). Notably, during the unprecedented coronavirus disease pandemic, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok played a significant role in disseminating health information, marking a milestone in the history of pandemics (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020; DePaula et al., 2022). Especially, TikTok has been a new effective medium that provides opportunities to deliver health information to different populations and groups.

TikTok, a mobile video platform characterized by short-form content lasting a maximum of 10 minutes, has become a significant medium for health communication during the pandemic. With availability in over 150 countries, TikTok boasts a user base of over one billion monthly active users and has witnessed over 3 billion downloads (We are Social & Houtsuite, 2023). The notable increase in TikTok downloads can be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This rapid expansion of TikTok has presented a distinctive opportunity for public health agencies to effectively disseminate COVID-19-related information and educate the population (Li et al., 2021). A considerable portion of TikTok's user base comprises adolescents and young adults, with approximately 50% falling within the age range of 10 to 29 (Roth et al., 2021:2). Consequently, to combat the pandemic effectively, it is imperative that all members of the community, including young individuals, possess an understanding of the gravity of COVID-19 and adhere to appropriate preventive measures. Considering its extensive popularity among young users, TikTok can serve as a viable medium for disseminating health information to this specific demographic (Li et al., 2021).

TikTok provides health organizations with a channel to convey their endeavors, establish a community dedicated to their mission, and secure backing for their undertakings. Additionally, TikTok furnishes a platform for organizations to instruct the general public on diverse health-related issues and mobilize the community to take preemptive actions against an array of health concerns. Extensive research exists regarding the utilization of social media by public health agencies. Nevertheless, research studies tend to generally focus on social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Park et al., 2011; Thackeray et al., 2013; Park et al., 2016; Okay et al., 2020). Despite the abundance of studies exploring the unique features and functionalities of various social media platforms in different domains, there is a scarcity of research investigating the health communication strategies employed by public health agencies specifically on TikTok (Zhu et al., 2019; Basch, Hillyer & Jaime, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). These studies also focused on the communication during the pandemic. To our knowledge, no published studies are focusing on health communication strategies after the pandemic and conducting comparative analysis on the content of COVID-19 material on TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The primary objective of this study is to comparatively examine the health communication activities carried out by the World Health Organization (WHO) during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By closely analyzing the communication strategies implemented by the WHO, this research seeks to acquire valuable insights into the efficacy and dynamic nature of health communication in response to the pandemic. Through a comprehensive analysis, this study aims to make a substantial contribution to the existing body of knowledge on health communication practices during times of public health crises, with a specific emphasis on the WHO's engagement across diverse platforms, including TikTok. The outcomes of this study are anticipated to offer significant insights for both public health agencies and

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