

Battling the infodemics: health communication effectiveness during COVID-19

Nirosha Elsem Varghese

I Sabat¹, NE Varghese², S Neuman-Böhme³, PP Barros¹, W Brouwer³, J van Exel³, J Schreyögg⁴, T Stargardt⁴

¹NOVA School of Business and Economics, Carcavelos, Portugal

²Centre for Research on Health and Social Care Management, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy

³Erasmus School of Health Policy & Management, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands

⁴Hamburg Center for Health Economics, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

Contact: nirosha.varghese@phd.unibocconi.it

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in many parts of the world has posed serious concerns to the public health. During this period of crisis, the World Health Organization (WHO) reminds all countries and communities that the spread of this virus can be significantly slowed or even reversed through the implementation of robust containment and control measures. The WHO has also asked the public to be

careful while reading and spreading health recommendations from untrustworthy online sources of information. Myths and misbeliefs about the prevention and spread of COVID-19 not only create global panic but also pose risks to people's lives and public health in general. Rampant misinformation on the disease slows down the efforts of public health bodies to contain the outbreak. Therefore, the role of public health bodies in communicating the right message and in the right form to the public is crucial.

In our study, we aim to assess the effectiveness of communication strategies used by international and national public health authorities to inform the public on COVID-19 risks and prevention. In particular, we conduct a survey experiment on a large sample (N=4000) of adults from seven European countries to test the efficacy of public health messages in a form of prevention and corrective information provision. The study seeks to investigate how people's risk perceptions and behaviors change subject to the preventive information provision or treatment with the information countering widely spread misperceptions about the COVID-19 as compared to the control group.

The findings of this research will be relevant for policymakers and public health professionals in the development of effective communication strategies during disease outbreaks.

Key messages:

- Risk perceptions towards COVID-19 and their determinants across European countries are unknown.
- Unclear effectiveness of public health messages in a form of prevention and corrective information provision.