

Correspondence

Not all world leaders use Twitter in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: impact of the way of Angela Merkel on psychological distress, behaviour and risk perception

ABSTRACT

At a time of growing governmental restrictions and ‘physical distancing’ in order to decelerate the spread of COVID-19, psychological challenges are increasing. Social media plays an important role in maintaining social contact as well as exerting political influence. World leaders use it not only to keep citizens informed but also to boost morale and manage people’s fears. However, some leaders do not follow this approach; an example is the German Chancellor. In a large online survey, we aimed to determine levels of COVID-19 fear, generalized anxiety, depression, safety behaviour, trust in government and risk perception in Germany. A total of 12 244 respondents participated during the period of restraint and the public shutdown in March 2020. Concurrent with the German Chancellor’s speech, a reduction of anxiety and depression was noticeable in the German population. It appears that, in addition to using social media platforms like Twitter, different—and sometimes more conservative—channels for providing information can also be effective.

To the editor:

Since the outbreak of the SARS CoV-2-virus in China, a vast number of unprecedented political initiatives have been undertaken internationally to keep the pandemic under control.¹ People all over the world have been exposed to increasingly unsettling news, and lately also unparalleled incursions into their lives. In Germany after a period of restraint, federal governments announced the shutdown of educational institutions on Friday, 13 March 2020. This was the first direct encroachment onto the lives of a large part of the population. German borders were partially closed on 15 March. The following day, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, among other leaders, appealed for solidarity and compliance with medical recommendations by a long awaited public speech (unprecedented television address), whereas other international leaders repeatedly also used Twitter.² Finally, on 22 March, the government announced a prohibition of contact, which largely bans gatherings of more than two people in public spaces. The political effects of the COVID-19-pandemic are unprecedented, as are the psychological. However, how do people cope with these changes and implementations, as well as the spread of the

virus as such? We launched a survey to ask respondents about the level of threat they perceived, their trust in governmental interventions, their level of general anxiety and depression, their safety-related behavior (i.e. buying groceries), and how they evaluate virus-specific hazards. Running the survey over that acutely critical period of 2 weeks allowed us to investigate developments over time from 10 to 24 March (Fig. 1). From the first day onwards, COVID-19-related fear, as well as safety behavior, show a clear upswing with a peak 1 day after the announcement of governmental restrictions and curtailment of individual freedoms. COVID-19-related fear peaks a second time 1 day after the Chancellor’s speech. Trust in governmental interventions to reduce the spread of COVID-19 increases from the day of their implementation onwards. A rising tendency is also shown for anxiety and depression. This suggests that concern about COVID-19 could cause more disconcertion alongside psychopathological manifestations. Slight upward trends can be seen for respondents’ evaluation of the risk of catching the virus, of suffering complications and of dying from it (if diseased). In addition, the reported risk of suffering complications and the risk of dying from COVID-19 peak

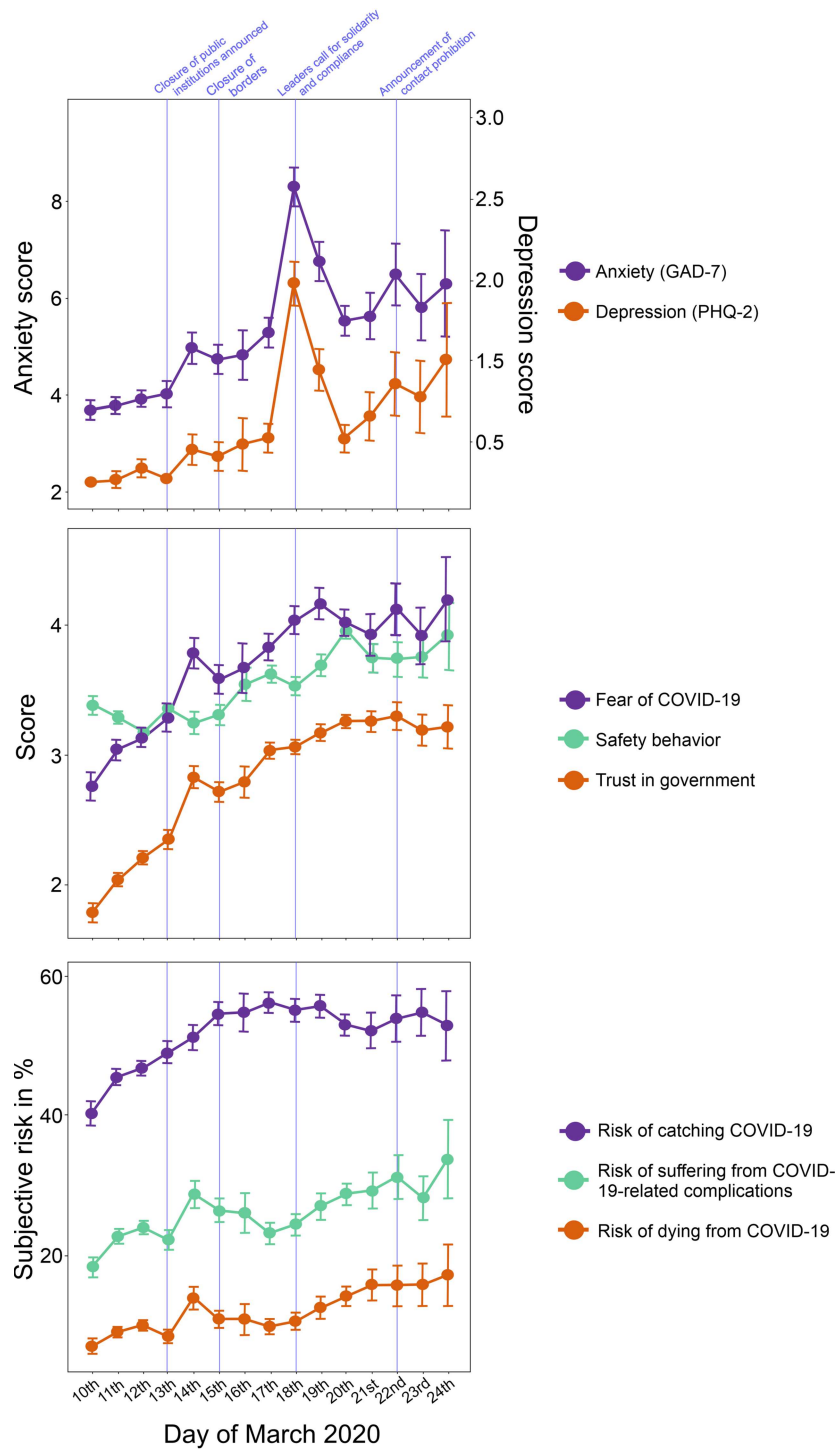


Fig. 1 Results on the psychological impact of the spread of COVID-19 from 10 March to 24 March 2020. (a) and (b) show self-reported levels of anxiety and depression as measured using standardized instruments (GAD-7 and PHQ-2), as well as COVID-19-related fear, trust in government interventions, and safety-related behavior (e.g. stockpiling groceries) on a seven-point Likert scale over time. On 22 March, 11.9% of the respondents reached the cutoff for depression and 10% reached the cutoff for generalized anxiety. (c) shows judgements concerning the likelihood of dying from, suffering complications from or catching COVID-19 in percent. Overall, 12,244 respondents participated. Vertical lines indicate dates of significant political landmarks in Germany. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

on the day after safety policies were announced, possibly demonstrating a top-down regulation of risk evaluation under stress.³ Besides illustrating the indubitably increasing concern regarding the spread of COVID-19, insights are three-fold: people are profoundly disconcerted by the COVID-19 outbreak, and this might even reach a critical threshold. In this case, establishing emergency infrastructure for people suffering from withdrawal and psychological disconcertion is crucial.^{4,5} Second, the level of trust in governmental policies is gaining ground, not only via social media but all along with public speeches. Third, the subjective perceived risk is overestimated compared to existing incidence rates,⁶ which might be a result of the feeling of threat. The public concern about COVID-19 needs to be acknowledged by an explicit information policy.⁷

Conflict of interest

We have no competing interests.

References

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