

# Emotions play key role on social media during outbreaks, study suggests

March 23 2020

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Sang-Hwa Oh became interested in how governments communicate about risk through the media when observing a protest in her native South Korea 12 years ago regarding mad cow disease. When a MERS outbreak in 2015 also brought about serious public concerns, the professor in advertising sought to study how people used social media during the event and the role of emotion in influencing their behavior. Credit: Fred Zwicky

Heading off a disease outbreak like COVID-19 means motivating people to assess their risk and alter their behavior, and yet the role of social media in that process is little understood.

A recently published study of [social media](#) use in South Korea during a 2015 MERS outbreak suggests emotions might play a key role.

In the study published online by the journal Health Communication, researchers examined the role of fear and anger in connection with exposure to MERS-related information through social [media](#). They found that those with higher levels of fear and anger related to the disease also were more likely to report that they consumed more information about it through social media.

The researchers also found those emotions appeared to play a role—fear more than anger—in motivating those who had consumed more disease information through social media to engage in preventative behavior.

The lead author of the study was Sang-Hwa Oh, a professor in advertising at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Oh has focused her recent research on social media effects related to [health issues](#)—including studies underway during the current pandemic.

Oh's interest in the media and health was spurred by a 2008 protest by South Koreans against the importation of American beef, resulting from fears about an outbreak of mad cow disease. Evidence suggested the risk might be low, she said, but the government had done little to address [public concerns](#).

"I became particularly interested in how government can play a better role in explaining or communicating with the population regarding risk issues," Oh said.

Infectious disease became a particular interest with the growing use of social media, she said. "People during outbreaks come to social media in search of the most-updated information." Especially when other government or media sources are lacking or misleading, social media offers the ability to share information immediately and with a wide range of people, and it's accessible all the time from everywhere, she said.

Social media also makes it easy to share emotions, Oh said. "People's initial reaction to an infectious-disease outbreak can be very emotional and intense. They think about how that kind of disease can affect them, immediately, or their family."

In South Korea in 2015, as in 2008, Oh felt the government failed to adequately address the public's concerns, giving them added incentive to rely on social media. According to one survey conducted during the outbreak, more than 70% of respondents said they got their MERS-related information primarily through social media.

Oh and her research colleagues found participants for their study through an online survey firm that supplied a representative sample based on age, gender and region. They analyzed survey responses from 400 participants. Half of the respondents were male, half female, with an average age of about 38.

Participants were asked to assess how much they had seen information on MERS on social media "such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube." They also were asked to assess their levels of risk perception, fear and anger related to the [outbreak](#), and the degree to which they had engaged in specific preventative behaviors such as not going to public spaces and washing their hands.

Oh said the findings suggest that public health communicators and

policymakers should pay more attention to the role of emotions during infectious-[disease outbreaks](#), and maybe monitor those emotions through social media in order to better address public concerns.

"Many experts or scientists assume that people are going to make a judgment about risk based only on scientific statistics, but that's not true. Rather, social, cultural, psychological and communicative factors affect the process of assessing risk, and thus it is a much more complicated process," she said.

"Those experts and scientists sometimes criticize the public's reaction to risk as irrational, but if they don't understand people's emotional responses, then they're not going to do a good job in explaining the risks and communicating what to do. Telling people 'don't panic' will not work unless you adequately address and act upon what makes people worried, fearful and upset."

**More information:** Sang-Hwa Oh et al. The Effects of Social Media Use on Preventive Behaviors during Infectious Disease Outbreaks: The Mediating Role of Self-relevant Emotions and Public Risk Perception, *Health Communication* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2020.1724639](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1724639)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Emotions play key role on social media during outbreaks, study suggests (2020, March 23) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-emotions-key-role-social-media.html>

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