

Understanding the psychological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic

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In response to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic, the Psychological Science Accelerator (PSA) issued a call on March 13th for rapid and impactful proposals to understand the psychological and

behavioral aspects of the pandemic. Singapore Management University (SMU) Assistant Professor of Psychology (Education) Andree Hartanto was invited to participate in the project.

"My contribution was to comment on the research proposal before the study began, do pilot testing on the study with researchers from other labs, and run the actual study in Singapore," Professor Hartanto told the Office of Research and Tech Transfer.

The PSA is a globally distributed network of over 500 psychological science laboratories, representing over 70 countries on all six continents, that coordinates data collection for democratically selected studies. Its mission is to accelerate the accumulation of reliable and generalisable evidence in psychological science, reducing the gap between truth about human behavior and mental processes and our current understanding.

Accepted for publication

The research project broadly aims to provide suggestions on how to best ensure compliance with health-promoting behaviors and manage [negative feelings](#) associated with the pandemic, as the mitigation of a pandemic depends on how the population, as a whole, engage in behaviors that limit the spread of the virus.

While the study is due to be completed later this year, it has already been accepted for publication in principle by *Nature Human Behavior*, an online-only monthly journal dedicated to the best research into human behavior from across the social and natural sciences.

"The remarkable part about this project is that the proposal was accepted as a registered report at *Nature Human Behavior*, meaning that regardless of whether the results are positive or negative, it will still be published there," Professor Hartanto enthuses.

Professor Hartanto appointed Nadyanna Majeed, a fourth-year SMU undergraduate in Psychology and his former independent study student, as the lead investigator for the project at SMU. "I believe it will provide a unique and important learning opportunity for Nadya as an undergraduate, and as she fast tracks to graduate school in August this year."

As the lead investigator, Nadya tells the Office of Research & Tech Transfer that she is responsible for all aspects of the study in Singapore, where SMU is the only participating institution. "It includes roles such as recruiting participants, running the actual study, and also administrative tasks such as making sure the participants receive their remuneration."

The study

Apart from the research team at SMU, there are over 100 other labs from various countries collaborating on data collection for this project. The project is made up of three sub-studies, each focusing on a different aspect.

The first sub-study draws on insights from behavioral science and public health, and seeks to understand if message framing in terms of gains (e.g. protecting others) versus losses (e.g. endangering others) can improve policy support, information seeking, and intentions to engage in preventative behavior related to COVID-19.

The second sub-study is related to coping with [negative emotions](#), as negative emotions triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak can have detrimental effects on people's health and well-being. One way in which people cope with negative emotions is by employing emotion-regulation strategies that alter the strength of their emotional responses. This sub-study compares the effectiveness of various coping strategies related to distressing information about the pandemic, such as photographs of sick

people in the news.

The last sub-study aims to test the effectiveness of different types of messages encouraging social distancing. Nadya explains: "Specifically, we compare the effectiveness of an autonomy-supportive message, which strives to take the person's perspective and provide rationale and structure for the desired behavior, versus a controlling message, which uses more pressuring, prescriptive language, versus no specific message where the objective or factual information is presented in a neutral tone, without any extra affirmation."

Methodology

Research studies in SMU are normally conducted in the psychology lab, but due to COVID-19, the team is unable to carry out their study in person. Instead, the study is conducted online. Participants are recruited through SMU's subject pool system and are assigned to a bundle of sub-studies randomly and within each sub-study, they are also randomly assigned to a condition as the study uses a within-subjects design.

"Participants are assigned to one of two bundles: the message-framing bundle which comprises two sub-studies, or the emotion-regulation bundle," Nadya clarifies. "To complete all three sub-studies would not be feasible as it would take up too much time for each participant."

In the first sub-study in the message-framing bundle, participants are randomly assigned to either a gain condition where behaviors are framed as protecting others, or a loss condition where the behaviors are framed as endangering others. Participants are shown messages that are framed accordingly. Then, they are asked about their attitudes and opinions about relevant health policies and their desire to seek more information related to the pandemic, and their intentions to engage in preventative behaviors against COVID-19.

In the second sub-study, participants are randomly assigned to read either a supportive message, a controlling message, or a neutral message. The supportive message stresses the rationale behind and structure of the desired behavior of social distancing, and takes on a more understanding and sympathetic tone, whereas with the controlling message, pressurizing language is used to coerce people into complying. After viewing their assigned message, participants report whether they would or would not comply with the social distancing measures.

In the emotion-regulation bundle, participants are randomly assigned to and taught a coping strategy, which they will then use throughout the experiment. They are shown a series of distressing photographs of COVID-19 taken from news agencies around the world, and are asked to use their assigned coping strategy to regulate their emotions.

Benefits of the study

Nadya believes that the way a message is framed and how we choose to cope in a crisis is important because it can have impacts on how relevant organizations may choose to enact their policies. Governments or health authorities can use the knowledge from the study to better address their citizens or patients by creating effective messages in their press releases, infographics, and information on their websites, so as to increase compliance with important behaviors such as social distancing and wearing masks. Ultimately, these measures are important in helping to slow the spread of the virus.

"Virus transmission cannot be addressed alone. We've seen during this pandemic that the whole population must work together to reduce the spread. Ensuring that messages are effective is important in preventing even more people from getting sick and losing their lives, as even one individual choosing not to cooperate can endanger their whole community," Nadya argues.

She adds: "The results from the emotion-regulation study can be used by mental health professionals such as counselors, psychologists, and social workers to help individuals cope with distressing events. Not just with regard to this pandemic, but also in general. From this study, we can see which strategies are more effective than others. It's important that we find effective coping strategies so that people can find the best ways to cope."

Provided by Singapore Management University

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