

# How is Instagram used by health agencies to engage with the public during the COVID-19 crisis?

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Credit: Aalto University

Most of the images shared by major health agencies (NHS, CDC, WHO, IFRC) relate to preventive measures, health advisories, gratitude and resilience of front-line workers. Social media messaging depicting well known personalities, influencers, and celebrities received greater engagement. Furthermore, posts with inquisitive messaging, infographics, or dispelling myths/fake news/misinformation also receive more attention.

Pictures can speak a thousand words! Given the significance of images for [online information](#) sharing, a team of researchers attempted to understand how pictures on social media can be used to communicate and engage the public with [health](#) messaging during a crisis. More specifically, the research focuses on the kind of messaging that has been portrayed by the leading public health agencies through Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Instagram user engagement was assessed through likes and comments indices.

Aqdas Malik, a researcher in the Department of Computer Science collaborated with researchers from U.S. (M. Laeeq Khan, Ohio University) and Canada (Anabel Quan-Haase, Western University) to study [social media posts](#) by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and the National Health Service (NHS), UK. The team found that posts that performed very well in terms of likes and comments were those with pictures of celebrities, posts alerting/dispelling myths, [fake news](#), or misinformation, infographics and data visualization.

"As most of the online users barely confirm the reliability of social media content before sharing with their network, huge responsibility lies on the shoulders of social media companies." said Dr. Malik; "This is critical as the majority of the public around the globe get COVID related information through [social media](#) and most of the misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracies about the pandemic has been spread through these platforms."

The team analyzed the Instagram presence of four major health agencies (NHS, CDC, WHO, IFRC) and found how the posts varied in their content theme, gender depiction, person portrayal, and image type. They compared how the different content of these posts resulted in different levels of engagement on Instagram. They found that effective strategies

for public health organizations to use on Instagram include inquisitive messaging and infographics, as these performed well on the platform. This entails an effective data analytics and visualization strategy that should be employed by organizations especially for crisis and emergency risk communication.

"Instagram can be a highly engaging tool for reaching youth during crises and emergencies, in scenarios where younger demographics may not be effectively targeted by mainstream media" concludes Dr. Malik.

**More information:** Aqdas Malik et al, Public health agencies outreach through Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic: Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication perspective, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijdr.2021.102346](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2021.102346)

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