
Understanding knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors around COVID-19 in Singapore via WhatsApp focus group discussions

Suan Ee Ong

Research for Impact | National University of Singapore

On behalf of Pearlyn HM Neo | Jane M Lim | Rayner KJ Tan

Background and introduction

- The global COVID-19 infodemic
- New dynamics in how the general public access, understand, interact with, share, and trust health and outbreak-related information
- Known players: mainstream media, including newspapers and TV + official government and intergovernmental organisation news
- Newly important and pervasive players: social media outlets, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter
- Singapore: second highest rate of internet penetration in Southeast Asia (88.4%) + 4.8mil internet users out of 5.6mil population + 91% of population uses smartphones

Study aim and objectives

Aim

- To explore Singapore residents' knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours around COVID-19 as shaped by different information sources

Objectives

- To investigate the propagation of information and misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this shapes knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours
- To explore the feasibility, acceptability, and rigor of collecting focus group-based qualitative data using a common, trusted, free-to-download, free-to-use mobile messaging app

Methods

Recruitment

- March 2020
- Mini e-flyer with QR code and web link: disseminated on Facebook + via research team's personal and professional networks
- Inclusion criteria: Singapore citizenship /permanent residency, age 21 and up, WhatsApp user
- Incentive: SG\$50 participation voucher - choice of rideshare or supermarket chain
- Interested individuals completed a standardised online form asking for demographic information (e.g. age, gender, education levels, housing type, marital status) and time/data availability for discussions

Methods

Data collection: logistics

- End March - early April 2020
- 8 WhatsApp-based focus group discussions of 8 participants per group over 5 consecutive days (total 64 participants)
- Facilitated by a member of the research team, with at least one other team member observing
- Real-time field notes taken by researchers in separate chat
- Conducted in English; participants encouraged to share information found in other languages (e.g. Chinese, Malay, Tamil)
- Age-stratified: 21-30 yrs, 31-40 yrs, 41-50 yrs, 51 yrs and up
- Randomised allocation of participants into groups by relevant categories: gender, ethnicity, highest level of education

Methods

Data collection: content

- Combination of synchronous and asynchronous discussions with daily prompts addressing relevant themes:
 - Knowledge, perceptions, understandings, attitudes re: COVID-19
 - News-sourced information
 - Government-sourced information
 - Lay health beliefs, misinformation, and fake news
 - Outbreak preparedness and hysteria
- Examples of prompts
 - News articles on COVID-19: local, regional, international
 - Government information: press releases,
 - Misinformation: memes, 'fake news', photos, videos

Methods

Conduct and confidentiality

- Pre-discussion, all participants signed and complete an online consent form that included clauses on confidentiality and sharing of discussed content
- Discussion ground rules: respect, civility, non-judgement

Data storage and security

- Inbuilt: WhatsApp end-to-end encryption of chats
- Transcripts and media downloaded and saved in password-protected shared drive accessible only by research team

Data analysis

- WhatsApp chat transcripts + media imported into QSR NVIVO 12

Preliminary findings

- Overall high reported levels of trust and confidence in government information sources related to trust in institutions and authority
- Varied perceptions of trust and confidence in mass media: greater trust in local news sources and established Western news outlets, more suspicion around other international news outlets → differences by age and education levels
- High trust in and reliance on pandemic-related information shared by family and friends via social media and messaging apps; greater skepticism and fact-checking among younger groups
- Differing attitudes around socially acceptable behaviours during the pandemic: panic buying, adhering to new social norms and regulations, sharing/believing in veracity of information from unverified sources

Strengths

Practical

- Low data collection costs
- Ease of data collection: from anywhere at any time
- Able to reach participants across different social statuses, locations and ages → wider range of opinions/views

Methodological

- Data collection as new measures were being implemented: real-time responses and reactions
- Textual + media data (images, videos, emoji) = helpful in “showing” what participants meant, provided richer data compared to text alone

Challenges

Practical

- Asynchronous sessions: convenient but scattered
- Synchronous sessions: great for some participants, not for others

Methodological

- Difficult to nudge quieter participants; encourage dominant participants to share space
- Alternating rapid/slow pace of discussion: keeping up + effective facilitation
- Establishing and maintaining participant rapport online
- Different methods to engage different age groups

Next steps

1. Iterative thematic analyses of data by research team
2. Academic dissemination: writing up of manuscripts for peer-reviewed publication
3. Public dissemination: writing an op-ed grounded in our key findings for publication in Singapore mainstream media

Thank you for your attention!

Questions? Suggestions?

suan@rforimpact.com