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Evaluating the use of media on perceptions and behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic Examen de l'influence des médias sur les perceptions et les comportements pendant la pandémie de la COVID-19

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Introduction

Amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic, many Canadians are facing a large amount of uncertainty regarding the current status and future directions of the pandemic. The vast variability and fast flow of media information regarding COVID-19 may be overwhelming and contribute to increased levels of anxiety. Previous studies on media use during outbreaks such as H1N1 and SARS serve as important comparisons to guide our understanding of media consumption during times of crisis.^{1,2} With respect to H1N1, researchers found that self-reported levels of anxiety mediated the likelihood that respondents would engage in protective behaviours.¹ For SARS, a study performed a few months after the outbreak found that Canadian undergraduate students found the media coverage on the outbreak excessive and they had little anxiety about acquiring the virus.² Yet,

nearly 70% of participants failed a SARS-specific knowledge section of the questionnaire.² In comparison to those previous outbreaks, our media access and available platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased greatly, making it even more critical to understand how individuals get their information and the way it affects their psyche. While mass media campaigns can produce positive changes in health-related behaviours across large populations, excessive use, both in terms of duration and number of platforms has been linked to mental health issues.^{3,4,5} Preliminary studies during the pandemic have already found dramatic decreases in the mental health status of Canadians.⁶ Medical schools and medical students will benefit from recognizing and understanding the public's use of media as a means to improve knowledge dissemination and encourage protective behaviours while minimizing levels of excessive, potentially harmful anxiety.

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The goal of this project is to investigate how residents of Saskatchewan, Canada use media during the COVID-19 pandemic and how media use may impact feelings of anxiety and engagement in recommended health practices. We aim to understand what platforms are primarily used and whether there is a relationship between particular platforms and perceived anxiety regarding COVID-19. These findings will help researchers to understand and make recommendations to inform best practice media consumption.

Methods

This study has received full research ethics board approval from the University of Saskatchewan. We employed an internet-based cross-sectional survey starting April 7, 2020. The survey was designed based on previous studies regarding SARS and H1N1.^{1,2} It included questions regarding participants' media use, anxiety levels, and protective behaviours (ie. wearing a mask). The survey has been administered to a voluntary sample of University of Saskatchewan students and members of the general public in Saskatchewan via PAWS, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and email. Snowball recruitment has been used to expand the sample size. The survey has been programmed and administered by the Social Science Research Laboratories using the survey programming platform called Voxco. Voxco is a Canadian-owned company with servers located in Canada [<https://www.voxco.com/privacy-policy/>].

We are currently open to collaboration with other sites to further expand the participant demographic outside of Saskatchewan.

Summary

Catering to household media consumption appears to be the most effective way to distribute large amounts of information regarding the dynamic nature of the current COVID-19 pandemic. The main goal of this project is to identify best-practice media use to provide information that is accurate, effective, and minimizes the emotional/psychological effects on the public's well-being during this pandemic. A cross-sectional survey has been designed and distributed via snowball recruitment to Saskatchewan residents.

The results of this study may help physicians, medical learners, other health professionals and the public health sector at-large deliver information in an effective way to minimize anxiety, confusion, and misconceptions all while promoting appropriate protective measures. With implementing best-practice media use, there may be implications at a larger level to improve adherence to health guidelines, increase knowledge about the virus and ultimately, reduce hospitalizations as a means to help flatten the curve.

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