

## **Covid-19 Crisis Communication Management in Morocco: Investigating Male and Female Publics' Perceptions and Assessments of Moroccan Public Authorities' Crisis Response Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

The present research paper examines how Moroccan political public authorities' communication strategies influence Moroccan male and female publics' feedback, and the perception of government's crisis response strategies in light of a new atmosphere, a new condition at the pandemic time of the coronavirus Covid-19. By collecting data from 132 Moroccan internet users via online survey, which was conducted between May and June, 2020, after the declaration of the state of emergency, the present study gathered concrete information and viewpoints regarding Moroccan male and female internet users' feedback about political leaders' communication strategies; trust in different sources and media channels, and perception of the Moroccan political leaders' crisis communication management. The findings of the study have revealed that younger male and female publics, who got news from social media, had negative views of authority messages, and expressed more negative opinions of the government's crisis response and communication strategies as weeks went by. Therefore, trust in public authorities' decreased as the crisis evolves. Other age group, 60 years or older of the respondents get information about the crisis from institutional political sources and mainstream news media, which have been more aligned with authorities' information at the start of the health crisis. In addition, women have used multiple media platforms, but they have less direct access to information than do men. While some progress has been made in women's political use of information and news consumption during the outbreak on social media, on the overall, the participation of women in both feedback and news consumption is still very limited in Morocco.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, crisis communication management, social media, communication strategy

## **1. Introduction**

Clear, concise and consistent communication is what political leaders, parties and government require at times of crisis. Therefore, they use crisis communication to manage perceptions and reduce the impact of a crisis. Communication in crisis situations is timely, transparent and based on correct information, but also honest and frank, showing empathy and understanding about the public's concerns. In the current pandemic, crisis communication is essential to ensure that people understand the risks of COVID-19 and follow recommendations to protect their health and limit the spread of the virus.

However, the management of communication during Covid-19 pandemic has been widely criticized and questioned by Moroccan male and female political activists, Facebook users, journalists, and experts in political communication. The main criticisms are related to the communication mistakes that have been made by political leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they include, the lack of consistent and sufficient data, the lack of clarity and empathy on the part of political leaders, the delay in offering information, the slow access to the internet, unplanned and illogical decisions making which affects Moroccan publics, and which cause anger and dissatisfactions of citizens and the government's decision making. These communication mistakes have negatively affected the government's approval ratings. In this exceptional situation, the consumption of information immensely increased, particularly news related to the evolution of the outbreak (Edelman, 2020, WHO,2020).

## **2. Review of the literature**

Recently, crisis communication and crisis management have been among hot issues discussed in different disciplines and sections, in politics, economics, business, and at the social, political,

economic, and cultural level. Crisis communication “involves the sending and receiving of messages to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis” (coombs, 1995, p.4). Seger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) have stated the major objectives of crisis communication managers, and which include managing image and perceptions of blame and responsibility, providing specific information to stakeholders, generate support and assistance,

Crisis communication management aims at limiting risks and exercising the greatest possible control over its implications, and focuses on its significant objectives, including the transmission to society of peace of mind, control of the situation and confidence in the future (Figus, 2020). It is of paramount importance to always act proactively when it comes to informing citizens, particularly focusing on those affected, responding to the media and controlling the dynamics of the events that may occur (Figus, 2020). Therefore, establishing solid channels with the different publics and stakeholders, and identifying which of them are most affected by the situation in order to establish a prioritized communication are important strategies to manage a crisis effectively.

However, media platforms differ in terms of stimulating information opportunities, political interest and knowledge, and participation in civic life. Recently, with the emergence and consolidation of digital technologies, the media system has gone through several changes and transformations (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Therefore, the introduction of new a new and complex communication technologies, particularly social media which are characterized by the rapid growth of media channels and platforms, the multiplication of media practitioners, the abundance of communication, and the increase in competition among the media. Consequently, a saturated news ecosystem has emerged where being informed is not an easy task. Increased disinformation (Bennett; Livingston, 2018), mistrust towards legacy media, political polarization, fragmentation, and the configuration of a high-choice media environment (Van-Aelst et al., 2017) make it difficult for citizens to obtain valuable information on public affairs.

Crisis communication requires some key principles, which inform the language, style, content and structure of crisis communication (National Democratic Institute, 2020). There are ten crisis communication rules to abide by, which are, to respond quickly, which shows leadership, leads to trust, reduces rumors and can save lives, focus on facts, build trust and provide reasonable reassurances, show empathy, be honest and open, make it easy for the media to report on the crisis, Involve communities and affected stakeholders, communicate often, Move from reactionary to proactive communication, consolidate message content and communication platforms (National Democratic Institute, 2020).

In the context of Covid-19 outbreak, information has become a valuable asset to face the crisis situation. Therefore, the main function of media is to raise public awareness about risks that are often invisible or remote to most of the population (Roslyng; Eskjær, 2017). Emerging research studies have showed the various motivations of the publics for crisis information seeking (Austin et al., 2012; Lu; Jin, 2020), emphasizing the needs for additional information, receiving timely and unfiltered information, learning about the magnitude of a crisis, checking on family/friends, mobilizing, connecting with a community, and fostering emotional support during crises (Fraustino; Liu; Jin, 2017), and providing an unfiltered, up-to-date line of communication (Procopio; Procopio, 2007; Tai; Sun, 2007).

Social media use increases during crisis events (Fraustino et al., 2017), and this trend continues to grow exponentially (Reuter; Kaufhold, 2018; Thompson et al., 2017). For example, Facebook's total use across its messaging services increased in April 2020 by more than 50% in areas most affected by the virus. With social gatherings on pause, messenger and WhatsApp channels, voice and video calling doubled in the same timeframe (J.P. Morgan, 2020).

H1. The use of traditional media was prevalent during the crisis. H2. People who get their news from traditional media are generally most likely to express a positive opinion of the crisis response. H3. Criticism of the government was more moderate in the first stage of the crisis. H4. People less in agreement with governmental information are the most critical of the crisis response. H5. Trust in public authorities' decreases as the crisis evolves.

### **3. Methodology**

Due to the national lockdown during Coronavirus pandemic, an online questionnaire has been conducted for almost a month, from May 20th to June 20th, 2020. A snow-ball sample technique was used to deliver invitations explaining the motivation of the questionnaire and with a self-directed link to the server through WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The invitation encouraged people to disseminate the questionnaire to their contacts. The dissemination of the online questionnaire among the participants was based on criteria of interest and motivation for the research, so that no compensation was offered for participating in the research.

To answer the research questions, an online descriptive survey method were determined as the research tools to collect data. The descriptive online survey method was used to collate data for the study, as it is the most effective way to not only save time and money, but also to collect information without travelling across regions of Morocco, which declared the state of emergency in the event of a health crisis. Also online survey method shows the true dynamics of the study as the respondents are assured of their confidentiality, thus encouraging them to share accurate and true responses to the questionnaire.

This paper focuses on four research questions derived from a literature review and previous studies. What are the main differences that emerge in the use of information channels during the

Covid-19 outbreak by Moroccan Male and Females? How does the Moroccan population assess the management of communication Moroccan political leaders? What messages sent by the government did the publics retain before the declaration of the State of Alarm? In which sources of information has the population shown the greatest confidence? How much accurate information have Moroccan publics had about Covid-19?

A representative sample needs a total of 200 respondents. The online questionnaire was sent via social networking sites randomly to internet users in Morocco, of which 145 duly filled questionnaires were received back. The final sample for analysis was based on 132 completed questionnaires by the target population. Among those internet users who participated in the survey, 12 male and female political activists and bloggers in the online environment were personally interviewed via “zoom” video calling to gather more substantial information. In the sample, 71.1% are women, and 61% men. All age groups were in the sample, with 49% under 30 years old. Regarding their education, 68.7% are undergraduates and 48.3% graduates. For this research, an analysis by gender in Morocco on social media has been conducted. However, the sample was not considered large enough to provide statistically significant differences.

#### **4. Findings**

The present research paper conducted in May and June, 2020 in Morocco during Covid-19 confirms the crucial role played by both traditional mass media and modern social media during crises. The first research question of the present research study explored the use of different media platforms during the first four weeks of the lockdown. As shown in Table 1, the findings have showed the increase in information seeking and media consumption during emergencies by both male and females. Television (89%) is the main source of information for Moroccans during the Corona pandemic crisis. Social media, particularly social networking sites, such as Facebook (75%), WhatsApp (72%), Instagram (38%), were also among the most frequent information channels, along

with other sources of information, including online newspapers (69%), Radio (65%), YouTube (40%), Webs/Blogs of public institutions (36%), twitter (33%). Print newspapers (10%) and Magazines (8%) were, however, the least used information sources.

In addition to these research findings, Moroccan internet users' reliance on social media has increased during Covid-19 crisis. These information-seeking trends have revealed discrepancies and differences related to gender and education level of the participants in the online survey. Men with different academic levels had a higher use of media platforms than women in general as they seek to get information about Corona pandemic. Moroccan young male and female participants and internet users under the age of 29 resort to social networking sites, such as Facebook (75%) and WhatsApp (72%), blogs (36%), and Twitter (33%) to get information and updates more than the rest of the age groups.

Unlike the Majority of young respondents who accessed internet on their mobile or smart phones to get information about the pandemic. Other age group, 60 years or older of the respondents spent less than an hour on social media per day, while they have resorted to television during this challenging crisis situation, as portrayed in Fig. 2. In fact, 60 years or older group of the respondents reported a highly significant use of television (96%) for news updates and information about the Covid-19 crisis in Morocco, while only 4.25% claimed they didn't use it for the same reason. Thus, this category of people has showed a very limited consumption of information from social media and online media channels. People with higher levels of education read the print press more frequently.

An analysis by gender have showed that more than half of the women 56% resort to Television 64,3 % and WhatsApp 70% as the main source of information. While some progress has been made in women's political use of information and news consumption during the outbreak on social media, on the overall, the participation of women in both feedback and consumption is still very limited

in Morocco. This Coronavirus crisis puts women at risk of being further relegated to the background with no voice and no means to influence policies and decisions. As it is, there is a huge deficit of women’s leadership in COVID 19 responses. Gender parity or women’s effective inclusion is rarely considered since the beginning of this health crisis, the news has become a valuable resource for citizens. . The voices of women are left out of the decision making tables of COVID 19. Without women in these leadership positions, there is a higher probability that decisions that are taken would not address the differential challenges that women experience. In this regard, women’s issues could fail to be addressed during and after the crises.

**Table 1. Information source during the Covid-19 health crisis**

<b>Information source</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Television	89%
Facebook	75%
WhatsApp	72%
Online newspapers	69%
Radio	65%
YouTube	40%
Instagram	38%
Webs/Blogs	36% %
Twitter	33%
Print newspapers	10%
Magazines	8%

**Table 2. Information source during the Covid-19 health crisis by age**

Information Source	Age	Age	Age	Age	Age
	29 or younger	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60 or older
Television	68.5%	75.0%	81.4%	88.2%	94%
WhatsApp	88.5%	80.1%	73.1%	72.1%	60%
Facebook	87.7%	71.5%	77.4%	60.3%	50%
Blogs	48.0%	44.5%	37.2%	37.9%	10%
Twitter	69.8%	44.6%	16.1%	12.4%	11%

Hypothesis 1, related to the use of traditional media was prevalent during the crisis, is only partially confirmed. Three of the four most used information channels are considered mainstream news media. However, the second source of information is WhatsApp. Results show that citizens made synchronous use of multiple media and platforms.

#### **4.1. Media use and government crisis communication management**

The present research study has adopted and adapted some interesting statements regarding favorable and unfavorable assessments of Government's communication management on Covid-19, and which includes, "communication has always been clear and sufficient"; "has been scheduled at the appropriate times"; and "has been the most reliable information", "has not revealed the whole truth", "has confused the population", "has generated social alarm", (Moreno, Ángeles; Fuentes-Lara, Cristina; Navarro, Cristina, 2020).

An analysis by gender shows that more than half of the women believe that the government has not revealed the whole truth (55.5%) and that it has generated social alarm (51.8%). Unlike men who only 39.6% believe that the government has created social alarm. Regarding differences by age, 62.5% of the youngest (29 years or less) believe that social alarm has been generated, while in the intermediate age groups this statement is only supported by a third of the sample.

In Morocco, the percentage of people who closely followed news about the Coronavirus increased by 32 percentage points during the second half of March 2020, compared to the tracking of political news data from the previous fortnight. Thus, 57% of US adults followed the news about Covid-19 “very closely” and 35% “fairly closely”. In total, 92% of citizens actively consumed news about the virus, compared to 8% who consumed news sporadically.

Among the respondents who assessed the government’s communication management during the Covid-19 crisis in Morocco are Moroccan female and male political activists and internet users who had a stronger use of social media. They believe that the Moroccan government communication during the Covid-19 crisis has caused social alarm and confused the population. These are Facebook users and practitioners who visited social media Movements frequently. Unlike social media users who have showed unfavorable assessments of the political leaders’ communication or what they refer to as the communication of “the Moroccan government” during Covid-19 pandemic, official print newspapers consumption have showed that political leaders’ communication has always been clear and sufficient (53%), has been scheduled at the appropriate time (33, 6%), and has been the most reliable information (56%).

As seen from table 3, the majority of the youngest (29 years or less) who use Facebook (70,7%) and Twitter (64.4%) to get information report that political leaders’ communication is in a real crisis, and therefore generates social alarm and confuses the population. However, most audiences for all media agree with the statement “The government has not revealed the whole truth.

**Table 3. Perception of the government's communication strategy by media consumption**

Perception	Whats-app	Facebook	Twitter	Websites/ Blogs	Printed press	Online News- papers	Television	Radio
Has always been clear sufficient	38.8%	23.5%	20.6%	30.7%	53.2%	22.3%	44.6%	33.8%
Has not revealed the whole truth	60.6%	64,4%	66.1%	70.3%	41.2%	48.5%	54.1%	52.4%
Has been scheduled at the appropriate time	19.4%	23.5%	23.7%	24.9%	33.6%	24.0%	23.8%	21.5%
Has confused the Population	48.8%	88.5%	77.7%	64.1%	45.4%	46.7%	45.9%	33.4%
Has been the most reliable information	33.0%	37.5%	43.3%	43.2%	56%	39.4%	39.9%	45.8%
Has generated social Alarm	43.4%	70,7%	68.4%	63.2%	51.5%	47.9%	48.8%	36.6%

#### **4.2. Growing criticism of governmental crisis communication management**

At the early stages of the outbreak, Moroccan males and females use television among all media sources, which has become the largest platform nationally and globally, since it has played a particularly important role in communicating COVID-19 information. This is especially apparent in information dissemination on personal protective action inhibiting disease spread (e.g. wearing masks,

reducing travel, social distancing, and teleworking). The findings have showed that at the early stages of pandemic, 42% of the respondents claimed that the government was the most reliable source of information. Female respondents have commented Sufficiency, congruence and consistency in health risk communication have important implications for effective health safety instruction as well as critical content interpretability and recall.

There have been notable insufficient, incongruent, and inconsistent communications regarding the pandemic and its risks, which was especially salient in the present study's findings. Respondents stated that the government has not revealed the whole truth (66.7%) in the first weeks during the pandemic, it "has caused social alarm" (60.8%), and "has confused the population" (66, 4%). Few respondents think that political leaders disseminate "the most reliable information source" (30.6%), and it was clear and sufficient (18 %). The most important aspect during crises is timing of communication; Besides, during the first fortnights of the state of alarm, appropriate timing of communication is something that Moroccan male and female's users complained about during the pandemic, 45% of participants believe that communication has been scheduled at the appropriate times, but in the in the second fortnight, the number of participants who believe that the government had correctly timed communication have decreased ( 33 % ).

However, in the first fortnight 30% of the respondents state that the whole truth was not revealed; 33% that the information confused the population, and 42,6% that it has generated social alarm. In addition to this, the majority of internet users and political activists on social media have criticized the Moroccan government communication management. There was a decrease in participants who believed "the information was clear and enough" (19%) and "the information was the most reliable" (15%). At the same time however, more respondents state that political communicators and ministers have not revealed the whole truth.

An analysis by gender has revealed that there have been significant differences by both gender and age between the two fortnights of the State of Alarm. The percentage of women in the

world of social media and political public sphere remains very low in Morocco, compared to that of men, and the percentage of women is only around 10%. With the crisis, these percentages are likely to decrease as the gender gap widens. It was explained by female respondents (40%) that the declaration of the state of emergency has obliged us to stay at home, and has made it possible to set up family life rituals that have been lost in never-ending meetings, professional obligations that occupy the whole day, leaving nothing for basic things, children, couples, internal balance. Habits have changed; the role of women has become even more central to the success of containment and to the maintenance of a balanced family, household, community and society.

In the first month of confinement, the government was a highly trusted source for Moroccan female citizens (56%). In fact, both the government and the official media force enjoyed greater trust from women than from men. Moroccan citizens did not trust media overall. Only few older male respondents (10%) considered news media a trusted source, while the youngest people aged 29 and under showing the least confidence in the media (9%). A detailed comparison between the first and the second fortnights of confinement indicate a general descent of trust in sources as time went by.

**Table 4. Perception of the government's communication strategy by fortnights**

<b>Perception</b>	Total	First fortnight	Second fortnight
Has always been clear and sufficient.	18%	25%	19%
Has not revealed the whole truth	66,7%	30%	70%
Has been scheduled at the appropriate times	21,4%	45%	33%
Has confused the population	66,4%	33%	69%
Has been the most reliable information	30, 6%	49%	15%
Has generated social alarm	60.8%	42,6%	72%

## 5. Discussion

The present research study examines crisis communication management in Morocco during Covid-19 pandemic, which goes beyond normal political communication. In fact, during a crisis there is often little to no time to plan elaborate communication strategies. Rather, political leaders, parties and governments are called on to provide a quick, empathic and trustworthy response; therefore, they require immediate skills to communicate with the publics. These cannot be suddenly built just when a crisis arises.

Therefore, professional public relations practitioners and strategic communication specialists are called upon for strategic crisis communication management. Public relations are the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), In this respect, an organization could be politicians, parties or the government. Unlike normal political communication, crisis communication, which requires to be managed by public relations practitioners, is supposed to be timely, transparent and based on correct information, but also honest and frank, showing empathy and understanding about the public's concerns.

However, the present research findings have showed the expected decline in trust in public authorities as the health crisis evolves. There was a higher decline in trust with regard to politicians, the ministry of health, and official political spokesperson, and this general descent of trust in public authorities and sources have become obvious as time went by. A lack of conformity in messaging causes confusion among Moroccan citizens, and weakens the impact of essential crisis communication. In fact, some respondents have stated that “we don't know who to trust, and which information is important”. This indicates highly deceived and confused publics during a time of a

serious health crisis. Therefore, pandemic preparedness is based on trust in the information, trust in the sources, and particularly trust in public authorities.

In the current Covid-19 pandemic, communication facilitators are important to manage crisis communication to ensure that publics understand the risks of COVID-19 and follow recommendations to protect their health and limit the spread of the virus. Communication facilitators or public relations practitioners are “boundary spanners” (Tench, 2009) who listens to and brokers information between the organization and its key publics. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), the goal of this role is to provide both management and publics the information they need for making decisions of mutual interest.

By managing crisis communication effectively, public relations can be a tool that helps manage or even reduce the scale and impact of a crisis. Therefore, based on research findings of the present research paper, crisis communication’s main purposes are to inform publics by providing accurate and timely information about the crisis, manage public perceptions about a crisis and how politicians, parties or governments are responding to it, limit the duration or reduce the impact of the crisis by providing clear instructions on what to do or how to help, and restore confidence and provide future-oriented perspectives.

Younger people who got news from social media had negative views of authority messages and expressed more negative opinions of the government’s crisis response as weeks went by. They believe that institutional political sources and mainstream news media are used to being more aligned with authorities’ information at the start of a crisis. Moroccan citizens had a negative opinion about the role played by both public authorities and the official media during Covid -19 pandemic. The main complaints were related to the communication mistakes that have been made by political leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they include, the lack of consistent and sufficient data, the lack of clarity and empathy on the part of political leaders, the delay in offering information, the

slow access to the internet, unplanned and illogical decisions making which affects Moroccan publics, and which cause anger and dissatisfactions of citizens and the government's decision making. Opinions about the news media's response to the outbreak vary considerably, depending on the platform Moroccan Female and male use for obtaining news. Citizens who get the news from two network television stations and print publications are the most likely to say the news media are doing an excellent or good job responding to the coronavirus outbreak.

## 6. Conclusions

The present research paper has showed crisis communication as one of the essential competencies required to deal with a crisis situation, such as Covid- 19 pandemic. In light of this health crisis, this paper examines the ways information forms and media platforms influence the publics' information-seeking behaviors and the publics' perceptions of public authorities' crisis response strategies during the pandemic. Findings have proved the use of different media platforms during the first four weeks of the lockdown, and an increase in information seeking and media consumption during emergencies by both male and females. Television is one of the main sources of information for Moroccans during the Corona pandemic crisis, along with other information channels which are considered mainstream news media. Publics who resort to the mainstream news media for Covid-19 information express positive opinions of the government's communication strategy. Yet, the second source of information is social media. Younger male and female citizens who got news for Covid-19 information from social media had negative views of authority messages and expressed more negative opinions of the government's crisis response as weeks went by.

Using the research data, it has been found that Moroccan publics reacted positively to the dramatic events at the beginning of the crisis. As the crisis went into its acute phase, both male and female's trust in political authorities decreased significantly; and there is evidence in the data for a polarization effect according to which low-trusting citizens responded more negatively to the

deepening crisis than high-trusting citizens did as the crisis evolves. Therefore, the present research paper is required to be conducted during this health crisis to assess how some Moroccan political public authorities are prepared for facing the pandemic, and suggests that before a crisis takes place, risk communication and preparedness are essential to public authorities to reduce the likelihood of a crisis. The effectiveness of crisis communication and health information across various media platforms are the main purpose of this paper, and are presented as new empirical knowledge that needs further research. Thus, explaining the use of different media platforms by different age categories and gender during the pandemic crisis in Morocco, and establishing relationships between media choice and criticism of crisis communication response are the main objectives of this study.

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