

Chapter 14

Information–Seeking Behaviors in the COVID–19 Crisis in Turkey: What Types of Information, From Which Sources, and With What Motivations?


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ABSTRACT

In this study, information-seeking behavior during the initial quarantine period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey is examined, and predictors of information-seeking are analyzed through the synthesis of Information Repertoire and Protection Motivation Theory approaches. Based on data collected from 2283 participants representing Turkey, the study reveals the changing impact of the need based on information types, information sources, and protection motivation components according to the channels through which information is sought. The results demonstrate that, in addition to the importance of the information need, perceived severity, response efficacy, and perceived susceptibility motivate information seeking. Furthermore, perceptions of the competence of the social environment motivate information seeking, highlighting the role of social context in information seeking. The results underline the need for policies to strengthen the effectiveness of official actors providing information in line with search dynamics in disaster communication and to design messages that are sensitive to social context.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis was a worldwide phenomenon that deeply affected social, economic, and cultural life, as well as healthcare. Everyone faced challenges from their own perspective. This process, which we returned to in post-pandemic restructuring, clearly revealed the pandemic policies and consequences that interrupted daily life and social interactions during the acute crisis period. On the other hand, the window of opportunity that emerged pointed to opportunities for reform and restructuring, drawing lessons from public and government experience in the post-crisis period (Munir et al., 2004). This opportunity differed from the short-term opportunities pointed out by some studies, where entrenched behaviors may change but require rapid responses (Hou et al., 2020; Zhang, 2021). In other words, it created an opportunity to rectify flawed practices so that possible disasters can be overcome with the least damage in the future, and a resilient society can be established.

That's why different areas of responses to this crisis are still being debated to explore unnoticed connections. Disaster communication of individuals in the crisis period, where pandemic restrictions and measures are most strictly implemented, has been one of the key issues discussed in the context of missed opportunity windows and gaps. Some researchers have warned of short-term windows of opportunity during the crisis. For example, a study that identified two missed windows of opportunity for early control of the COVID-19 outbreak indicated that delayed disclosure of information by the government and failure to correct misinformation in a timely manner kept public awareness and perception of severity low (Hou et al., 2020). They referred to the importance of governments improving problematic disaster communication practices, as well as supporting individuals' cognitive processes through communication in a way that encourages participation in measures. On the other hand, the fact that the affected people were not limited to a certain segment of society, and that social communication and support that could buffer the stress created by the pandemic restrictions were paradoxically interrupted when it was most needed (An et al., 2023), made the COVID-19 crisis different from previous experiences. All these indicators highlight the importance of disaster communication and providing disaster information to the broader community.

Indeed, in disasters, information plays a critical role in coping during and after the crisis. Providing information is an important part of disaster responses (Sommerfeldt, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic, as a crisis that interrupts face-to-face communication processes due to both health risks and public restrictions, has made the role of personal communication networks in disaster communication critical. Due to the nature of the crisis, when providing disaster information, it is necessary to consider the guiding effects of the channels and sources through which information is sought and the cognitive dynamics of threat and coping that may influence information-seeking behavior.

While disseminating information, utilizing effective sources and channels tailored to the preferences of target groups for information retrieval enables broader outreach and the exclusion of inefficient channels (Lai and Tang, 2021). Therefore, within the realm of disaster communication, there is a growing interest in elucidating the functioning of the selection and utilization mechanism within the personal information environment where information is gathered. The theoretical framework, founded on information repertoire and curation, posits that individuals select a subset from the array of channels accessible to them in their pursuit of information (Reagan, 1996). They are also subject to the influences of the channels and active participants within these channels in this informational milieu (Thorson and Wells, 2016). 'Curating' entails the selection, organization, and management of information sources within one's repertoire (Marchionini, 1995). The repertoire that individuals curate in relation to information-

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