

Pandemic Perceptions in Brazil and Canada: Understanding the Diffusion of Information about COVID-19 on Social Media

The COVID-19 outbreak paralleled with its misinformation epidemic led the World Health Organization to classify the combined events as 'infodemic.' This project sought to answer the following question: How did social media's diffusion of information about COVID-19 influence the public's perception of this pandemic, specifically in the countries of Brazil and Canada?



Authors

Mariela Sol Torroba Hennigen,
under the supervision of Dr. Bree
McEwan

Affiliations

This project was funded and supported by the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation and the U of T Laidlaw Scholars Program.



01

Abstract

This research investigates how social media's COVID-19's information diffusion influences different people's perceptions of it in Brazil and Canada. This research is important because the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted people worldwide and therefore, it is relevant to better understand the effects of the diffusion of COVID-19 information on different communities. This study applied the theories of third-person effect, institutional trust, and interpersonal trust and their implications within the context of the diffusion of COVID-19 information.

02

Hypotheses

H1: People will perceive that others are more susceptible to social media information than themselves.

H2: Greater exposure to COVID-19 information via social media will increase perceptions of others' susceptibility.

H3: Trust in provincial government will be correlated with greater trust in the COVID-19 public health message.

H4: Trust in government will be negatively correlated with greater trust in 'questionable COVID-19 messages.'

03

Methodology

A Qualtrics survey form was developed for data collection. Participant recruitment happened through interpersonal social media messaging.

Variables measured included: COVID-related health behaviors, ego-involvement, pandemic-related conspiracy statements, trust in the provincial government, trust in provincial health agencies, interpersonal trust, and news media perceptions.

04

Results

Results show support only for H2 and H3.

For H2, the correlation between greater exposure to COVID-19 information via social media and increased perceptions of others' susceptibility was statistically significant.

For H3, the correlation between greater trust in provincial government and greater trust in the COVID-19 public health message from provincial health agencies was statistically significant.

05

Analysis

H1: not supported in the combined data sample

H2: supported in the combined data sample

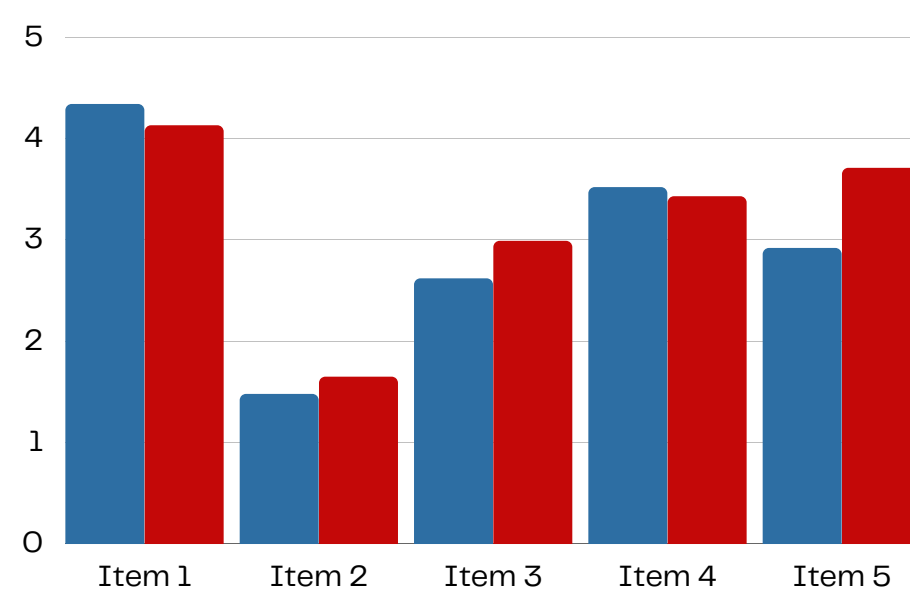
- Brazilian sample: H2 correlation not supported
- Canadian sample: H2 correlation supported

H3: supported in the combined data sample

- Brazilian sample: H3 correlation supported
- Canadian sample: H3 correlation supported

H4: not supported in the data

- Brazilian sample: H4 correlation not supported
- Canadian sample: H4 correlation supported



The graph above portrays the differences between Brazil and Canada in mean scores for some of the tested variables.

ITEM	VARIABLE
1	COVID Health Behaviors
2	Belief in Pandemic Conspiracies
3	Trust in the Provincial Government
4	Trust in Provincial Health Agencies
5	Interpersonal Trust on Social Media

06

Conclusion

The correlations initially established through the hypotheses do not imply causation, leaving many answers unanswered regarding causation between the variables. Considering that this research's methodology invited people to retrospectively perceive COVID-related misinformation statements and how they impacted their trust in institutions and their interpersonal connections, this research's key achievement was to initiate the mapping of the complex nature of the diffusion of COVID-19 information within social media and its implications in different communities. After concluding this investigation, the project provides an inkling into the effects of third-person perception (TPP) and the overall roles that institutional and interpersonal trust play in people's perception of a societal event, but further investigation is required to bring further clarity to this phenomenon and its relevant communication theories.

07

Acknowledgements

This research project was supported by the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation and the U of T Laidlaw Scholars Program. Thank you to the UTM Library for the access to SPSS and supportive staff. Special thank you to my supervisor Dr. Bree McEwan for the ongoing guidance and support as my research advisor this past summer.

Related Literature

McEwan, B., Carpenter, C. J., & Hopke, J. E. (2018). Mediated Skewed Diffusion of Issues Information: A Theory. *Social Media + Society*, 4(3), 205630511880031-. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118800319>