



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Fear and stigmatisation during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learnt for future public health crises

Research article: A qualitative study on health stigma and discrimination in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learnt from a public health perspective. *Published in Frontiers of Public Health in March 2023. Click [here](#) to view the published article online.*

Authors: Dr Chou Chuen Yu, Mr Bernard Tang, Dr James Alvin Low, Dr Mathews Mathew, Dr Sharon Straus, Dr Christine Fahim

Research brief written by: Dr Jonathan Gao, Research Fellow, GERI.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Healthcare workers, tourists from China and construction workers were perceived to be stigmatised by the public during the early stage of the pandemic.
2. Ageist attitudes were observed in some participants, where older adults were thought to be more fearful of the pandemic, susceptible to misinformation and struggling to cope with the changes due to the pandemic.
3. Trusting the government and local news outlets as an accurate source of information, and active fact-checking, were likely important factors in combating misinformation.

IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

1. Key drivers of misinformation and stigma were identified. This could guide the development of strategies and tools, such as in public health messaging, to combat the spread of misinformation and stigma in future pandemics.
2. Highlighting the sacrifices and contributions by healthcare workers, as well as neutrally framing the pandemic as a medical issue rather than using place-specific terms, could have helped to reduce stigmatisation against healthcare workers, construction workers and Chinese tourists. Similar strategies could be used for future pandemics.
3. Ageist attitudes stemming from concern towards older adults were observed in this pandemic. As such, public health messaging and the way media frames news headlines could be better designed in future pandemics to avoid exacerbating ageism.
4. Trust in public institutions like the government and local news outlets helped in combating misinformation, suggesting that public institutions should continue to maintain the public's trust in them to limit the spread of misinformation during a public health crisis.

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 was declared as an international public health emergency in January 2020. As COVID-19 was a novel disease, misinformation about preventive measures as well as conspiracy theories about its origins quickly spread. Such misinformation has the potential to result in discrimination, fear and stigmatisation against groups such as patients, healthcare workers or Asians. Consequences of such attitudes and behaviours can include abuse against those stigmatised or causing individuals to avoid testing themselves for COVID-19. Misinformation and stigmatisation can also be disruptive to social harmony, which is important for managing a pandemic.

FOCUS OF PROJECT

The focus was to explore the perceptions and reaction of laypersons to the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. This study was part of an international collaboration to explore how misinformation, fear and stigma are contextualised within a cultural, political and global setting in both Canada and Singapore. Findings from the Singapore arm of the study are reported in this Brief.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants had to be English speakers, above 18 years old and residing in Singapore during the pandemic period. This study had 29 participants ($M= 56.5$ years old) with 55% of the participants above 60 years old.

STUDY DESIGN

The design of this study was guided by the Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework (HSDF). Using this framework allows for the conceptualisation of stigma across socio-ecological determinants such as age, gender and race, and how these determinants interact with organisational biases and power structures with communities, organisations or systems.

Interview questions were developed based on HSDF and semi-structured interviews were conducted between 29 October 2020 to 4 February 2021. Participants were asked about specific situations that they encountered and their subjective experiences were explored.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Geriatric Education and Research Institute (GERI), Singapore

Dr Chou Chuen Yu, Mr Bernard Tang, Dr James Alvin Low

Department of Geriatric Medicine, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, Singapore

Dr James Alvin Low

Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Dr Mathews Mathew

Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute, St. Michael's Hospital, Unity Health Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Dr Sharon Straus, Dr Christine Fahim (Principal Investigator)