



Raising Awareness in Public Health: A Study of Beijing Health Commission Weibo Communications during the 2022 COVID-19 Wave in Beijing

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Abstract

The public demands of information will increase during the crisis and the social media accounts run by governmental sectors is one of the major sources where the public obtains information. This study focuses on the practices of Beijing health commission, an authoritative official outlet, in posting COVID-19 related information from a governmental stance. We explore the content of these social media posts and manner of posting during the COVID-19 crisis. Based on a data set of 1,422 Weibo posts related to the early 2022 COVID-19 wave in Beijing, we identified the theme of reports of confirmed cases and travel paths, and propagandistic objective as the most prominent. From analysed posts and the identified themes, the preliminary findings suggested that the government gave its priority to maintain its legitimacy during the crisis. Thus, by borrowing the concept of paternalism, we argued that arising the public's attention of crisis is what government applied to achieve its propaganda goal, which aims to practicing its paternalistic governance in China.

Keywords

Health Communication; Paternalistic Governance; COVID-19; Public Awareness; Weibo; Propaganda; Winter Olympic



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Повышение осведомленности в области общественного здравоохранения: исследование коммуникаций Пекинской комиссии здравоохранения Weibo во время волны COVID-19 2022 года в Пекине

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Аннотация

Общественные потребности в информации возрастают во время кризиса, а аккаунты в социальных сетях, управляемые правительственными секторами, являются одним из основных источников, откуда общественность получает информацию. В данном исследовании основное внимание уделяется практике Пекинской комиссии здравоохранения, авторитетного официального органа, по размещению информации, связанной с COVID-19, с позиции правительства. Мы исследуем содержание этих публикаций в социальных сетях и способы их публикации во время кризиса COVID-19. На основе набора данных из 1422 постов Weibo, связанных с волной COVID-19 в начале 2022 года в Пекине, мы определили тему сообщений о подтвержденных случаях и маршрутах передвижения, а также пропагандистские цели как наиболее важные. Судя по проанализированным постам и выявленным темам, предварительные выводы свидетельствуют о том, что правительство отдало приоритет сохранению своей легитимности во время кризиса. Таким образом, используя концепцию патернализма, мы утверждаем, что привлечение внимания общественности к кризису — это то, что правительство применяет для достижения своей пропагандистской цели, направленной на практику патерналистского управления в Китае.

Ключевые слова

коммуникации в области здравоохранения; патерналистское управление; COVID-19; информирование общественности; Вейбо; пропаганда; зимние Олимпийские игры



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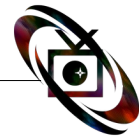


Introduction

The pandemic that first emerged in China in late 2019 challenged the emergency response system for public health events in China (Zheng et al. 2021). Since then, in the name of “supremacy of the people and the supremacy of life”, the Chinese government has developed a number of epidemic prevention and control measures, and adjusted those measures in accordance with the epidemic’s various stages of development. As the first country in the world to have to contend with COVID-19, the Chinese public sectors have made ‘dynamic zero COVID’ its primary goal in ongoing prevention efforts since the disease outbreak in Wuhan in early 2020. Although the new confirmed COVID-19 cases within China have proved this goal of having a ‘zero’ unattainable in the short term, the Chinese public sectors, alongside the public at large, must make concerted efforts to safeguard people’s lives.

Apart from causing loss of life and livelihoods, the COVID-19 pandemic has been characterised as an ‘infodemic’, as the public’s demand for timely, accurate, and comprehensive information has become more urgent than in previous crises. As a country of 1.4 billion, China has witnessed an explosion in social media use in recent years: from 2015 to 2019, social media penetration in the country rose from 31% to 72% (Hootsuite and We are social, 2020). The average Chinese internet user has come to spend around 117 minutes a day consuming and interacting on social media (2020). Isolation at home has allowed people to spend more time obtaining information online on the COVID-19 pandemic and creating remote connections.

Public knowledge of the epidemic was enhanced by developing a communication dynamic centred on connection, dialogue, and information sharing between the public sector and the public (Huang et al., 2021; Chen & Xu, 2021). The microblogging platform Sina Weibo (hereafter referred to as Weibo) is the second most popular Chinese social network among the many in the country (DeGennaro, 2019), with up to 516 million monthly active users as of February 2020 (SinaTech, 2020). As a channel fostering dialogue between the Chinese public sectors and the public (Romenti et al., 2014), Weibo has been integrated into Chinese crisis communication since its operation. It has been widely used during many types of crises in the country, including natural disasters such as the 2010 Yushu earthquake (Qu et al., 2010) and human-caused disasters such as the 2015 Tianjin explosions (Zeng et al., 2017). Since it first emerged in China at the end of 2019, COVID-19 has disrupted medical systems and brought public health response mechanisms into question. Related online mis- and disinformation has caused massive confusion (Zheng et al., 2021), with the multiplicity of information sources and formats having perplexed the public as to who is credible during this crisis. Weibo, one of China’s domestic social media platforms, has played a significant role in the creation and



dissemination of information, promoting public policy throughout this three-year public health event (Yang & Vicari, 2021).

From early in the disease outbreak, the type of crisis information released by public sectors responsible for public health events plays a key role and affects the efficiency of government and public cooperation. In this process, public sectors have used their social media accounts as institutional channels to deliver COVID-19-related crisis information (COVID-19 information) in China. Various Weibo government user accounts (i.e. multiple levels of government departments and state media) have become active on Weibo to provide netizens with COVID-19 information and guidance on beating the pandemic. As laypeople often lack the capacity to deal with crises professionally, the government often assumes the role of credible information provider and caregiver to those affected (Liu et al., 2016). While the Chinese regime has made great effort to dispel rumours, related measures were also suspected to have been taken to control dissent towards its governance (Zou & Tang, 2021).

We employ the conceptual and theoretical framework of paternalistic governance in crisis communication to investigate the content of the Chinese government's social media posts and manner of posting during the COVID-19 crisis. Accordingly, our main questions concern 1) how the Chinese regime has raised the public's awareness while maintaining control over the narrative online, and 2) what themes have emerged from the content the Chinese regime has posted. To address these questions, the present study focuses on a data set of 1,422 Weibo posts related to the early 2022 COVID-19 wave in Beijing (15 January–15 February 2022), from 26 government user accounts under the management of the Beijing Health Commission during the public health crisis.

Via inductive thematic analysis, we identified five themes in this data set. Reports of confirmed cases and travel paths comprised the most prominent theme throughout the period analysed. A propagandistic objective was another major theme, especially in a period with such intense cultural, political, and general international influences on the narrative. We also report on the frequency of these themes'appearance during each of the major stages of the public health crisis in Beijing (i.e. outbreak, Chinese New Year, opening ceremony of the XXIV Olympic Winter Games, and post-peak). Significant decreases in the frequency of COVID-19-related posts by government user accounts appear to have been associated with specific time periods, with the aim of reducing the impact of negative publicity. Amid the Chinese government's communication strategy, response is directly related to perceived acceptance of responsibility (Coombs, 2007); the government's involvement in shaping the language of crisis communication has the potential to influence attitudes towards and evaluations of government accountability and legitimacy in a crisis (Zhang, 2022). Thus, the government's manner of framing the COVID-19-related content it posts on social media can influence its relationship with citizens and its image in dealing with public health events.



This study provides new insights into crisis communication and contributes to research related to the COVID-19 pandemic by addressing an important yet understudied topic in the literature: we empirically analyse how Beijing's health commission, the government department overseeing matters of public health, framed its COVID-19-related social media posts during a unique period interweaving cultural, political, and general international influences. Moreover, we suggest the strategies these government stakeholders could use to more effectively deliver COVID-19-related crisis information on social networks and inspire a better communicative dynamic with the public.

SCCT and the addition of social media

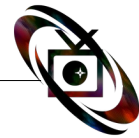
Proposed by Coombs (2007), the classic situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) posits that organisational crisis managers should select suitable crisis response strategies based on the situation at hand. Coombs realised that not only could stakeholders' attributions regarding a crisis impact the organisation's reputation, but they could also generate emotions, such as anger, towards organisations. SCCT divides crises into three clusters, illustrating the corresponding degree of impact on an organisation's reputation: 1) the victim cluster, such as cases of natural disasters or rumours, tends to represent minor reputational threat; 2) the accidental cluster, such as cases of equipment or product failure or accusations from external stakeholders, tends to represent a medium level of reputational threat; and 3) the intentional cluster, in which the organisation knowingly took an inappropriate action in risk response, tends to represent the emergence of public anger and a major reputational threat (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Coombs (2007) provides a limited set of primary crisis response strategies once the levels of crisis responsibility and reputational threat have been determined, including denial, diminishment, and rebuilding. In addition, Benoit (1995), whose study focuses on communication, maintains that organisations should not make silence a crisis response strategy, due to its being too passive and allowing for others to control the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

However, SCCT is based on the traditional "one-to-many" communication model, which is not entirely applicable to situations in which organisations take social media as a channel for disaster response (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). SCCT focuses on the perspective of organisations, using the general term 'stakeholders' to describe other crisis participant groups. Stephens and Malone (2010) remark that crisis response strategies tend to ignore other stakeholders' desires, which directly impacts crisis managers' decision-making.

The emergence of social media has enabled organisations to directly communicate with the public and disseminate crisis information in 'multi-line' rather than the traditional media's 'one-line' mode of communication.

Organisations conducting crisis communication over social media encounter both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, organisations can use social



media to interact with various stakeholders towards disseminating crisis information and managing disasters more effectively (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). On the other hand, with the emergence and exchange of user-generated content, social media has created a breeding ground for the secondary spread of crises (Coombs, 2014). Faced with the large volume of information and social media users' opinions, crisis managers often find it difficult to provide credible information and meet the public's expectations (Hughes & Palen, 2012).

Schultz et al. (2012) examine the impact of media and crisis types on reputation, secondary crisis response, and secondary crisis communication, as well as highlighting the advantages of social media in organisational crisis communication. However, the interaction between disaster participants and organisational network dynamics should be further researched in the future (Schultz and Raupp, 2010; Schultz et al, 2012). SCCT has been identified as the most widely applied theory of crisis communication, thus warranting ongoing review in an era of media fragmentation, disinformation, and low public trust (Macnamara, 2021).

Innovative Chinese paternalistic governance in crisis communication

Amid the country's authoritarian tradition, Chinese culture emphasises paternalism in many aspects of governance (Wong et al., 2017). In practice, paternalism usually restricts individual freedoms in claiming both to promote individuals' happiness and to safeguard the happiness and safety of society (Jansen & Wall, 2009). In other words, paternalistic governance can be seen as a way of performing as a parent and doing things for children's own good, e.g. combining care with strict rules. Having created one of the most restrictive media environments in the world by producing the most sophisticated censorship regimes, the Chinese government has adapted to the information age, coming to rule through sophisticated information manipulation to expand its power (Rozenas & Stukal, 2019).

The authoritarian Chinese state's censorship of social media is more tangible than in democratic regimes, as the former has crafted an elaborate system of repression to tame its citizens. For many, the central government's censorship and regulation of their lives could remain virtual; for the few daring to push the boundaries, censorship and regulation could become more explicit and threatening, and it could also move from the virtual sphere to real-world interactions, such as in invitations to police stations for 'tea', interrogations, detention centres, or worse (Gallagher & Miller, 2021). As more members of the public share their views online, a critical challenge under authoritarianism has become how to go about adapting paternalistic governance to growing netizen participation and awareness of their own power, since this could influence relations between the government and the public to an unknown extent. Instead of implementing blanket measures to expand its power, the regime has had to learn to adopt measures suitable to the current situation.



Traditional definitions of paternalism generally refer to government interventions imposed without explicit public participation or consent, enacted on the grounds that imposition of such governmental care improves the welfare of citizens (Le Grand & New, 2015). Chinese governance has adopted paternalism, which has often been criticised, in many political and social aspects, ostensibly to protect and safeguard the broad masses' vital interests – for instance, by regulating social media (Anand, 2018). The paternalistic governance of social media has become a notorious feature of China's authoritarian regime: although the government has offered the public some degree of freedom of participation in recent years, its fundamental attitude is to regulate and control the establishment and maintenance of a favourable portrayal of the one-party state in the mediatic sphere (Wang, 2018). Political control is thus often the primary means of social governance in China.

However, compelling the public to obey paternalistic governance completely is not an easy task for the government, as the development of social media has allowed more liberal notions into the country and influenced public thought and online participation. The growth in such participation has promoted struggles between paternalistic risk governance and the public, since government decisions can limit the sovereignty of the people in networked crisis communication. At the heart of this struggle is the matter of control of information on social media platforms, which promotes a net-centric form of paternalistic risk governance in crisis communication. We argue that the Chinese regime is undergoing a complex transition, facing a dilemma over how to present its paternalistic governance in terms of risk management and social media regulation and censorship while preventing citizens from antagonising such governance.

The government's performance of paternalistic governance in Weibo-based networked crisis communication is a notable strategy, as it combines the regime's 'responsibility' and 'authority' into a parental figure online. From the perspective of 'responsibility', it can be said that the Chinese government demands a people-oriented policy, prioritising governmental solutions for Chinese citizens (Wang & Liu, 2018). Those affected by crises are often unprepared, helpless, and fearful, since crises tend to catch people by surprise, so they lack the capacity to manage crises professionally. In times of crisis, the Chinese public may demand that multiple levels of government provide deep care, carrying out their responsibilities towards the people and areas affected (Liu et al., 2016). As a responsible 'parent', the government is the main crisis manager and must fulfil the responsibilities of risk governance and protection from crises, address the public's needs, and mitigate or eliminate negative impacts on society and citizens (Renwick, 2017).

Governance itself is another dimension that ought to be highlighted here, since paternalistic risk governance involves multiple governance approaches in terms of public online participation (Braithwaite, Coglianese, & Levi-Faur, 2007). Not only has the tornado of social media adoption opened space for citizens' self-



expression, but, on platforms such as Weibo, it has also led to a massive influx of misinformation, rumours, and online crime (which can also include misinformation on crises, baseless rumours, or fraudulent appeals for financial aid). At the same time, the censorship of rumours and misinformation and the suppression of dissenting voices may threaten crisis managers' ability to handle official messaging effectively (Liu et al., 2012).

Moreover, as Büscher et al. (2017) have noted, social-network-based crisis communication has motivated public criticism of governmental responses and a struggle for control, leading the Chinese regime to beef up censorship, since public criticism could harm the authoritarian regime's stability. For Weibo-based networked crisis communication, however, the platform's large user base renders complete censorship of posts impracticable. Under paternalistic governance, netizens' participation has inspired a complex power dynamic between the state and the public, making the country's traditional mode of governance an unsuitable means to reinforce control online.

We choose the term 'authority' to label the other dimension of paternalistic governance in China, as it refers to the power of decision-making, the legitimacy of turning such decisions into law, and the ordering of its execution. In other words, this is perceived as governance achieved by leaders' decisions and guidance in regulating the participation of their subjects, who must obey, like they would a strict parent.

We conceptualised three research questions for this study, based on the literature reviewed above:

RQ1. What major themes comprise posts from the selected government user accounts?

RQ2. How do these governmental posts perform paternalistic governance and what are the related themes?

RQ3. How do these governmental posts promote public understandings of the pandemic?

Method

The choice of Beijing for the case study

On 15 January 2022, few confirmed cases were reported in Beijing. This news is specific to the current time and place. First, Beijing is the capital of China, and its important socio-geographical characteristics have triggered a high level of interest in it among the Chinese during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the 2022 public health crisis in Beijing coincided with the XXIV Olympic Winter Games, leading the government to strengthen controls and monitoring of the pandemic. Third, the new outbreak began two weeks before the Chinese New Year (1 February 2022), which is especially meaningful to the Chinese in terms of family reunion, representing a period of massive mobility. Hence, this city-level outbreak in early 2022 attracted nationwide attention.



Data Collection

Using Python, we retrieved data from 26 government user accounts posting on Weibo between 15 January 2022 and 30 February 2022. We selected accounts managed by departments of the Beijing Health Commission according to the national ranking¹ of the 100 most outstanding health commission accounts on Weibo. Since the sampled accounts' host institutions are located in Beijing, we based the keyword search method on the configuration 'Beijing (or) pandemic' to obtain related posts. Overall, we identified 22 topics and collected 1,422 posts.

Following guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006), we further generalised the themes via an inductive approach to obtain five broad thematic categories. The two authors carried out this process independently, reaching a consensus through iterative consultation.

To gauge the frequency of posting during the early 2022 COVID-19 wave in Beijing, we calculated the number of posts each day during the period studied. Dates within this period covered pivotal stages of the public health crisis: outbreak (15 January), Chinese New Year (1 February), opening ceremony of the XXIV Olympic Winter Games (4 February), and post-peak (15 February).

Findings

Main themes surrounding the 2022 COVID-19 wave in Beijing

In analysing the 1,422 posts collected, we classified five main themes based on 22 topics, each representing a perspective of the performative form of paternalistic governance deployed in responding to public health events. Table 1 details the definitions for each theme and topic. The most prominent theme was labelled 'report of 2022 Beijing pandemic' (n=568, 39.9%), the second most prominent as 'propaganda objective' (n=399, 28%), and the third as 'epidemic protection' (n=337, 23.6%), followed by 'convenient information for the outbreak' (n=111, 7.8%) and 'offences against national policy of epidemic prevention' (n=7, 0.4%).

Theme	Topics	Definition	Proportion (%)
Report of 2022 Beijing pandemic	Confirmed case report and itinerary	Information on confirmed cases and their itineraries	25.3
	Outbreak prevention and control policy	Outbreak Prevention and Control Policy issued by the central and local governments	11.8
	Official disinformation	Official disinformation issued by the government in response to rumours	0.07

¹ Ranking rules are set by Weibo, including the ability of communication, interaction, service, and public recognition. See <https://gov.weibo.com/rank/rule/index?type=1>.



	Requirement of traceability	Requirement of Traceability for citizens to report trips that overlap with confirmed cases	0.4
	Outbreak press conference	Press conference on the outbreak held by the Beijing Municipal Government	1.6
	Number of vaccinations already given—call for vaccination	Report on the number of vaccinations given per day	0.6
Propaganda objective	Good deeds of health care workers	Good deeds of health care workers in the region	11.5
	Epidemic prevention work display	Description and display of the work done in the district	11.3
	Slogan of epidemic prevention work for Olympic winter game	The goal of strengthening epidemic prevention for the Olympic Games	4.5
	Epidemic technology display	New technologies for epidemic prevention	0.07
	Call for public responsibility for epidemic prevention	Inspire the public to strengthen the awareness of epidemic prevention for the country and Olympic	0.5
Epidemic protection	Knowledge of the epidemic	Knowledge of the epidemic, promoting public awareness of the virus	3.5
	Knowledge of epidemic protection	Introducing and guiding the public on how to protect themselves and their families during an epidemic	11.5
	Vaccine knowledge/risk -calls for vaccination	State the need for vaccination to promote vaccination in the public	8.6
Convenient information for the outbreak	Guidance of how to solve <i>Jiankangbao</i> ¹ pop-up problem	Guide the public on how to deal with the technical problems of <i>Jiankangbao</i>	2.3
	Notification of medical consultation	Inform the public of the opening hours of hospital medical services	1.4
	Knowledge on psychological support	Information to provide psychological support to the public during the epidemic	0.07
	Notification of nucleic acid infrastructure	Nucleic acid testing point and time information	2.9
	Information guide for	Provide information for the public	0.1

1 *Jiankangbao* – The Beijing Healthbot app is a convenient tool for individuals to check their health status in relation to epidemic prevention. The results can be used as a reference for individual's health status when return to work, go to public places, etc. The personal information will only be used for the prevention and control of the epidemic.



	help during the outbreak	to seek help during the outbreak	
	Notification of vaccination	Information on where and when vaccines are administered	0.8
Offences against national policy of epidemic prevention	Notification of offences against national policy and regulations of epidemic prevention	Notify individuals and companies who violate epidemic regulations	0.3
	Knowledge of violations of national policy and regulations of epidemic prevention	Introduce the behaviors that violate epidemic prevention regulations and warn the public not to break the law	0.1

Table 1. Themes during 2022 Beijing Pandemic from 26 governmental accounts on Weibo

Frequency of posting during the 2022 COVID-19 wave in Beijing

Figure 1 illustrates the trends and frequencies of the five themes during three stages of the 2022 COVID-19 wave in Beijing.

During Stage 1, the theme ‘report of 2022 Beijing pandemic’ was the most prominent (47.3%), as more of such information helps to increase public awareness and self-protection. The theme ‘epidemic protection’ was the second most prominent (26.9%), indicating a public sector focus on protecting the public against the disease outbreak; indeed, the 26 accounts of the Beijing Health Commission posted most frequently during this phase, at an average of 52.4 posts for all the accounts per day.

As for Stage 2, ‘propaganda objective’ accounted for the largest proportion of posts (65.1%), which may be related to its timing, comprising both the Chinese New Year and start of the Winter Olympics. The theme ‘report of 2022 Beijing pandemic’ was the second most prominent in this phase, although the overall number of posts decreased significantly in comparison to the first phase. The frequency of posting also decreased then, to an average of 51.6 posts for all the accounts per day. Hence, at a time when politics and culture were particularly intertwined, the public sector cut back on posts related to the disease outbreak, possibly in an attempt to weaken its impact in terms of image.

The distribution of topics in Stage 3 is found to have been similar to that of the second phase, having remained dominated by propaganda purposes (40.5%). The frequency of posts decreased even further, from 51.6 per day for all the accounts in the second phase to 34 posts per day for all the accounts in the third phase. The Chinese New Year and Olympic Games and their extended news coverage, celebratory traditions, and customs may have led the public sector to dilute the information flow of outbreak-related news. It is also possible that the public’s concern about COVID-19 has declined over time.

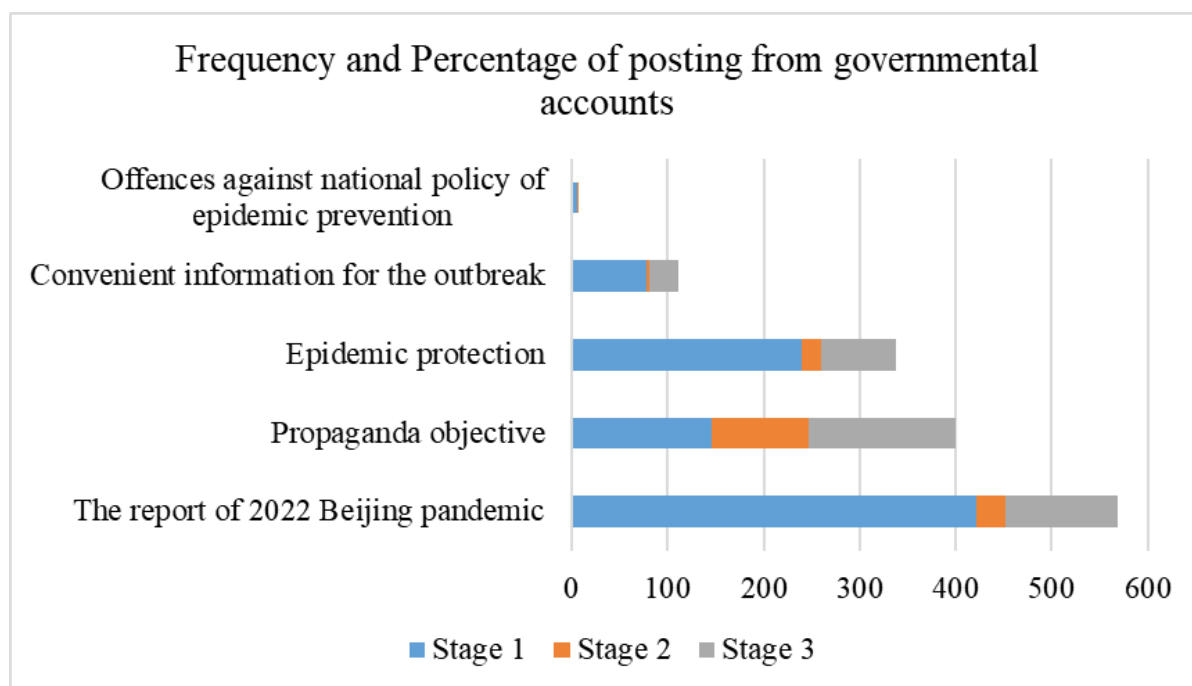


Figure 1. Frequency and Percentage of posting from governmental accounts of Beijing Health commission during the 2022 Beijing Pandemic

Discussion and conclusion

Our empirical findings show that during the early 2022 COVID-19 outbreak in Beijing (15 January–15 February), 26 accounts affiliated with the Beijing Health Commission worked to raise citizens' awareness of public health by posting under five major themes. In employing SCCT and paternalism theories, we contribute theoretical insights to crisis communication in public health.

Since the public sector is directly responsible for public health, not only did these accounts publish multiple types of information related to the new COVID-19 wave, but they also aligned their posting strategies with the cultural, political, and general international influences at hand. On the one hand, as a responsible 'parent', the public sector's extensive posting of related information and knowledge contributed to the public's understanding of the outbreak in the capital, to help achieve the goal of 'dynamic zero COVID' even it is hard to achieve in a short time. On the other hand, as an authoritative 'parent', its posting for publicity purposes, while creating an image of activism and performance, may have led to citizens' resentment and criticism, as the public would prefer to see a responsible public sector than one focused on performing in front of the public.

The notification of crimes against COVID-19 prevention further reinforces the power of the public sector in public health crisis communication. As Jia (2022) argued regarding science communication during crises, the public's participation in it has remained limited; although social media has become the main forum



for laypeople to voice their demands and for experts to voice their assessments, paternalistic governance (on the part of the government) still largely determines what contents can circulate online.

It should be noted, however, that the strategies these government user accounts applied were not always consistent. For instance, although a 'propaganda objective' appeared in all stages, the posts' corresponding narratives varied; what these accounts meant to highlight in the different stages of the outbreak can be gleaned from the content itself and the frequency of the posts. Indeed, the types of information governments use (statistics, experts' quotations, scientific reports) in their posts could generate different understandings for the public, deciding how they are aware of a situation (Lu, Chu & Ma, 2021).

Although Weibo has been integrated in crisis communication for over a decade, COVID-19 opens a new era of social media use which requires broader, faster, and more accurate crisis information. This, in turn, requires the public sector to communicate more closely with the public to win the battle against the pandemic. The regime's crisis communication strategy during public health events is therefore particularly important, as it affects citizens' perception of public health crises as well as their relationship with their government.

Based on our analyses, we propose the development of a set of criteria for crisis communication strategies, namely the thematisation of Weibo contents. The public sector ought to be able to refine and template crisis messages to deliver them directly to the public through text. It follows that crisis message thematisation is necessary to enable the public to quickly access information from the public sector on Weibo, where the information flow is massive. This would likely further inspire a better communicative dynamic between citizens and the public sector.

Despite the long-standing emphasis on paternalism in Chinese culture, in the current pandemic era, not only has the country's public sector adapted to digital-age crisis communication, but it has also evolved a performative form of paternalistic governance. These findings enhance our understanding of how the public sector is culturally differentiated in this era. The insights gained in this study can guide policy stakeholders, the public sector, researchers, and others in exploring how to construct content in future public health events towards promoting public awareness.

The findings of this study have implications for improving public sector responses to possible future health events, especially in terms of information production and dissemination. This study also serves to record how the general population in China responded to and remembered the first significant, protracted, high-impact health incident of the information age. This study contributes some new insights for the researchers and for the governmental sectors responsible for health events in the post-pandemic era by providing empirical findings of how the government sectors promote understanding of health events among citizens.



The study is based on the existing research of the relationship between social media and health events and draws lessons from the disciplines of crisis informatics, media and cultural studies, sociology, paternalistic governance. Additionally, we recommend that the aforementioned parties adopt a plan for disseminating COVID-19-related crisis information on digital platforms to improve communication between the governmental sectors and the citizenry.

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