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Editorial: Uncertainty management during and about the COVID-19 pandemic

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Uncertainty management during and about the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected and destabilizing global event. The lives of millions of people around the world were significantly affected from many different, often interconnected perspectives, and many important changes ensued. Among the pandemic's multiple consequences was the radical reshaping of social life, affecting individual interpersonal relationships and all of our daily activities and established habits. The outbreak of the pandemic and its associated effects (including the virus itself, vaccines, personal protective equipment, lockdowns, social restraints, and vaccination passes, etc.) almost completely catalyzed our attention and permeated our communicative interactions (formal and informal, friendly and professional, spoken and written, and face-to-face and technologically mediated ones). Furthermore, a climate of uncertainty, doubt, fear, and sometimes suspicion pervaded our everyday interactions. Even health communication, in some circumstances, was marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, especially before vaccines became available and their efficacy was demonstrated, and both international and national public health agencies faced the challenge of dealing with skepticism, hesitancy, and the consequences of phenomena such as dis/misinformation and the infodemic.

The Research Topic

This Research Topic aimed to collect articles investigating *Uncertainty management during and about the COVID-19 pandemic*, in all its various facets and across communicative settings, from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. The six published contributions can be grouped under three main themes: (1) information management during and about the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) communication about vaccination and treatments; and (3) emotional resources used to cope with the COVID-19 lockdown.

Sources of information during and about the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to reliable and comprehensible information was crucial as people attempted to overcome the climate of uncertainty surrounding an unknown virus and a previously unexplored global health scenario.

The survey conducted by Hagan et al. on a sample of university students in Ghana revealed that searching for information on social media or professional platforms can bring different outcomes: participants who used professional platforms showed lower levels of anxiety than those who relied on social media.

van Loenhout et al. conducted a study on the use and perception of information sources and channels in Belgium and their relationship to the adherence to measures. The analysis revealed, among other things, that experts contributed most to the public's knowledge about the disease and prevention measures and that the information they provided was considered clearer and more trustworthy than that obtained from other sources (politicians, journalists, and close contacts).

Young et al. focused instead on the experience and challenges of Canadian family physicians concerning information management during the COVID-19 crisis. The main finding of the semi-structured interviews was that the participants were overwhelmed with information, with the need to discriminate the most relevant pieces of information, emphasizing the importance for national health services to implement specific communication plans for family physicians, especially during emergencies such as pandemics.

Communication about vaccination and treatments

One of the major challenges that public health agencies faced was communication, regarding measures to contain the infection, and treatments and vaccines to fight and prevent the virus within a framework that was as complicated as it was continually evolving.

D'Angelo and Orletti applied a qualitative methodology combining classical rhetoric and conversation analysis to the investigation of an interactional sequence from an Italian talk show broadcast during the pandemic in which interlocutors with different degrees of expertise confront each other and clash over the treatments for the virus. The study shows how, in the media context, the speakers construct their identity and authority as experts through the management of certainty/uncertainty, rhetorical pragmatic devices, and conversational moves in a polarized dialogue wherein the two sides are representatives of two distinct and incompatible perspectives.

The article by Ihlen et al. applied the notion of *rhetorical situation* to emphasize how rhetoric can effectively achieve the objective of fostering trust in disputed public health advice, particularly focusing on vaccine hesitancy. Drawing on existing literature, the authors identified five key principles for content strategies related to vaccination that can contribute to an appropriate response to vaccine hesitancy.

Coping with the COVID-19 lockdown

It is apparent how heavily the experience of lockdown impacted the personal (mental, behavioral, emotional, relational, etc.) and professional lives of each individual, and there are many studies that attempt to identify the most effective potential coping strategies.

The study of Biassoni et al. analyzed a corpus of written narratives (both about the present and the future) collected in Italy during the lockdown to investigate the relationship between certainty, anticipatory states, and positive feelings. The analysis, conducted with the use of the LIWC software package, revealed how the appraisal dimension of certainty influenced the elicitation of positive feelings through the elicitation of positive anticipatory states. These results highlight the importance of certainty in coping with environmental threats and stressors.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global event that encouraged a great number of studies, not only in the biomedical field but also in the social sciences and humanities, due to its impact on people's lives. This Research Topic offers insights into the importance of a focus on uncertainty management for public health agencies and experts to communicate certain and reliable information in times of crisis, both for laypersons and experts who, like family physicians, act as mediators.

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Conflict of interest

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