

Strategies of Resonance and Authority: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Saudi Ministry of Health's Crisis Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated effective crisis communication from governmental organizations worldwide. This study examines the multi-layered communication strategy adopted by the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) to engage the public during the pandemic. Employing a blend of sociolinguistic and rhetorical analyses, we scrutinize how the MOH calibrated its messaging to encompass elements of social solidarity, religious imperatives, and cultural values, alongside more authoritative and strict directives. This dual approach facilitated the MOH's ability to capture the public's attention and encourage compliance with health guidelines. The study finds that the MOH's strategy constituted a nuanced and adaptive model of crisis communication that both respected and leveraged the Saudi society's multi-dimensional identity, comprising its cultural, religious, and linguistic facets. By understanding these multiple layers, the MOH crafted a message that was scientifically rigorous, culturally sensitive, and emotionally resonant. This paper argues that the Saudi MOH's complex strategy offers critical lessons for crisis communication that respects both the scientific and sociocultural imperatives of pandemic response. It presents a compelling case study for government organizations seeking to harmonize scientific guidelines with the socio-cultural fabric of their communities, particularly in times of crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, when the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) categorically designated COVID-19 as a national crisis, it initiated a unique lexicon in the discourse surrounding the pandemic within the Saudi context. This pivotal declaration led to stringent mandates for the populace to adhere to social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders, aimed at mitigating the viral spread. Concurrently, MOH's spokesperson became an integral conduit of information, captivating public attention with daily televised briefings that resonated broadly within the community. The Saudi citizenry actively sought out MOH's

digital updates, as they carefully monitored statistical indices such as death rates and hospitalization percentages on both national and global scales.

As the pandemic's scope rapidly expanded, it was impossible to ignore the strikingly divergent rhetorical strategies employed by officials across different nations. Social discussions—both in physical settings and on social media platforms—began to delve into conjectures and queries regarding the variables responsible for successful pandemic management. Was it adherence to COVID-19 precautions, governmental regulations, or cultural attributes?

Against this backdrop, our study presents a thematic discourse analysis of MOH's spokesperson's communications, with the aim of uncovering nuanced sociolinguistic dynamics. While extensive research has been conducted globally on the discourses surrounding past pandemics like Ebola and SARS, scholarly focus on Saudi Arabia's socio-political narratives in health crises—particularly COVID-19—is comparatively limited. Existing studies largely engage with public dialogues on social media and television, employing methodologies such as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis. Nevertheless, there remains a discernible gap in the field of discourse analysis concerning health crises within the Saudi context, despite a plethora of studies in medical sciences.

Our study strives to fill this lacuna by examining the socio-political discourses deployed by Saudi MOH in their daily press briefings on COVID-19, utilizing previously unexplored data sets. Coinciding with noticeable positive socio-political transformations in Saudi Arabia, we have observed significant enhancements in governmental communication strategies, particularly from sectors like the MOH. Each MOH statement during the pandemic has palpably influenced Saudi Arabia's social dynamics, underscoring the need for our sociolinguistic investigation.

The primary objective of our research is to scrutinize the Saudi MOH's discursive framing and crisis management strategies as conveyed in their daily press briefings. In doing so, we aim to offer crucial insights to vital sectors, not only within Saudi Arabia but globally, on the effective use of language during comparable crises. The MOH's strategic linguistic choices have played a seminal role in shaping public awareness and preparedness for similar health emergencies.

To fulfill our research objectives, we have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of daily press releases issued by Saudi MOH, guided by the central research questions:

- What overarching themes are discernible in the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH)'s daily press briefings in managing the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do these themes contribute to effective crisis management and public engagement?

By endeavoring to answer these questions, our study aspires to contribute meaningfully to the existing body of scholarly work on discourse generated by official entities in times of health and societal crises.

ANALYZING CRISIS DISCOURSES: WHY IT MATTERS?

Analyzing crisis discourses requires the synthesis of multifaceted communication strategies, media framings, and officials' language—an arena where a plethora of scholarly work has laid an invaluable foundation for our understanding. For instance, Andy Cowper's timely insights into the delicate balance needed in COVID-19 messaging provide a crucial backdrop for our investigation into Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Health (MOH) content strategies. Cowper's focus on avoiding panic while disseminating critical information echoes the findings of Vaughan et al. (2009), who emphasized the necessity for nuanced and effective communication during health crises to reduce risk.

The nuanced investigation by Moodley et al. (2019) into the media framing of Ebola in South African newspapers adds another layer to this complex tapestry, uncovering discourses steeped in colonial history and global hysteria. Similarly, Holland and Blood's examination of Swine Flu media narratives in Australia illuminates the intricacies of public perception and the fine line between awareness and alarmism. Their research supports Briggs and Nichter's contention that the discourse itself can, at times, outpace the actual virus, creating a self-perpetuating public health problem.

Peiri's study in 2018 enhances our understanding of how pandemics are framed in UK media, a vital consideration given the mainstream media's pivotal role in shaping public opinion and policy, even in the age of social media. Within this realm, Nerlich and Halliday's exploration of Avian Flu narratives uncovered conflicting discourses of fear and caution, revealing the delicate balance that health agencies must maintain. Holmes' work on pandemic preparedness plans further dissects the impact of language and the social construction of disease, emphasizing the often-overlooked power of rhetoric in crisis management.

On the home front, work by Elyas et al. (2022), Al-Ghamdi (2021), Alhulaybi & Hemame (2022), and Albawardi & Al-Ghamdi (2020) has shed light on the discourse dynamics specific to Saudi Arabia, ranging from media framings and ideological representations to the role of linguistic features like illocutionary acts in health officials' speeches. These contributions reveal how the language used by government bodies like the MOH shapes and reflects the nation's unique cultural, social, and political landscape.

Acknowledging the above previous literature, our current study seeks to extend this rich tapestry of research into pandemic discourse. We focus on MOH's linguistic strategies during their daily COVID-19 press conferences in Saudi Arabia. Not merely an academic exercise, our research aims to fill a specific gap concerning the MOH as the key governmental body tasked with navigating the pandemic's socio-economic repercussions in Saudi Arabia. This work, we hope, will offer actionable insights not just for the MOH but for governmental bodies more broadly, enriching the existing body of work on crisis communication and management.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In pursuing an enriched understanding of our central research queries, this study employed a methodological approach that synergistically integrates both qualitative and

quantitative research paradigms (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This eclectic strategy adopts a pragmatic viewpoint, promoting a more nuanced and robust interpretation of the issues at hand (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Such a mixed-method approach not only augments the clarity of our findings but also enhances their interpretive rigor, thereby facilitating a more compelling and nuanced analysis that resonates with both academic and public audiences (Zentella, 1990). Although we utilized a mixed-method approach, we predominantly relied on qualitative analysis, aligned with our belief in its crucial role for this inquiry (Johnson et al., 2007). Consequently, our strategy may be most appropriately categorized as a "qualitatively dominant mixed-method" approach, emphasizing a constructivist-poststructuralist-critical perspective on research while also leveraging quantitative metrics for validation (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 124).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for qualitative analysis were culled from press releases and briefings by the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH), focusing primarily on the discourse around COVID-19. Quantitative data, meanwhile, were extracted from the same sources, particularly targeting the frequency of certain rhetorical strategies and patterns. Importantly, both sets of data were simultaneously gathered through the same mechanism.

To achieve our research objectives, we sourced data exclusively from the official MOH YouTube channel, analyzing press conferences led by MOH spokesperson Mohammed Alabdulaali between March and May 2020. A meticulous selection process informed the choice of 72 videos based on criteria such as subject matter, duration, source credibility, and the official status of the speaker. Notably, we restricted our focus to the Arabic versions due to their comprehensive nature compared to their truncated English counterparts.

Owing to challenges in automated transcription of the Arabic language, which often involves code-switching between Standard Arabic and colloquial dialects, manual transcription was employed. To deepen our analysis, multiple data juxtaposition techniques were used. Although we initially attempted to utilize the Sketch Engine software, technical limitations led us to resort to manual thematic categorization executed in Microsoft Word.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In the current study, a mixed-method approach was employed, integrating both thematic and discourse analyses to scrutinize daily COVID-19 press briefings by the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH). Thematic analysis, as conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2006), served as the foundational methodology for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns in the data set. The analysis engaged in an iterative process of coding, re-coding, and then grouping these codes into larger thematic categories. O'Halloran (2011) posits that each code represents "the most basic segment... that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (p. 63). A meticulous review of the

themes was undertaken to validate their internal coherence and distinguish them from other emerging themes.

Concurrently, discourse analysis was incorporated to explore the implicit social discourses framed by the Saudi MOH's public communications. The utility of discourse analysis for understanding how individuals and institutions frame phenomena through language has been previously documented (Vaughan et al, 2009, Peiri, 2018). This approach is particularly advantageous for investigating the nuanced language employed in institutional press releases, especially during a public health crisis (Peiri, 2018).

Previous studies, such as those by Taylor and Ussher (2001) and Braun & Clarke (2006), have demonstrated the efficacy of combining thematic and discourse analyses for a nuanced, multi-dimensional interpretation of data. Being inductively driven, the themes that emerged in this study were deeply rooted in the gathered data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To streamline the analysis, specialized qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was utilized. This facilitated the organization and categorization of the data, thereby enhancing both the depth and reliability of the research findings.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The corpus of our study consists of 72 meticulously analyzed video broadcasts, disseminated between March and May 2020 via the Saudi Ministry of Health's YouTube channel and Saudi national television. Our analysis unveils a distinct moralizing tone employed by the Saudi authorities to frame the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 crisis. Through a methodical thematic analysis rooted in a data-driven approach, such moralizing tone came through salient recurring themes such as social solidarity markers, religious contextualization, the collective voice "we", cultural imperatives, and enforcement of law and order. When opening his speeches, MOH spokesperson often leaned into scientific discourse, including the use of global and local statistics, medical terminology, and references to global scientific research. Such scientific rigor was vital for establishing authority and credibility, the moralizing tone with the framing of the mentioned themes is validated.

When communicating with the public, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Health (MOH) imbued the crisis narrative with markers of social solidarity, cultural norms, religious tenets, and collective pronouns like "we" and "us." Interestingly, the rhetorical style oscillated between the dual tones of compassion and discipline.

The subsequent Chart (1) delineates the frequency distribution of specific themes identified in the analyzed broadcasts. The collective pronouns "we" and "us" were ubiquitous in all MOH's press releases. Moreover, there was a consistent emphasis on public health as a priority, both by guaranteeing healthcare coverage and by asserting the importance of law enforcement. Around 70% of the releases incorporated markers of social solidarity, 60% utilized religious motifs, and a staggering 90% underscored cultural values.

Most strikingly, the moral discourse recurrently emphasized altruism and communal well-being, themes that resonate deeply with Islamic teachings and Saudi cultural norms.

This potent moral framing was disseminated through various avenues: the use of social solidarity markers, references to religious identity, collective pronouns ("we" and "us"), and the accentuation of ingrained cultural values.

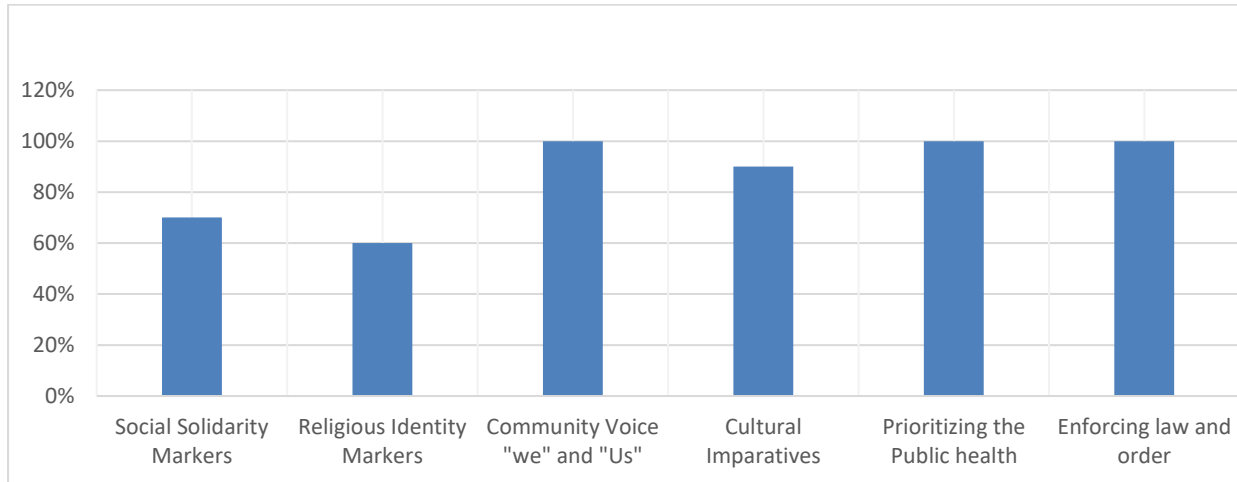


Figure 1. Most Recurring Themes

Most frequently, the emphasis on the morality of thinking beyond the self and taking care of others was employed in every broadcasted conference. This powerful discourse stemmed from Islamic and cultural values and was delivered in several approaches such as the use of social solidarity makers, religious identity markers, collective identity markers such as the pronouns "we"/"us", as well as the emphasis on cultural values. The Saudi MOH in the daily press releases utilized the use of social solidarity markers in the key messages for the public during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Social Solidarity Markers

In their daily communique, the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) conspicuously deployed markers of social solidarity as the cornerstone of their public messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic. As outlined by Berrocal et al. (2021, p. 2), solidarity is considered an essential component for societal cohesion, operating both at interpersonal and intergroup dimensions. This concept aligns closely with Islamic teachings and forms a foundational value that has historically characterized Arab society.

Through various communication channels, including social media platforms like Twitter, the Saudi MOH consistently advocated for social solidarity. Within this framework, the emphasis on collective well-being and individual contributions towards societal resilience emerged as a significant sub-theme. For instance, Table 1 below catalogues select quotes from the MOH's daily briefings, illustrating how markers of social solidarity serve as an instrumental strategy to galvanize community cohesion amidst the pandemic.

Table 1. Examples of using Social Solidarity Markers

Translation into English	Original examples in Arabic
We are all in the same boat	نحن في مركب واحد
This is a patriotic mission; we request your cooperation.	هذه مهمة وطنية نريد تعاونكم

Responsibility entails not only self-protection but also caring for and protecting your loved ones and considering society.	ليست المسؤولية أن يحمي الانسان نفسه وأن يبعد عن المخاطر لوحده، بل عليه أن يفكر في أحبائه ويحميهم ويفكر في المجتمع كله
The carelessness of some affects everyone	التقصير من البعض يؤثر على الجميع
We can overcome this if we all act responsibly.	ممكن ذلك اذا كنا كلنا مسؤولين
We must operate as a unified team, and everyone must exercise caution. Instances of complacency are disheartening, but they have been limited.	يجب أن نعمل كفريق واحد والجميع يجب أن يعمل بحذر واحزنتني هذه المظاهر من التهاون ولكن نقول أنها محدودة
The number of infected cases in the following weeks will primarily depend on your cooperation and adherence to the instructions	ارتفاع الإصابات في المرحلة المقبلة يعتمد بالدرجة الأولى على تعاونكم والتزامكم بالإرشادات والتوجيهات
It is possible to overcome this if we were all responsible	ممكن ذلك اذا كنا كلنا مسؤولين

As table 1 above shows, phrases such as "we are all in the same boat" were frequently employed by both the Minister of Health and their spokesperson to signal the equality and shared fate of people at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. These statements were an explicit call to action for the people of Saudi Arabia to practice social solidarity. The Ministry of Health (MOH) recognized that collaborative efforts between the government and the public are crucial for effectively managing societal crises like this pandemic. Therefore, the use of such markers of social solidarity serves as an indicator of the ministry's emphasis on collective responsibility and coordinated action.

Furthermore, these expressions of social solidarity resonated deeply with the Saudi population, drawing upon cultural and religious values that emphasize community support and mutual aid. The MOH's messaging not only aimed to foster a sense of national unity but also sought to instill a moral duty among citizens to act responsibly for the greater good. By intertwining public health directives with culturally significant concepts of social responsibility and collective action, the MOH effectively mobilized the population in a unified response to the pandemic. This strategic communication approach reflects an understanding of the cultural context and leverages it to enhance public health interventions. The success of this approach in Saudi Arabia could offer valuable insights for other nations seeking to promote social solidarity in their public health campaigns.

Religious Contextualization

Among the various elements that constitute a society's cultural identity, religion holds a significant place, particularly in Saudi Arabia where Islam is not just a faith but a comprehensive way of life. It provides guiding principles for even mundane daily activities. Given that the Saudi government adheres to Islamic scriptures as its constitution and that many Saudi citizens look to these scriptures for guidance, the Ministry of Health strategically employed religious texts and teachings to encourage public participation in pandemic protection measures. For most Saudi public, those Islamic guidelines are to be seen and followed as a law to respect, obey, and mediate upon.

The MOH's communications didn't just incorporate Quranic verses and Prophetic hadiths; they also enlisted religious figures to relay these messages to the community. Table 2 below presents specific examples from the daily press releases that utilized religious identity markers to influence public behavior.

Table 2. Examples of using religious identity markers

Translation into English	Original examples in Arabic
And let not your own hands throw you into destruction" (Quran).	"ولا تلقوا بأيديكم إلى التهلكة"
"Allah's Messenger said, 'Allah is to His slave as the slave thinks of Him; in other words, Allah can do for him what the slave believes He can do.'"	إن من صفة المؤمن أن يكون ممن يحسن الظن بالله جل وعلى كما قال الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم قال الله عز وجل أنا عند ظن عبدي بي فليظن بي ما شاء
"It is enough falsehood for a man to report everything he hears"	"قال الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم كفى بالمرء إثماً أن يحدث بكل ما سمع"
We must rely on God, and it is from Him that we derive the means to protect ourselves and our society from these epidemics.	يجب التوكل على الله ومنه ومنه أخذ الأسباب ومن أخذ "الأسباب حماية أنفسنا ومجتمعنا من هذه الأوبئة"
"It is obligatory to obey the national leader when he enjoins something good; this is undoubtedly for the public's best interest."	فتجب طاعة ولي الأمر فيما أمر بالمعروف وهذا لا شك أنه من المعروف لأنه يحقق مصلحة المجتمع
"Ours is a faith imbued with mercy; hence, the observance of Tarawih prayers may be suspended in the upcoming Ramadan for the greater good."	ديننا رحمة وصلوة التراويح قد لا تكون مقامة في رمضان القادم

The references to Quranic verses and Prophetic Hadiths, as illustrated in Table 2, serve as a powerful testament to Saudi Arabia's deep-rooted Islamic identity. The first example in Table 2, a verse from the Holy Quran, acts as a cautionary admonition, alerting individuals to avoid self-inflicted harm, both physical and metaphorical. Similarly, the inclusion of a Prophetic Hadith serves as an effective deterrent against spreading rumors, a crucial measure during crises when public sentiment is particularly susceptible. By emphasizing these principles, the Ministry of Health (MOH) effectively promotes societal stability and security.

Additionally, the MOH incorporated other fundamental Islamic tenets such as "Tawakkul" (reliance on Allah), respect for authoritative rulings, and the Islamic perspective on fate. The discourse also addressed sensitive religious duties, like the burial protocols for COVID-19 victims, which are deeply rooted in collective Islamic practices. In Islam, the community comes together for the washing of the deceased, followed by a prayer service involving relatives, acquaintances, and the public, and then a procession to the grave for burial, often involving close physical contact. Recognizing the importance of Umrah and Hajj globally, the MOH's spokesperson communicated new protocols at the two Holy Mosques, addressing an international Muslim audience. Given that these Islamic practices involve gatherings and physical closeness, the MOH needed to align their COVID-19

guidelines with Islamic teachings firmly. Thus, citing the Qur'an and Hadith became a significant communicative strategy in reinforcing their public health messages.

The Collective Voice "We"

Throughout the Ministry's press releases and shared content, the pronouns "we" and "us" were prominently featured. As Cramer (2010) articulates, the nuanced use of pronouns can "create, recreate, and make visible specific identities in real-time" (p. 620). The plural first-person pronoun "we" typically functions as a relational signal, serving not only to identify but also to foster a sense of community. It can exert a substantial influence on relational dynamics and cooperative behaviors (Cruz et al., 2017). Broadly speaking, the recurrent use of "we" by the Saudi MOH serves to establish a collective identity, possibly catalyzing a community-wide sense of responsibility aimed at mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Table 3 below furnishes further examples to substantiate this point, alongside previously listed instances.

Table 3. Examples of using the collective voice "we"

Translation into English	Original examples in Arabic
We are all in the same predicament, facing a significant challenge that requires collective action.	نحن في مركب واحد، نحن نعيش تحدي كبير
We are integral members of the global community.	نحن جزء من هذا العالم
It's imperative for each of us to take responsibility and rigorously follow established guidelines to safeguard both ourselves and our loved ones.	علينا أن نكون كلنا مسؤولون ونتقيد بالإجراءات لوقاية أنفسنا والمقربين من حولنا
The more diligently we adhere to safety protocols, the lower the risk for all involved.	كل ما تشبثنا كانت المخاطر أقل

The above examples show how MOH frequently invoked themes of national unity, social responsibility, and solidarity in combatting the crisis. The usage of plural pronouns like "we" and "us" engendered a collective identity in facing the pandemic. This also reveals an evident awareness of the nation's cultural nuances as the following theme demonstrates it more.

Cultural Imperatives

The Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) astutely recognizes the complex, multi-dimensional identity of Saudi Arabian society, one that is intricately woven around its cultural norms, religious beliefs, and linguistic nuances. This nuanced understanding is evidenced by the MOH's strategic choice of language and thematic focus in their daily press releases and other public communications. On several occasions, the MOH paid homage to culturally valued practices such as collective care, social greetings, and community engagement. They not only respected these practices but also offered alternative approaches considering the ongoing pandemic.

Additionally, the MOH employed local dialects, specifically the Saudi Najdi dialect, in their awareness campaigns as a calculated move to engender greater public acceptance and compliance. For instance, an educational video advocating the importance of mask-wearing featured a poem recited in the Najdi dialect including the usage of traditional sayings, metaphors, and poetic versus that resonated with the local populace.

Table 4. Examples of Emphasizing Cultural Imperatives

Translation into English	Original examples in Arabic
This is our beloved who laughs through his eyes... Our beloved is upset, we knew it, looking at his eyes	حبيبنا الزعلان من عيونه عرفناه وهذا اللي يضحك من عيونه درينا
The eyes, indeed, are sufficient in speaking volumes.	عيونك تكفي
May God protect you, and may God bless you, we ask all of you to pay much attention and to be careful. Protect our fathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters, our husbands, and all our loved ones	الله يحفظكم الله يحميكم نسألکم جميعاً جداً أن تنتبهو وتحرصو، الله الله في آبائنا وأمهاتنا وأخواننا وأخواتنا أبنائنا وبناتنا وأزواجنا وكافة أحبائنا، كلنا مسؤولين و الكل عليه أمانه أن يحرص ويحفظ حياة الآخرين
We decided to keep apart from one another only out of care and love, and we will not stay separate for long. May your Eid return happily and joyous	لم نبتعد إلا حرصاً وحباً ولن نفترق، عاد عيدكم بالفرح والمسرات

The Saudi Ministry of Health consistently emphasized the fundamental role of familial bonds within the Saudi social fabric, incorporating this theme into each of its press releases. This approach aimed to galvanize collective action and underscore the importance of familial care as a deeply rooted cultural value. For example, the first two statements above poetically capture the intimacy among family members who intuitively understand each other's emotional states through mere eye contact. These statements are more than just sentiments; they serve as an intimate lens through which the community can understand the broader importance of familial bonds, especially in times of crisis.

The third statement stands as an important reminder of the paradox inherent in caring for family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. It subtly informs the public that the highest expression of care during that time of crisis is to invert their traditional practices. Rather than physical closeness and demonstrative affection, the message calls for a redefined sense of care through social distancing and vigilant protective measures.

The fourth example, related to the celebration of Eid Al-Fitr following Ramadan, serves as a cultural milestone. During a period typically marked by physical gatherings and communal prayers, the Saudi MOH took the opportunity to air a video that reinforced cultural values of optimism, unity, and the importance of maintaining emotional closeness with loved ones, even when physically separated. This multifaceted messaging not only provides guidelines for safe conduct but also nurtures the societal bonds that make the Saudi community resilient in the face of challenges.

While the Saudi health authorities primarily adopted a positive tone to encourage ethical behavior during the pandemic, they did not shy away from employing a more cautionary rhetoric when the situation demanded. The aim of this dual approach was to frame the crisis effectively, heightening public awareness and vigilance about the potential consequences of failing to follow safety measures. Although the warning rhetoric was secondary to the primary message of collective responsibility, the Ministry of Health used it judiciously to punctuate their communications. The Ministry's focus on its governmental responsibility was evident through its prioritization of public health and its readiness to enforce law and order as the situation demanded.

During their daily press briefings on COVID-19, the Saudi Ministry of Health consistently underscored the primacy of public health. The ministry conveyed to the general populace that safeguarding public health stands as the government's paramount concern, and that this commitment extends equally to both citizens and residents. While the narrative did incorporate cautionary messaging to heighten community awareness, it was simultaneously tempered with optimistic affirmations and a reassuring tone. Selected quotes in Table 5 further elucidate the ministry's emphasis on prioritizing public health.

Table 5. Examples of prioritizing public health

Translation into English	Original examples in Arabic
The leadership of our country, may it be protected, was proactive in taking strict precautionary measures before the countries of the world began to take any preventive measures	قيادة بلدنا حفظها الله كانت سباقة في اتخاذ اجراءات احترازية صارمة قبل أن تبدأ دول العالم باتخاذ أي اجراءات وقائية
The government has enacted these precautionary guidelines for your protection	وضعت الدولة هذه الاحترازات لحمايتكم
Your well-being is our concern	نحن حريصون عليكم
We provide free healthcare for all	تقديم العلاج مجاناً للجميع
The health of citizens and residents is a top priority	صحة المواطن والمقيم أولوية قصوى
Our distancing today brings us together tomorrow	تباعدا اليوم يقربنا غدا
All our government sectors operate with high efficiency and in seamless coordination, guided by a leadership that works unceasingly to support the Saudi populace	نحن وجميع القطاعات الحكومية نعمل بكفاءة عالية وتناغم عالي تحت قيادة تعمل بلا كلل ولا ملل لدعمنا

In a notable transition, the focus has shifted from moralizing public behavior during the pandemic's critical phase to emphasizing the ethical responsibilities of the authorities. As observed in the examples provided in Table 5, while the Ministry of Health (MOH) consistently prioritized public health, it also articulated this as an expression of its concern for the well-being of the populace. For instance, the MOH announced that healthcare and treatment for COVID-19 would be offered free of charge to everyone. Additionally, in one of the later examples, the MOH underscored its commitment to collaborating with other governmental sectors, all under the directive of the nation's overarching leadership, to serve the public effectively.

Enforcement of Law and Order

Interspersed with the above themes were clear, direct, and sometimes stern mandates about what actions needed to be taken. MOH's spokesperson often leaned into scientific discourse, including the use of statistics, medical terminology, and references to global scientific research. This theme of scientific rigor was vital for establishing authority and credibility. These directives ranged from stay-at-home orders to mandates on mask-wearing and social distancing. We observed that at various times, the discourse from the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) underwent a distinct shift—moving from a nurturing tone, filled with calming and persuasive messages rooted in social solidarity, religious, and cultural identity, to a more stringent tone that emphasized the enforcement of "law and order." The following quotes in Table 6 effectively capture this change in narrative.

Table 6. Examples of justifying the use of law and order

Translation into English	Original examples in Arabic
Allow me to speak with you with full transparency, even if it is painful. Unfortunately, some members of society did not implement the slogan, we are all responsible and did not take dealing with the seriousness of the epidemic seriously enough	اسمحو لي ان اتحدث معكم بكل شفافية وان كانت مؤلمة.. للأسف أن البعض من أفراد المجتمع لم يطبق شعار كلنا مسؤول ولم يأخذ التعامل مع خطورة الوباء بجدية كافية
We need to take greater measures to protect us and the community from these practices	نحن بحاجة لاتخاذ اجراءات اكبر تحمينا وتحمي المجتمع من هذه الممارسات
There are examples of recklessness among young people and the World Health Organization indicating that the virus is not only able to hospitalize you but even cause you to die. Our youth do not want to lose any of them, and we do not want them to be a source of infection for their parents, and this is a very dangerous matter	هناك أمثلة من الاستهتار بين الشباب ومنظمة الصحة العالمية تشير إلى ان الفيروس ليس قادر فقط على إدخالك المستشفى بل حتى أن يسبب لك الوفاة، شبابنا لا نريد أن ن فقد منهم أحد ولانريد أن يكونو مصدر انتقال العدوى لآبائهم وأمهاتهم وهذا امر خطير جداً
We must all be united and responsible, and everyone in this country must be aware that the message they receive about staying at home as much as possible is not less important than all other messages, but rather is the most important	يجب أن نكون كلنا متكاتفين ومسؤولين والجميع في هذا البلد يجب أن يعي أن الرسالة التي تصلهم بشأن البقاء في المنازل أكبر قدر ممكن ليست رسالة أقل أهمية من كافة الرسائل الأخرى بل هي الأهم
We will go back to where we were, and we do not want to go back with the wound of loss	سنعود لما كنا عليه ولا نريد أن نعود ولدينا جرح الفقد

The examples provided in Table 6 illustrate the multi-faceted approach taken by the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) in communicating with the public. While emphasizing the importance of individual compliance with health guidelines, the MOH also took care to assert their authority to enforce law and order in matters related to containing the virus. This underscores the significance of community safety as a shared responsibility.

MOH's strategy indicates that employing solely positive and reassuring rhetoric is not always sufficient in times of crisis. A balanced approach, which also incorporates firm and

direct warnings, is crucial for maintaining law and order, and for ensuring that the public takes the situation seriously. This dual messaging serves not only to comfort, but also to caution, striking a necessary balance in the interest of public safety.

CONCLUSION

The Saudi Ministry of Health's (MOH) communication strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a rich case study in the nuanced ways governments can use varied rhetorical approaches to engage with the public during times of crisis. MOH adopted a multi-layered strategy, interweaving messages of social solidarity, religious and cultural identity markers, as well as firm warnings, to ensure effective crisis communication.

The first layer of the MOH's strategy involved deploying phrases and idioms that resonated with collective responsibility and social cohesion. Also, MOH frequently invoked themes of national unity, social responsibility, and solidarity in combatting the crisis. The usage of plural pronouns like "we" and "us" engendered a collective identity in facing the pandemic. The consistent use of pronouns such as "we" and "us" underlined the collective nature of the fight against the pandemic, serving to build relational ties and encourage cooperative behavior. Furthermore, the MOH effectively utilized religious texts and teachings, positioning its guidelines and directives within a broader religious and cultural framework. This not only signaled the importance of the pandemic in a spiritual context but also served to enhance compliance by aligning public health imperatives with deeply ingrained religious and cultural norms.

At the same time, the MOH didn't shy away from switching its tone when necessary. Moments of stricter, more authoritarian language were introduced to punctuate the generally supportive and educative discourse. This transition wasn't just tactical but also indicative of a larger understanding: that public compliance in a crisis may require a balance between comfort and caution, reassurance, and warning. Incorporating both elements demonstrated the MOH's commitment to safeguarding both the physical and psychological well-being of the population. By validating cultural practices and integrating them into public health guidelines, the MOH achieved a certain level of social acceptance and adherence that might not have been possible through a more authoritative or purely clinical approach alone.

MOH's strategy thus presents a sophisticated model of crisis communication that negotiates multiple layers of identity and authority. It recognizes the multi-dimensionality of society — its values, beliefs, and aspirations — and crafts a public health message that is not just scientifically sound but also culturally sensitive and emotionally resonant. The Saudi experience serves as a vital case study for understanding how complex societies can be effectively managed through well-strategized communication, especially in times of global crises.

This analysis provides essential insights into how governments can approach future crises, blending different rhetorical strategies to create a holistic, effective, and culturally attuned public health campaign.

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