

# COVID-19-related Psychosocial Information: Findings from a Public Online Search Engine

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** There is an emotional and psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We planned to find the responses provided by online search engine to an Internet user when searching for psychosocial issues related to COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methodology:** Key terms "COVID-19" and "COVID-19 PSYCHOSOCIAL" were searched on Google search. Responses from the first five pages were considered. About 62 relevant articles were found.

**Results:** Articles were grouped into news article, journal article, and resource article. The article describes the impact of COVID-19 and coping methods. Few provided helpline numbers and online resources like textual and audiovisual information on home-based well-being methods as well as guidance for individual care.

**Conclusion:** Media channels, scientific community, and various government and nongovernment organizations published various articles catering to the psychosocial and mental health needs of general public, risk groups, and professionals. In the future, the acceptance, knowledge dissemination, and impact of these articles on people's attitude and practice during the pandemic situation shall be looked into. There is a need for standard guidelines for publishing public information on online public forums.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Mental health, Pandemic, Psychological issues, Social support, Search engine.

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## INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19)<sup>1</sup> pandemic had created an unprecedented situation in the whole world. News of affected and dead people all around the world were drumming the brain every moment. Added to this were the news of misery of the population like loss of livelihood, getting stranded away from family, and not getting daily supply of food and medicines to name a few. People were also going through a phase of disruption of their daily routine as a result of lockdown and/or quarantine. The anxiety level used to shoot up when one used to hear the news of somebody known becoming COVID-positive.<sup>2</sup> As a result, people were often turning onto the Internet via search engines to find some respite.

We attempted this study with the aim of finding out the responses provided to an Indian Google user related to mental health and psychosocial issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our objectives were to find the number, type, quality, and usefulness of the resources available online, about the psychosocial impact of COVID-19, on the general public during the first wave of the pandemic.

## METHODOLOGY

Out of the initial lockdown period of 21 days imposed by the Government of India, we selected four random days by simple random sampling. On these days, we searched the key terms "COVID-19" and "COVID-19 PSYCHOSOCIAL" separately on the Internet via Google search engine on our laptops. We looked up each article in the first five pages. Each page generated ten results. Article inclusion criteria were any article having psychosocial-related

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information relevant to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Exclusion criteria were (i) repetition of same article and (ii) articles having no psychosocial-related information. Psychosocial means "pertaining to the influence of social factors on an individual's mind or behavior and to the interrelation of behavioral and social factors".<sup>3</sup> Articles satisfying the above criteria were noted down by the two authors independently, and the articles agreed upon by both were then further categorized and studied.

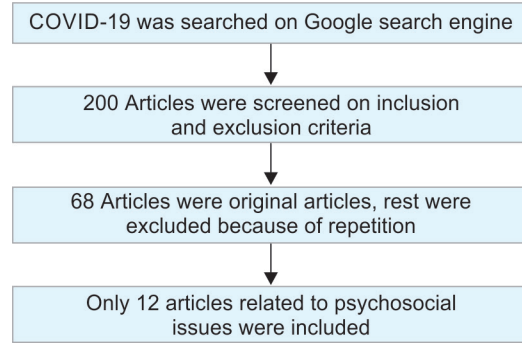
## RESULTS

When the term "COVID-19" was searched for, out of a total of 200 articles, 68 articles were original, and 132 articles were repetitions that were excluded. Out of the above 68 articles, only 12 articles were selected as per our inclusion and exclusion criteria. These 12 articles were broadly categorized into news articles, journal articles, and

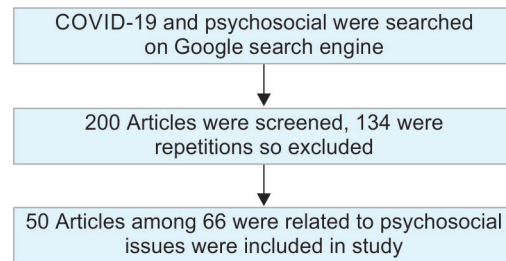
**Table 1:** Pattern and nature of articles pertaining to psychosocial aspects when searched using keyword COVID-19

Category	Number	Theme
News articles	4	a) Consequences of the pandemic like grief and stigma b) Advice on protection of mental health
Journal articles	1	a) Impact of the pandemic on psychological and psychosocial aspects
Resource articles	7	a) Provision of helpline to discuss issues related to mental health b) Identification of issues like anxiety and depression c) Tips on caring for mental health for self, children, and others d) Videos on coping methods such as problematic alcohol usage, stress, and stigma e) Videos on coping methods in an indoor life

**Flowchart 1:** Article selection process using keyword COVID-19



**Flowchart 2:** Article selection process using keyword COVID-19 and psychosocial



**Table 2:** Pattern and nature of articles pertaining to psychosocial aspects when searched using keyword COVID-19 and psychosocial

Category	Number	Theme
News articles	15	a) Ways to manage anxiety b) Psychosocial issues due to the pandemic, including plight of the migrant workers c) Impact of the pandemic on psychological and psychosocial issues d) Provision of helpline for students e) Telepsychotherapy f) Support for medical professionals
Journal articles	5	a) Social issues related to specific gender b) Relationship between lung function and psychosocial stressors c) Call for papers related to COVID-19
Resource articles	23	a) Psychosocial support for migrant workers b) Message to general population, health workers, team leaders, and employers to reduce stigma and anxiety c) Guidance for indoor activities d) Videos on reducing the psychosocial impact e) Mental health of the elderly f) Well-being of students g) Advice for psychologists and therapists h) Job offers in helping during the pandemic i) Telehealth courses
Websites	7	a) Social support for migrant workers b) Psychoanalytical support c) Tips on how to keep oneself confined in a small place and how to deal with stress and conflict

resource articles (government or nongovernment), details of which have been tabulated in Table 1 and Flowcharts 1 and 2.

When the term “COVID-19 PSYCHOSOCIAL” was searched for, out of 200 articles, 66 were original and the rest 134 were repetitions. Out of these 66 articles, 50 articles were selected as per our inclusion and exclusion criteria. These 50 articles were broadly categorized into news articles, journal articles, resource articles

(government or nongovernment), and websites. Details of these articles are tabulated in Table 2.

## DISCUSSION

During the time of the pandemic, people searched for information regarding COVID and mental health/psychological issues related to

it, on public forums like Google and YouTube.<sup>3</sup> This information had effect on knowledge, attitude, and behavior of the general public. The study aims to understand the type and quality of information of such articles in public forum. The study is the first of its kind.

First, we used the term “COVID-19” on the Google search engine to find out how many psychosocially relevant articles were available for the general public on public media forums when a general term is used for searching.

Next, we used a more specific term “COVID-19 PSYCHOSOCIAL” to understand the type of information available in the online public platform regarding the psychosocial aspects during the pandemic. We have limited our search to the first five pages only as data show that relevance of the results to the search item gradually decreases over the pages<sup>4</sup> and more than 90% of people limit their search to the first three pages.<sup>5</sup>

From Table 1, we can see that approximately 18% of the articles on COVID-19 were related to psychological and psychosocial aspects. Since a similar study has not been conducted before to our knowledge, it cannot be commented whether psychosocial aspects have been adequately addressed or not. It is also observed that a majority of them are discussing about the impact or consequences due to the pandemic and methods to implement caregiving and coping for the same. Few of them have provided helplines also to support the community at stake. No article was found on telepsychiatry, which probably points to the fact that online consultation had not yet become popular.

Table 2 shows that a wide range of psychological and psychosocial aspects have been addressed. The main focus is found to be on minor psychiatric symptoms and not disorders per se. They are devoted to information about how to identify symptoms of stress and anxiety on individual basis during lockdown. Some are also related to management of those symptoms with behavioral techniques, namely, meditation, yoga, indoor activities, taking a break from COVID news, connecting with friends, and family members. There are also articles for the community at large. Also, some articles specifically focus on the marginalized sections like migrant workers. Few articles have also focussed on specific gender issues. However, there was lack of any specific policy for addressing the psychosocial issues of COVID-19 on an individual or community basis.

During lockdown, both the public and government were unaware of the course of the pandemic, and fear and stigma of COVID-19 had enveloped them. Online public forums like Google were used commonly to understand the ongoing crisis related to lockdown and COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> The general public during the lockdown used online public forums like Google for getting information about mental health problems related to COVID-19 and learn skills to cope with them. They also searched for helpline numbers that may be used during the crisis. Professional people used the online public forum to understand the need of people and accordingly update their clinical skills. Contemporary relevant research topics are generated through contemporary discussion on online public forums.<sup>7,8</sup>

Google search engine results show that news channels played a prominent role in spreading awareness about science behind the COVID-19, its natural course, the comorbidity associated with the disorder, and when and where to seek help. The experts from different fields would address the media, and general doubts of the public would be answered. The lockdown had impacted the life of migrant workers and students away from home in an unimaginable way that had been brought to the notice of both government and

the general public through media. The media also tried to come up with the general help for the public by trying to suggest popular coping skills and recommending lifestyle changes.

Government and nongovernment organizations had tried to find out ways to help the needy and various resource articles were published. The pandemic forced the government to amend rules on a daily basis and so many resource articles were handy for the general public. The psychosocial impact of the lockdown was initially anticipated and various counseling helpline numbers were made available to the general public.

Various segment of society had various needs. Lockdown and COVID had a differential impact on their life. The resource articles show that guidelines have tried to address the need of marginalized and vulnerable segments along with the general public.

The search on Google also shows that research articles are gradually getting published to understand the psychological and psychosocial impact of COVID-19 and their call for further research. Media and resource articles were a major help available to the general public.

Vulnerable populations like the elderly, migrant workers, single mothers, widows, and students had unprecedented impact of COVID and lockdown. The children’s schools were closed, and social life was abruptly halted, which increased online usage and the burden on parents and caregivers increased.

The study finds that the psychosocial issues of known psychiatric patients were not addressed. There were no guidelines for dissemination of information on online public forums. The psychosocial issues related to children and pregnant females were not addressed and need attention. Also, general keywords used in online public forums may not bring relevant articles to users. Digital health literacy of the general population will play an important role on what information becomes available to them on online public forums.<sup>9</sup>

## LIMITATIONS

The study was done based on the responses generated on 4 days only. Daily searches throughout the lockdown period could have yielded better results. Our search keywords were nonspecific and the general public may not use the word like psychosocial. Specific psychiatric disorders were not searched for. We did not compare our findings from other search engines.

## FUTURE DIRECTION

We suggest that more data should be gathered to evaluate the impact of these articles on general public knowledge, attitude, and behavior. Policies should be made in preparation for such catastrophic events in the future such that the quality of the content of information released during such times is monitored and of the highest quality to ensure that the general public will receive the most accurate information in a timely manner. Digital health literacy should become the primary focus to enable quality information to users at all times.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that various informative articles on psychosocial topics were available for the general public as well as professionals. These articles addressed various psychosocial issues related to COVID-19, including information and awareness, coping methods,

helplines etc. Public policies related to psychosocial issues are required to help us better to cope with conditions such as the pandemic.

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