

## HASHTAGS, HOPE, AND FEAR: SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES SHAPING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF COVID-19

**Babar Sohail**

Assistant Professor

University of Sialkot, Sialkot, Pakistan

[Rana.sohail@uskt.edu.pk](mailto:Rana.sohail@uskt.edu.pk)

**Faiz Ullah**

PhD Media and Communication Studies

University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

[Ranafaizullah34@gmail.com](mailto:Ranafaizullah34@gmail.com)

**Shahbaz Aslam**

PhD Media and Communication Studies

University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Email: [shahbaz\\_vu@yahoo.com](mailto:shahbaz_vu@yahoo.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9034-2519>

### Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic produced an unprecedented shift in global communication dynamics, with social media emerging as a primary arena for information dissemination, emotional expression, and public interpretation of the crisis. Unlike previous pandemics, the digital environment enabled individuals, institutions, and informal networks to construct competing narratives shaping perceptions of risk, responsibility, and meaning. This study investigates how social media narratives, particularly those expressed through hashtags, visual storytelling, and affective discourse, shaped public understanding of COVID-19. Using qualitative content analysis of 1,200 social media posts and interviews with 30 social media users, the research identifies three dominant narrative categories: hope-based narratives, fear-based narratives, and polarizing political narratives. The findings demonstrate that social media did not simply transmit information; it emotionally framed the pandemic, producing competing collective imaginaries that influenced compliance with preventive measures, trust in institutions, and interpretations of scientific authority. Hope-centered narratives fostered solidarity and communal resilience, while fear-driven narratives amplified anxiety, misinformation, and social fragmentation. Polarized political narratives intensified distrust and shaped ideological identity performance. The study highlights the role of affective publics in crisis communication and emphasizes the need for strategic, transparent, and emotionally intelligent digital health messaging to strengthen public resilience in future health emergencies.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; social media communication; narrative framing; affective publics; hashtags; crisis communication; digital emotion; misinformation; public perception

### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped global communication practices, transforming digital platforms into essential spaces for seeking information, sharing personal experiences, and expressing emotions. Social media became a primary public sphere through which individuals attempted to make sense of an unfolding health crisis marked by uncertainty, fear, conflicting narratives, and rapidly changing scientific knowledge. Digital platforms served simultaneously as sources of news, emotional support networks, arenas of political conflict, and channels for public health messaging. The volume and velocity of information circulating through platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok amplified both collective understanding and widespread confusion, demonstrating the power of mediated narratives to shape social meaning during emergencies.

Unlike traditional top-down communication models, digital networks foster decentralized, participatory communication, enabling ordinary individuals to engage in narrative production alongside experts, institutions, and media organizations (Castells, 2009). During COVID-19, this participatory framework produced what Papacharissi (2015) describes as *affective*

*publics*—emotion-driven communities that mobilize around shared sentiments and collective expressions rather than rational debate. Emotional storytelling became a key framework through which people interpreted risk, identified blame, and created meaning in the midst of crisis.

As uncertainty intensified, hashtags emerged as symbolic anchors for emotionally charged narratives that shaped public discourse: #StayHome, #WearAMask, #FlattenTheCurve, #WeAreInThisTogether, #COVIDHoax, #Plandemic, #COVIDWarriors, and others became ideological markers dividing communities into moral, political, and epistemic camps. Hashtags served as narrative frames capable of constructing solidarity and hope or amplifying division and fear, demonstrating the centrality of digital rhetoric in crisis communication.

Simultaneously, misinformation and conspiracy theories spread rapidly through digital networks, creating what Sunstein (2001) and Pariser (2011) describe as echo chambers and filter bubbles, which reinforce pre-existing beliefs rather than facilitate evidence-based understanding. Competing narratives surrounding institutional trust, vaccine safety, masking policies, and government restrictions heightened polarization and undermined a unified public health response. Herman and Chomsky (1988) note that in contested environments, communication becomes a battleground where powerful actors compete for narrative dominance. COVID-19 represented such a battleground.

This study investigates how social media narratives, particularly those shaped through hashtags and emotional discourse, constructed public meaning around COVID-19. It explores how themes of hope, fear, and polarization circulated online, how users interpreted these narratives, and how these narratives influenced public perception of risk, responsibility, and scientific credibility.

The purpose of this research is threefold:

1. To analyze how social media narratives framed the pandemic and shaped public meaning.
2. To examine the emotional structures, hope, fear, grief, anger that informed digital communication.
3. To understand how narrative framing affected trust, compliance, and collective behavior.

This work contributes to crisis communication scholarship by integrating narrative analysis, emotional communication theory, and digital culture studies. It provides insight into how affective storytelling shapes public response during health emergencies, and it offers practical implications for future digital health communication strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Social Media as a Public Sphere in Crisis

Social media functions as a dynamic public sphere in which individuals engage in identity performance, emotional expression, and meaning-making (Papacharissi, 2015). Castells (2009) argues that communication power in digital societies lies in the ability to shape collective narratives rather than to control communication flow. COVID-19 intensified this process by forcing much of public life, social, political, medical, and educational, into digital space. Unlike traditional media, social media integrates personal testimony with collective memory production, merging private and public communication.

During crises, people turn to media not only for information but also for emotional security and communal belonging. Lakoff (2002) notes that narrative framing provides cognitive tools for interpreting complex realities, enabling individuals to navigate uncertainty. Social media thus served both affective and cognitive purposes: offering emotional support communities and constructing interpretive frameworks for understanding the pandemic (Ahmad et al., 2021; Aslam et al., 2020, 2024; Hussain et al., 2021).

## 2.2 Narrative Framing and Meaning Construction

Framing theory suggests that messages structure meaning by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others (Goffman, 1974). Frames function as narrative filters that guide interpretation. In digital spaces, frames are constructed through linguistic cues, memes, visuals, and hashtags. Sunstein (2001) argues that digital fragmentation intensifies selective exposure, allowing users to cluster around preferred interpretive frames.

During COVID-19, common narrative frames included:

- Scientific/public health frame: data-driven and expert-centered
- Human-interest frame: emotional stories of suffering or resilience
- Political frame: narratives about power and control
- Conspiracy frame: distrusting official science and institutions
- War frame: virus as enemy; society as battlefield

These frames shaped not only understanding but also emotional tone, ranging from hope and solidarity to fear, outrage, and despair.

## 2.3 Hope-Based Narratives and Collective Resilience

Hope emerged as a dominant emotional resource in early pandemic discourse. Billig (1995) suggests that collective rituals and symbolic gestures strengthen belonging during a crisis. Hashtags such as #WeAreInThisTogether and #HopeFromHome created narratives of shared struggle, emphasizing unity, compassion, and resilience. Positive storytelling, videos of balcony singing, community donations, and messages supporting healthcare workers helped ease psychological distress.

Hope-based communication framed preventive measures such as masking and distancing as acts of solidarity rather than obligation. Emotional bonding increased compliance and restored social connection despite physical distance. Hope narratives thus functioned as psychological coping mechanisms.

## 2.4 Fear-Based Narratives and Emotional Contagion

Fear is a powerful emotional force in crisis communication. Papacharissi (2015) argues that emotional energy mobilizes affective publics. Fear-framed messages, daily death counts, images of mass graves, collapsing hospitals, and predictions of catastrophe generated emotional intensity and urgency. Fear served to motivate compliance but also increased anxiety, panic, and avoidance.

Digital platforms amplified fear through constant updates and unfiltered personal testimony. As Sunstein (2001) warns, emotionally charged content spreads more rapidly than rational information due to psychological priming. This environment became fertile ground for misinformation, conspiracy theories, and distrust.

## 2.5 Hashtags, Identity Politics, and Polarization

Hashtags act as indexing tools that structure discourse and group identity. They function as rallying points for mobilization and ideological alignment. Pariser (2011) explains that algorithmic filtering contributes to ideological clustering, reinforcing division. During COVID-19, hashtags such as #COVIDHoax, #AntiMask, and #NoVaccine reflected political and cultural identity battles rather than scientific debate (Adnan et al., 2019; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019; Jin et al., 2022).

These narratives reframed public health behavior as ideological performance rather than medical precaution. Mask wearing, vaccination, and distancing became symbolic identity markers. Such polarization undermined a unified pandemic response and weakened trust in scientific authority.

## 2.6 Misinformation and Competing Claims to Truth

Misinformation flourished amid uncertainty. Herman and Chomsky (1988) emphasize that information battles arise when authority is contested. During COVID-19, scientific

knowledge changed rapidly, creating interpretive gaps easily filled by rumor. Digital platforms accelerated false narratives due to emotional appeal and virality.

Misinformation eroded trust, intensified fear, and generated behavioral inconsistency. It fractured public consensus and hindered cooperation.

Research shows that social media narratives significantly influenced public understanding of COVID-19 by shaping emotional response, trust, and behavior through framing structures and hashtag discourse. However, limited scholarship deeply analyzes how hope-based versus fear-based narratives shaped collective interpretation and identity performance. This study fills that gap by analyzing emotional narrative patterns and interpretive reception.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Framing Theory, Affective Publics Theory, and Social Identity Theory. Together, these theories provide a lens for analyzing how social media narratives structure meaning, mobilize emotion, and shape public understanding of the pandemic.

#### 3.1 Framing Theory

Framing Theory posits that communication structures perception by highlighting specific elements of an issue while omitting others (Goffman, 1974). Frames act as interpretive scaffolding that guides how audiences make sense of complex events. In crisis environments, framing plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes, behaviors, and emotional responses (Lakoff, 2002). During COVID-19, competing frames emerged across digital platforms: scientific frames advocating preventive measures, human-interest frames emphasizing suffering and resilience, and political frames interpreting the crisis ideologically.

Hashtags serve as framing devices that categorize content, control meaning, and cluster discourse around specific emotional and ideological cues. Frames influence whether users interpret COVID-19 as a medical emergency, a political conflict, a global moral duty, or a conspiracy. Thus, Framing Theory provides foundational insight into how digital narratives structured public understanding during the pandemic.

#### 3.2 Affective Publics Theory

Affective Publics Theory argues that social media publics are organized through emotion-driven expression rather than rational debate (Papacharissi, 2015). Digital communication is deeply affective; emotions circulate, intensify, and shape collective meaning. Hope, fear, grief, anger, and solidarity become connective forces that mobilize online engagement. Affective publics emerged around hashtags like #StayHome, #WeAreInThisTogether, #MaskUp, and #COVIDHoax, serving as emotional markers of belonging.

COVID-19 communication was characterized by emotional volatility, where fear amplified urgency, hope reinforced resilience, and anger fueled polarization. Affective Publics Theory explains how emotional storytelling online shaped interpretations of risk, responsibility, and trust in institutions.

#### 3.3 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory asserts that people construct identity through group affiliation and symbolic boundaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social media served as a site of identity performance during COVID-19, where participation in hashtag discourse became a marker of ideological or moral stance. Hashtags functioned as identity labels; #AntiMask or #GetVaccinated signaled alignment with specific communities.

Identity-based polarization influenced public response to health directives and contributed to conflict between science, politics, and individual rights. Thus, Social Identity Theory helps explain how narratives became more than information; they became moral and cultural positions.

#### 4. Methodology

##### 4.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative mixed-methods design, integrating:

1. Content analysis of social media posts to identify narrative patterns and framing strategies.
2. Semi-structured interviews to examine how audiences perceived and interpreted online narratives.

This design enabled triangulation of both textual and experiential data, increasing analytical depth and credibility (Creswell, 2013).

##### 4.2 Data Sample

###### Social Media Dataset

A dataset of 1,200 publicly available social media posts was collected from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok based on key hashtags, including:

Hope-based	Fear-based	Polarization-based
#WeAreInThisTogether	#FearCovid	#COVIDHoax
#StayHomeSaveLives	#COVIDDeath	#NoVaccine
#HopeFromHome	#PandemicPanic	#AntiMask

The sample was selected using purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives and geographic variation.

###### Interviews

30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with adults aged 18–60 across varied backgrounds. Participants were recruited through social media posting and snowball sampling.

Participant Category	Number
Healthcare workers	6
University students	8
General public	12
Teachers & researchers	4

Interviews explored emotional reactions, trust perception, and interpretation of narratives.

##### 4.3 Data Analysis

###### Content Analysis

Posts were coded inductively using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding categories included emotion type, narrative style, framing strategy, identity markers, and calls to action.

###### Interview Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed for recurring themes using iterative coding cycles. Researcher triangulation ensured coding reliability.

##### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent, anonymity was preserved, and only public posts were analyzed.

#### 5. Results

The results are presented in three major thematic categories:

- (1) Hope-based narratives
- (2) Fear-based narratives
- (3) Polarizing political narratives

##### 5.1 Hope-Based Narratives: Solidarity and Emotional Coping

Hope-based content accounted for 42% of the analyzed posts. These narratives emphasized unity, emotional resilience, and communal action. Hashtags such as #WeAreInThisTogether,



#HopeFromHome, and #ThanksHealthHeroes were used to construct collective morale and encourage preventive cooperation.

Visual content included balcony singing, community volunteering, recovered patient celebrations, and support for healthcare workers. Interview participants reported that such content helped reduce fear and provided emotional comfort.

One participant described:

*“Those posts reminded us that even though we were physically isolated, we were connected emotionally.”*

Hope narratives framed compliance as moral responsibility rather than mandated duty, reinforcing Billig’s (1995) idea of collective belonging.

## 5.2 Fear-Based Narratives: Anxiety, Loss, and Crisis Sensationalism

Fear-based posts constituted 38% of the sample. Content included daily death counts, ICU footage, mass graves, and predictions of catastrophe. Emotional tone included panic, grief, desperation, and despair.

Hashtags such as #COVIDDeath, #StayScared, and #PandemicPanic amplified anxiety and urgency. As Sunstein (2001) explains, emotionally extreme content spreads rapidly due to psychological priming.

Interview narratives indicated conflicting emotional response:

*“It scared people enough to follow rules,”* reported one viewer. *“I stopped reading anything after a while, it felt like emotional suffocation,”* reported another.

Fear-based communication encouraged short-term compliance but produced long-term exhaustion.

## 5.3 Polarizing Narratives: Conspiracy, Distrust, and Identity-Based Conflict

Polarization narratives appeared in 20% of posts, with hashtags such as #COVIDHoax, #NoVaccine, #AntiMask, #Plandemic, and #FreedomFirst. These posts framed COVID-19 not as a health crisis, but as a political manipulation, institutional conspiracy, or an attack on personal freedoms.

Posts frequently included anti-expert rhetoric and distrust of science or government. Users described pandemic policies as tyranny, hoaxes, or strategic control mechanisms. Polarized content often used moral absolutism, “us versus them” framing, reflecting Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) social identity segmentation.

Interview responses illustrated frustration and confusion:

*“It divided families. You were either for science or against freedom.”*

Polarization narratives fostered conflict rather than unity and reduced compliance with preventive measures.

## 5.4 Emotional Trajectories Over Time

Data also revealed shifting emotional cycles:

Phase	Dominant emotion	Narrative tone
Early pandemic	hope	unity & solidarity
Mid-pandemic	fear	trauma & urgency
Late pandemic	anger & fatigue	polarization & distrust

Narrative sentiment shifted from collective resilience to emotional collapse and political combat.

## 5.5 Summary of Key Findings

Narrative Type	Impact
Hope narratives	Increased coping & compliance
Fear narratives	Motivated urgency but caused fatigue
Polarization narratives	Increased division & mistrust in institutions

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media narratives played a central role in shaping public understanding of COVID-19 by framing the pandemic emotionally rather than purely informationally. The prominence of hope-based, fear-based, and polarized political narratives illustrates how digital communication during crises is guided by emotional resonance, identity performance, and narrative framing rather than objective reporting. The study confirms Papacharissi's (2015) argument that affective expression in digital spaces forms the basis of collective mobilization. Affective publics emerged around hashtags that served as symbolic anchors, creating shared emotional meaning in a period of disorientation and global uncertainty.

### 6.1 Emotional Narratives as Interpretive Frameworks

The results show that hope narratives fostered a sense of emotional solidarity and collective resilience. Consistent with Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism and social bonding rituals, messages of unity communicated through hashtags like #WeAreInThisTogether and #HopeFromHome framed pandemic response as a shared moral responsibility. Participants reported that such narratives helped mitigate fear and distress, reinforcing Lakoff's (2002) assertion that narrative frames shape cognitive and emotional processing. Hope-based messaging framed preventive actions as communal gestures, increasing compliance and promoting social cohesion.

In contrast, fear-based narratives amplified anxiety and emotional uncertainty. Visual depictions of overwhelmed hospitals, rising death counts, and emotional testimonies generated immediate urgency but also accelerated psychological burnout. This reflects Sunstein's (2001) warning that emotionally extreme information triggers amplification loops in digital environments. Fear framing increased attention and short-term behavior adherence but produced fatigue and withdrawal over time, demonstrating both its motivational power and psychological risk.

### 6.2 Polarization, Identity, and Distrust

A significant finding is the role of social media in shaping political and ideological polarization. Hashtags such as #COVIDHoax, #NoVaccine, and #AntiMask functioned as markers of identity belonging rather than rational argumentation, consistent with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) theory that identity emerges through group differentiation. These narratives enabled individuals to perform belonging to ideological tribes, reframing public health behavior as symbolic action. This shift turned scientific measures into political conflict, weakening public trust in institutions and experts.

Polarization also produced epistemic conflict in which competing claims to truth circulated, reinforcing Herman and Chomsky's (1988) argument that crisis communication becomes a site of power struggle. When scientific knowledge evolved and institutional messaging shifted, distrust widened, allowing misinformation to thrive. The data demonstrates that polarization narratives did not merely express disagreement—they restructured pandemic meaning itself, shaping how audiences interpreted risk, vaccination, and authority.

### 6.3 Social Media as Emotional Infrastructure

The emotional trajectories identified, hope in early pandemic stages, fear during peak escalation, and anger or fatigue in later phases, highlight the temporal dimension of affective publics. Emotional norms shifted alongside crisis developments, demonstrating that digital communication operates as an emotional infrastructure rather than simply a distribution channel. Castells' (2009) view of networked communication as a struggle for narrative control is validated in the transition from solidarity to conflict. Hope created temporary unity,

while fear heightened vulnerability, and anger fueled collective exhaustion and political confrontation.

The findings emphasize the need for crisis communication strategies that integrate emotional literacy rather than relying solely on data transmission. When scientific messaging fails to account for emotional context, public compliance deteriorates and narrative ownership shifts toward alternative actors, including influencers, conspiracy theorists, and political factions.

#### 6.4 Implications for Public Health Communication

The results suggest several implications for future digital crisis communication:

Challenge Identified	Strategic Implication
Emotional volatility	Design communication frameworks that balance affective and rational discourse
Polarization dynamics	Center transparency, trust-building, and depoliticized messaging
Misinformation spread	Increase credible presence in digital spaces with narrative clarity
Identity performance	Frame prevention as shared community identity rather than ideological symbol

Health communication must recognize that in digital culture, public response is driven by emotional meaning-making, not only factual accuracy. Effective messaging must therefore integrate empathy, cultural sensitivity, and narrative coherence.

#### 7. Conclusion

This study examined how social media narratives shaped public understanding of COVID-19 by analyzing emotional framing and hashtag discourse across digital platforms. The findings demonstrate that social media played a decisive role in constructing public meaning around the pandemic, not through neutral information exchange but through emotional storytelling, identity signaling, and narrative framing. Hope-based communication fostered solidarity and compliance, fear-based narratives generated urgency but also exhaustion, and polarized discourse produced ideological division and distrust in institutions.

These results highlight the importance of understanding social media as a narrative and emotional ecosystem, where meaning is co-constructed by diverse actors rather than controlled by experts or governments. For future health crises, communication strategies must move beyond purely instructional messaging and incorporate emotional intelligence, transparency, and inclusive engagement.

Ultimately, the pandemic revealed that crisis communication is not only technical and scientific but symbolic, emotional, and relational. Narrative power can either strengthen social resilience or intensify fragmentation. Balanced digital storytelling is therefore critical to protecting public trust and cooperation in future emergencies.

#### References

- Adnan, M., Ali, A., & Aslam, S. (2019). Economic issues and ethical Journalism in Pakistan: Prospects and challenges. *Global Social Sciences Review*, 4(1), 11–22.
- Ahmad, R. W., Aslam, S., & Saeed, M. U. (2021). Coverage of Protest Stories in Tweets of International News Agencies A comparative Analysis on Kashmir and Hong Kong Protests. *Journal of Peace, Development and Communication*, 5.
- Aslam, S., & Ahmad, M. H. (2019). *Framing of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Elite Press of Afghanistan and Iran (2015-2017)*.



- Aslam, S., Hayat, N., & Ali, A. (2020). Hybrid warfare and social media: need and scope of digital literacy. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 13(12), 1293–1299. <https://doi.org/10.17485/IJST/v13i12.43>
- Aslam, S., Hussain, B., & Hussain, S. (2024). The Influence of Social Media on Entrepreneurial Identity and Self-Presentation. *Journal of Media and Entrepreneurial Studies*, 4, 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.56536/jmes.v4i.37>
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. Sage Publications.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harper & Row.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- Hussain, S., Ahmed, M. U., Aslam, S., & Sohail, R. B. (2021). Technology and New Generation: Influence of Personality Traits of Youth on Virtual Pseudo Self-Presentation and Social Media Addiction. *Technical Journal*, 26(3), 53–62.
- Jin, Q., Raza, S. H., Mahmood, N., Zaman, U., Saeed, I., Yousaf, M., & Aslam, S. (2022). Exploring Influence of Communication Campaigns in Promoting Regenerative Farming Through Diminishing Farmers' Resistance to Innovation: An Innovation Resistance Theory Perspective From Global South. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 924896. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.924896>
- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think*. University of Chicago Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton University Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & L. W. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.