

Like, Comment and Share: A Study on the Impact of the Facebook Campaign of the Kerala Police During the COVID 19 Lockdown

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID 19 as a global pandemic has created challenges in every sector. From adapting to new habits and lifestyles, individuals, organisations, and the government have had to take measures to cope with the unprecedented situation. The strategies adopted by Kerala, a southern state in India, received international coverage and appreciation for their preventive measures against COVID 19. Along with the medical practitioners, the Kerala Government involved law enforcers in the COVID prevention mission. The Kerala Police Department was in the front line to sensitise and educate the community about lockdown measures and safety protocols and played a pivotal role to curb the spread of the disease. The state police department used widespread campaigns to reach out to netizens about the preventive measures adopted by the government. This paper discusses how the Kerala State Police Department used its social media platform, specifically their Facebook page, to assist the COVID prevention campaign of the government. The study used quantitative content analysis of the official Facebook page of the Kerala State Police Department to gain knowledge about their communication strategy. An audience survey was conducted to measure the impact of social media communication and the perception of the police department. Thus, the paper tries to find if an active social media campaign is a powerful tool in changing the perception of the audience during a crisis.

Key Words: COVID 19, Social Media Campaign, Audience Perception, Kerala Police

1. Introduction

The outbreak of a novel Corona Virus has brought the world to stand still with its outbreak reported in Wuhan city, China, at the end of December 2019. In a few months, the virus had spread to all corners of the world, wrecking havoc to everyday life and creating panic and fear in the minds of people. By the time WHO declared the novel COVID 19 as a global pandemic, many countries reported a surging increase in cases of COVID positive patients. Governments, authorities and health care systems were unprepared to deal with challenges of the pandemic situation.

The first COVID 19 case reported in India was from Kerala on 30 January 2020. The Government of Kerala had entrusted the state Police Department with the COVID Prevention Campaign. With more than one million likes, the State Police Official Facebook page had surpassed the popularity of the New York Police Department in early 2019. The social media engagement of Kerala Police is a team of six officers under the leadership of ADGP Manoj Abraham. The success and popularity of the page is attributed to the funny memes, self-critical jokes of the department, creative and informative in-house videos and posters.

Ever since the first case of COVID 19 reported in the state, the Kerala Police Department was proactive in creating content and raising awareness about precautionary measures to fight COVID-19. The use of humour, reference to popular culture and incorporating meme were some of the strategies used by the state police department to keep the netizens informed and entertained during the lockdown. This article addresses three major areas of study.

H1: The Facebook Campaign adopted by the Kerala Police has created a positive image for the State Police Department.

H2: The Facebook campaign was successful in creating awareness about COVID 19 related information to the community.

H3: The COVID 19 Facebook campaign created community engagement among netizens.

The paper explores the community engagement that Kerala Police Department has initiated during lockdown with the help of the active campaign on Facebook. The study looked into the nature of messages used by the Police department to communicate the spread of COVID19 and the preventive precautions to be taken during the lockdown. The paper also explores the impact of the communication on the audience, in terms of engagement, awareness generation and attitude towards the police. The survey conducted on netizens across the state was used to understand the positive and negative impact of the communication methods adopted by the police department.

2. Review of Literature

POLICING DURING COVID 19

India had witnessed the world's strictest lockdown during the COVID 19 pandemic in three phases from 22 March 2020 to 30 May 2020. The job of the police department became challenging during the lockdown and the outspread of the disease. One of the functions of the police department was to ensure people remain at home and enforce social distancing in public spaces. The police officers were entrusted with the role of assisting the public when in need of urgent matters, in spreading awareness of the public health campaign and providing essentials and others to communities. (Mangla A & Kapoor R, 2020).

One of the biggest challenges for the Police force in the COVID prevention line of duty was the confusion and health risk of exposure to the virus. *The Hindustan Times* reported that India has only 192 policemen for every 100,000 people. The small police population ration and increased stress and concern have affected the efficiency of many officials in the police (Azad, 2020). As a first responder to an emergency, the police has the task to minimise the harm to the individuals of the community. The proactive response to the needs of the community helped police in building the trust of individuals (Wazeem, 2020). Bonkiewicz and Ruback (2012) studied the legalistic, service-oriented and watchman style of policing. IANS-CVoter Tracking Survey (2020) conducted during the pandemic showed a change in attitude and perception of the public towards the police department. The nationwide study conducted among 18 institutions showed a positive response towards the action of police during the pandemic (Deskmukhi & Guru, 2020).

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BY THE POLICE

During a crisis, the nature of communication plays an essential role in an aggravating situation (Bruns et al., 2012). Many law enforcement departments all over the world have active social media pages to respond to the response to complaints and queries of the community (Meijer & Thaens, 2013). Chuahan and Hughes (2015) study indicates that a social media page is a useful communication tool to curb the spread of misinformation during the crisis. A study on the social media strategies of the police (Meijer, A., & Thaens, M. (2013) shows that the law enforcement department took to social media to assist in the investigation and public promotion. Having an official version from Police helps in curbing the false rumour and misinformation during the uncertainties (Hughes, 2015). A content study on social media of the US (Mayes, 2017) showed that social media content could enhance the image of law enforcement officers in the community and bring transparency to its organisation and action. The social marketing theory in communication (French, 2009) states that effective communication strategy can help in promoting and creating a positive image for the communicator. A well-tailored communication generates interest among the audience, reinforces ideas, informs and educates the audience. Atkin and Rice (2012) had pointed out that interactive online campaigns have a high response among the audience than one- directional mediated message. A study on Facebook for Health communication (Kite et al. 2016) shows that Facebook with the video post content is an essential tool to generate user engagement about health-related issues. Communication strategies adopted by various groups in Africa during the Ebola outbreak to warn about the dangers of the pandemic (Strekalova, 2016) found that the information behaviour and audience engagement is much better with social media platforms.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative and quantitative approach to obtain a better understanding of the crisis communication strategy used by the Kerala Police Department during the lockdown. The study analysed the content and frequency of Facebook posts by the Kerala Police for ten weeks from 22 March 2020 to 31 May 2020. In addition, the study examined the responsiveness of the followers to the posts in terms of 'response', 'shares' and 'comments.' The study analysed 159 Facebook posts by the Kerala State Police department From 22 March 2020 to 31 May 2020. Each post was coded for the nature of the content which was determined by reviewing the attachment, message and title. Facebook posts in the form of video containing information about COVID 19 is classified as Information Video. Police Community Service consists of video and photographs about various services done by the police to assist people during the pandemic using Information posters includes the use of infographics, posters and memes about COVID 19. Information about COVID shared by the Police Department from other sources such as news, post from ministers or the account of other public figures falls under the 'Shared Content' category. The study looked into the percentage analysis of the data. To understand the communication method of Kerala Police, the content of their official Facebook page during the lockdown period was analysed. To study the use of engagement of Kerala Police in Facebook, Reactions, comments and Shares of the posts were extracted using the software 'Facepager.' The quantitative assessment of the users' engagement is calculated with a simple percentage. The posts during the lockdown period were classified as 'Links', 'photographs', 'video' and 'Status' as the default setting of Facepager. The audience engagement was studied using the parameters of the number of shares, comments and reaction to the post.

A questionnaire was devised to understand the impact of the ten-week campaign carried by the Police Department. The questionnaire was circulated to the netizen through an online platform from 7 June to 17 June over a period of ten days. A survey using a questionnaire was conducted on 157 netizens who have a Facebook account who were selected through simple random sampling. The samples have representation from all the 14 districts of the state.

4. Findings

For the research, the nature of posts by Kerala Police from March 22, 2020, to May 31, 2020, was analysed. A structured survey was conducted among Malayalam speaking netizens in the first week of June 2020.

COVID PREVENTION COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF KERALA POLICE

The Kerala Police had actively used Facebook to communicate official information about COVID 19 Prevention Methods and Lockdown protocols.

Table 1. Facebook Post Content and Frequency

| Content Criteria | Number of post | Percentage | Frequency of post per week |
|--------------------------|----------------|------------|----------------------------|
| Information Video | 56 | 35.22 | 5.6 |
| Information Poster | 37 | 23.27 | 3.7 |
| Photographs | 8 | 5 | 0.8 |
| Police Community Service | 18 | 11.32 | 1.8 |
| Shared Content | 22 | 13.83 | 2.2 |
| Other Information | 18 | 11.32 | 1.8 |

Table 1 shows the distribution of COVID related content by State Police Department during the 72 (10 weeks) days of Lockdown. The content is categorised into six significant areas of Information video, Information Poster, Photographs, Police Community Service, Shared Content and Other Information. The percent of message content was studied along with the frequency of the nature of post per week. As Table 1 indicates, more than one-third (35.2%) of COVID related information was shared in video format with a frequency of 5.6 videos uploaded per week. The videos messages informed the public about the campaigns of the state, violations of lockdown restriction and the necessity to wear a mask. Close to one-fourth of the information posted was poster format, which is informative or satirical. The frequency of poster content was 3.7 posts per week. Only five per cent of the content was in the form of photographs with captions.

The Kerala Police Department shared news content and information with a frequency of 1.8 posts per week, it consists of 11.3 per cent of the content. As Table 1 shows, 13.8 per cent of the post focused on information about community services done by the police.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OF KERALA POLICE ON FACEBOOK

Using the software Facepager, the nature of the post were classified as a link, status, photographs and video. The study analyses the user interaction as the number of shares, reactions and comments to these post on Facebook.

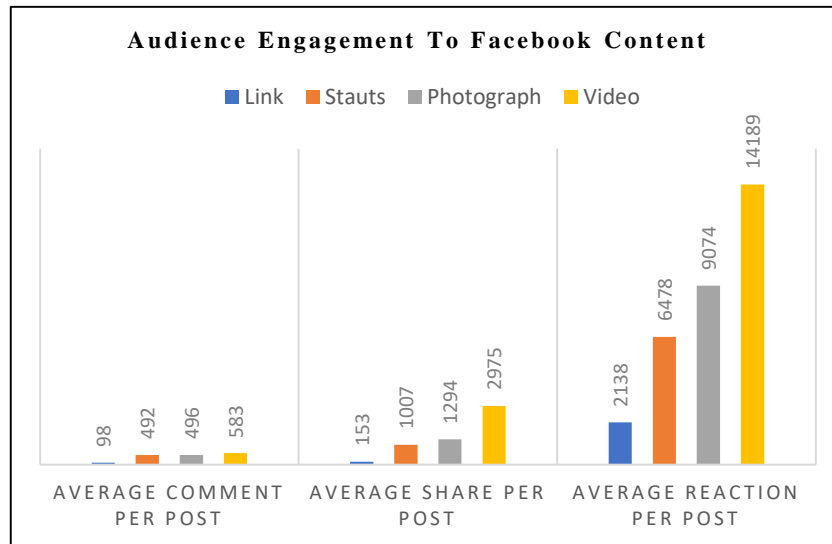


Figure 1. Audience Engagement to Facebook content of Kerala Police Department

The analysis shows that video content posted by the Kerala Police stimulated maximum engagement from the audience. The second most popular content format were the photographs. Status updates without multimedia content created the least engagement with the netizens on Facebook. The chart shows that the most popular audience engagement was in the form of reaction such as like, Ha-ha, love, wow etc. The netizens have also shared the content posted by the Kerala Police in other social media platforms. The graph also points out that comments on the Facebook post were the least popular form of audience engagement adopted.

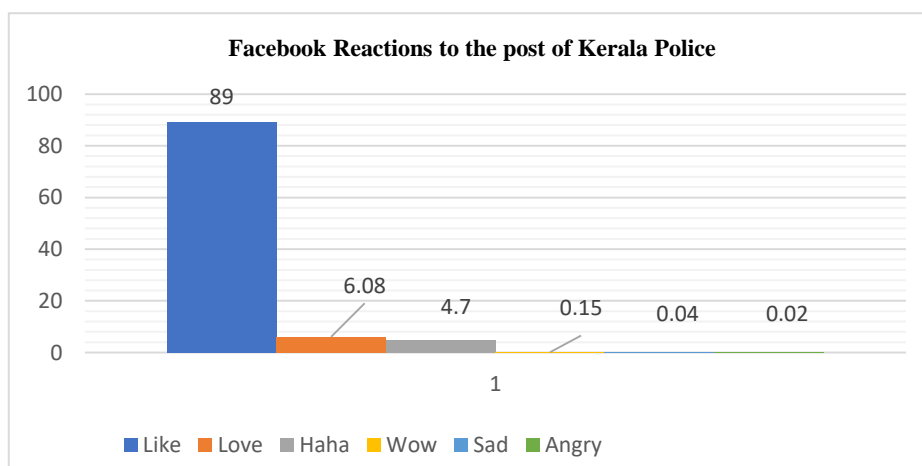


Figure 2. The percentage of reactions of audience to Facebooks posts of Kerala Police during Lockdown

The study analysed 159 Facebook post over ten weeks. The post had generated 1729044 reactions from the users. An average of 10,875 reactions is made on an individual post. The study analysed the nature of the reaction to understand the attitude of the users to the message shared on the Facebook platform. The simple percentage analysis shows that 89 per cent of the reaction received on the post was 'Like' and six per cent of the reaction was 'Love'. Only 4.7 per cent of the reaction signals the humourous 'Ha-ha'. The least used reactions for the Facebook post were negative emotions of 'Angry' and 'Sad' this response indicated that the users of Facebook had a positive reaction to the content uploaded by the Kerala Police about COVID 19 and Lockdown Protocol.

FACEBOOK CAMPAIGN AND COVID AWARENESS

The survey among netizens of Kerala shows that 62 per cent of them agree that the content shared by Kerala Police on their Facebook page was useful. Only one per cent of the sample said the message shared was not useful to the community. Respondents opined that the videos shared gave importance to self-protection. It made people aware of the consequences of neglecting law and order. These posts created awareness regarding the necessity of hygiene and the importance of social distancing. More than half of the audience enjoyed the content posted by the Police Department. Only three per cent of the participants responded that the content shared by the Kerala Police was not enjoyable. Many audiences responded that the creative and funny nature of the video helped in getting the attention of the public. *"The videos of the Kerala Police have succeeded in making people aware of the situation in an easy manner. The videos were glimpses of creative talents in the Kerala Police department."* There was criticism among the audience that content was of no use for the ordinary people who do not use social media. A few participants of the survey questioned the choice of movie clips and music in their video content. Most of the participants of the survey agreed to have a discussion about the content of the post, especially about COVID related matters with others.

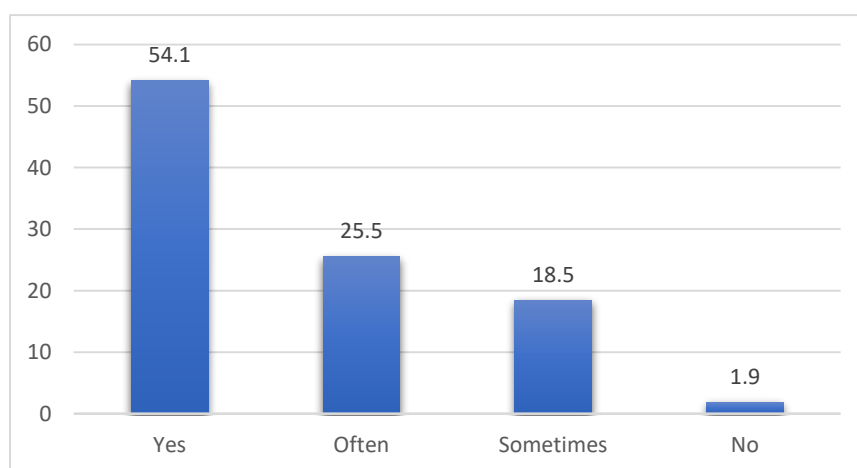


Figure 3. Audience response on awareness created by the Facebook post of Kerala Police

The figure shows that 54 % of the netizens replied that Kerala Police's intervention in social media had increased social awareness among people regarding security, only 2% of the respondents said that it didn't. This response shows that the social media presence of Kerala Police was successful in reaching out to the community and creating awareness.

AUDIENCE PERCEPTION ON KERALA POLICE

The research also studied how the communication method used by Kerala Police affected the perception of the community about the police and Police Department.

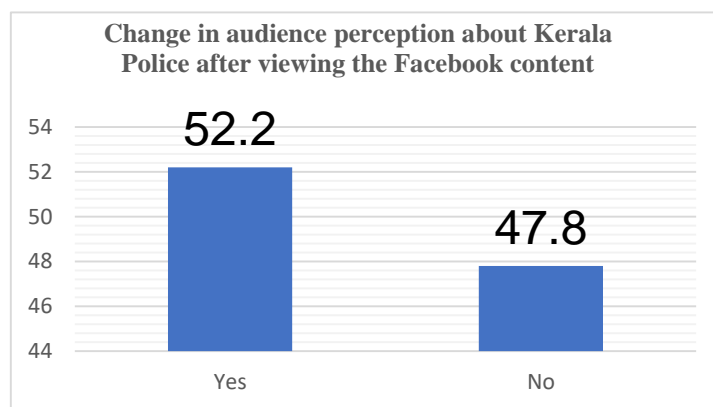


Figure 4. Audience perception about Kerala Police after viewing the Facebook content

The survey shows that more than half of the audience has a change in opinion about Kerala Police after viewing the post on Facebook. The response from the audience shows that the Police Department become more approachable to the community. *"After seeing those posts, we felt for comfortable in approaching the Department with our issues. The commitment and love of the Kerala Police for the people is evident in some posts."* Few participants said the Police had used social media to engage the community and to have a two-way dialogue with people. Many said the Facebook content had given mileage to the popularity of Kerala Police.

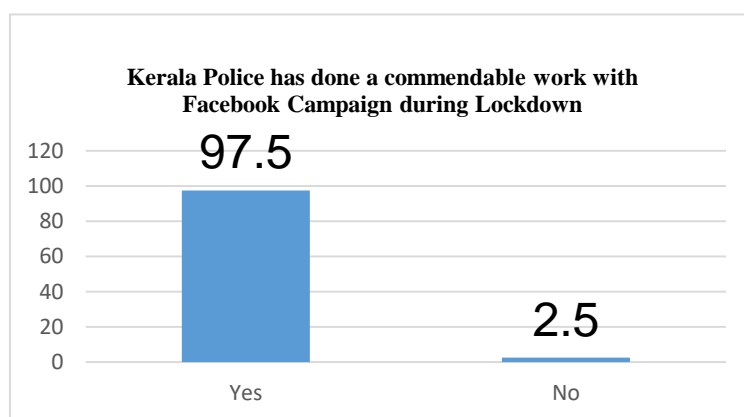


Figure 5. Audience perception about Kerala Police engagement during the pandemic

Majority of the respondents replied positively about the commendable work of the Kerala Police during the pandemic. This shows that through social media, Kerala Police could reach the public and gain a positive reaction from the community.

5. Discussion

The results in the study show that the Kerala Police Department has used Facebook to communicate COVID related information to the community during the Lockdown. The video messages and information posters were the most frequently used type of content format. The Department has taken the effort to reach out to the public every day with an average of two posts per day on the Facebook page. In addition to COVID Prevention methods and Lockdown rules, the Police department had also shared information about health issues during the Lockdown, and scams and other crime-related details. The findings also indicate that the Police Department frequently posted development in different parts of the state to update the netizens about the crisis. The audience response to the post made by Kerala Police indicates that video content was the most popular format of communication. It has generated most comments, shares and reactions from the online community. The study indicates that the strategy adopted by the Kerala Police Department had engaged the citizens about updates regarding Lockdown and Covid-19. The audience had responded that it had been made aware about the situation creatively and entertainingly.

The data in this paper indicates that the communication method used by the Kerala Police department has changed the perception of the audience about the law enforcement department. The response showed that the social media usage of Kerala Police played a major role in increasing the popularity of the Department among the Malayalee community. Most used reaction to Facebook posts were 'Like' and "Love." The responses from the users indicated that they had a positive reaction to the communication method adopted by the police department. The audience agreed that the content of the post helped the community to understand the effort and dedication of the Department in managing the crisis.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY:

This study only represents a preliminary understanding of the nature of Kerala Police's usage of social media during the nationwide Lockdown. The finding of the research is based on the practices used in Facebook, which is characterised by the dialogue-oriented message dissemination. It does not reflect their strategies in TikTok, Instagram or Twitter during COVID 19. Second, the study had not explored the dialogues between the Police Department and the community on the Facebook platform. A detailed study of Post Categories and Subcategories will provide further clarity.

6. Conclusion

Social networking sites had become an effective tool for communication during the crisis. The Police department in Kerala had utilised Facebook effectively during COVID 19 crisis for information dissemination to the public without relying on traditional media outlets. The Department had used the Facebook page during the Lockdown to communicate about COVID prevention measures and lockdown rules. The creative and humorous content and timely response from the Department had facilitated an active engagement with the public in virtual mode during the Lockdown. The research shows that the Facebook Campaign adopted by the Kerala Police was a success in creating awareness about COVID 19 pandemic and Lockdown protocols that the community should follow. Through various campaigns, discussions, and interactions, the Police Department was able to engage the community and were the first in line to serve the community in difficulties related to COVID and Lockdown.

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