

COVID-19 infections on international celebrities: self presentation and tweeting down pandemic awareness

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) which was first reported in China's Wuhan province in December 2019 became a global pandemic within a few months. The exponential rise in COVID-19 cases globally was accompanied by a spike in misinformation about the pandemic, particularly on social media. Employing Social Network Theory as a lens, this qualitative study explores how selected international celebrities appropriated their Twitter micro-blogging pages to announce their COVID-19 infection to the world. The study finds that these celebrities can take advantage of their huge social media following to counter disinfodemic and promote awareness about health pandemics.

Keywords

Health communication; Popularization of science and technology; Science and media

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Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection. This disease is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome, coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) which was first reported in Wuhan, China, and then spread to 136 countries within three months. As of August 14 2020, 213 countries and territories around the world have reported a total of 21,102,920 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and a death toll of 758,036 deaths [Worldometer, 2020]. While the intermediate source of origin and transfer to humans is still under investigation, the rapid human to human transfer has been confirmed widely [World Health Organization, 2020]. Within the early stages of the pandemic, there was a surge in misleading rumours and conspiracy theories about the origin and cure of COVID-19, coupled with fearmongering, racism and stigma, mainly on social media [Depoux et al., 2020]. Epicentres of COVID-19 were often targeted, leading to widespread distrust and outburst of racism. For instance, Chinese restaurants, Chinese tourists and goods from Asia were the first victims of viral racism [Depoux et al., 2020].

The proliferation of disinfodemic and misinformation about COVID-19 can generate hefty deleterious consequences on health initiatives. According to Posetti

and Bontcheva [2020], disinfodemic refers to falsehoods fuelling the pandemic and its impacts. Misinformation is closely related to the culture of rumours. As Qazvinian et al. [2011, p. 1589] intimate, a “rumour is commonly defined as a statement whose true value is unverifiable”. Qazvinian et al. [2011, p. 1589] further opine that “rumours may spread misinformation (false information) or disinformation (deliberately false information) on a network of people.” Conceptually, misinformation can therefore be referred simply as false information while disinformation has to do with the deliberateness through which false information is shared. There is no convincing literature that associates celebrities with COVID-19 disinfodemic. However, they have been identified as among the key distributors of misinformation about the pandemic [Brennen et al., 2020]. Misinformation makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. The central question to this study is, what role did the international celebrities play to mitigate effects of COVID-19 misinformation? If not addressed urgently, misinformation about a pandemic has a potential to negate official health initiatives.

This study builds on the recommendations by Depoux et al. [2020] that social media can and should be harnessed to support public health response. Leung and Cheng [2016] argue that celebrities can play a pivotal role in galvanising health awareness, utilising the immense social media clout at their disposal. The newspaper, *Vulture* [2020] has documented celebrities who appropriated social media to announce their COVID-19 infection, reflecting the potential of celebrities to amplify official health communication. Extant research reveals that when information is vivid and easy to understand, we are more likely to recall it. People are more likely to believe a claim when it is a real life experience backed by a photo or video [Newman et al., 2020]. Twitter has emerged as a robust platform for engagement, allowing messages to reach a wider audience within a short space of time. This advantage carries an inherent danger, especially when appropriated for undermining positive policy initiatives. The advantage of Twitter lies in its strong network. A research by Anger and Kittl [2011] reflects that a large part of Twitter users retweet and amplify content which is considered as entertaining, useful or breaking news. In this study, we have employed Social Network Theory to show how a Twitter post can easily spread across the network, particularly when the post is from an influential person or arouses public interest. The micro-blogging platform allows a user to express agreement and liking with the amplification of content on the one hand; on the other hand, he wishes to establish himself as an information hub and gain social influence [Anger and Kittl, 2011]. There is limited research which offers convincing information on voluntary participation by celebrities to fight a health emergency through their social media platforms [Ngewa and Kuriansky, 2016; Sonke and Pesata, 2015]. Building on these few seminal cases, this study explores the role celebrities can play in countering disinfodemic through announcing their COVID-19 infection on Twitter.

Celebrities as influencers of public opinion

There are three types of celebrity: ascribed celebrity, traditional celebrity andceletoid. Ascribed celebrity is linked to the bloodline whereby hereditary titled individuals such as kings, queens, emperors, duchesses and so forth command influence and respect within the social hierarchy [Rojek, 2001]. Traditional

celebrities are people who have gained public recognition because of their professional talent [Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017]. Celebrities are individuals who gain a huge burst of fame [Rojek, 2001]. The role of traditional celebrities is evolving with the developments in digital technologies. Zak and Hasprova [2020] opine that traditional celebrities have become online influencers, appropriating online spaces to communicate and engage with online users. Montoya and Vandehey [2009] understand an influencer in terms of a set of external personal perceptions that encapsulate the expectations, promises and experiences that an individual displays to others. These influencers are often people who grow their popularity socially or economically and individual members of society look up to them for certain decisions or behaviours within their areas of influence. They share personal information, news, photos and videos which can influence the opinions and attitudes of others, popularly known as influencer marketing. Info tech has become the major driver of business. Therefore, influencer marketing can be said to be one of the fastest growing tools in reaching new consumers with the help of online media [Zak and Hasprova, 2020]. Celebrities have also played an important role in mediating health communication, often contracted by health organisations. In Germany, communication of health related topics such as nutrition and exercise has been amplified by celebrities [Zak and Hasprova, 2020]. Heldman, Schindelar and Weaver [2013] note that there is so much debate on how social media can be harnessed to best achieve public health outcomes.

A study by Korda and Itani [2013] has examined the effectiveness and implications of using social media and other digital media in health promotion and disease prevention endeavours, and there has been less compelling evidence of its efficacy in impacting public health. Heldman, Schindelar and Weaver [2013] acknowledge that many health organizations have established a social media presence but the role of social media engagement in advancing public health communication work at the organisational level is infrequently discussed. Researchers have established that there is need to harness the participatory culture of social media if it is to be fully utilised in health communication [Heldman, Schindelar and Weaver, 2013; Neiger et al., 2013]. The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a historical chapter which has resulted in disinfodemic, particularly on social media. Communication about the devastating and global impact of the pandemic has been so vital in order to slow down infections. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was widespread rumour and conspiracy theories around the virus.

In Africa, it was widely rumoured that Africans were immune to COVID-19. Politicians were at times at the forefront of the misinformation. For instance, Zimbabwe's Minister of Defence, Oppah Muchinguri claimed that the coronavirus was God's punishment on the Americans for imposing economic sanctions on Zimbabwe [Chris, 2020]. In Burundi, the then late president Pierre Nkurunziza claimed the pandemic was transmitted by air and 'God has cleared the coronavirus from Burundi skies' [Donmez, 2020]. Nkurunziza allegedly died of COVID-19 on 8 June 2020 and his wife was airlifted to Kenya for treatment of COVID-19 symptoms [Bearak, 2020]. In U.S.A., president Donald Trump dismissed the severity of the virus until too late and African Americans spread rumour that blacks were resistant to the virus because of their melanin. However, the official statistics later proved that claim to be misleading. According to AMP Research Lab [2020], as at 12 August 2020, the overall COVID-19 mortality rate for Black Americans was 3.7 times as high as the rate for White Americans and Asians and

2.2 times as high as the Latino rate. Therefore, disinfodemic on social media propagated a false belief that there were certain people who could be safe from infection. When celebrities spoke about their infections, they acted as agents to demystify the false narratives about COVID-19. Heldman, Schindelar and Weaver [2013] argue that social media engagement is fast emerging as a way to complement and support the existing evidence and best practices from the community engagement and community building perspectives. Twitter has developed as a tool of persuasion and propaganda in political contexts and situations of crisis to such an extent that it has given rise to a rhetoric of persuasion and propaganda discourse models [Rueda and Helfrich, 2014]. It is in this context that celebrities who tested positive for COVID-19 took to Twitter to spread information about the reality of the pandemic.

When cases of COVID-19 infections and mortality began to rise exponentially in different countries, the world struggled to contain the flow of fake news surrounding COVID-19, even as it pushed back against the pandemic with lockdowns and other emergency measures [Banerjee, 2020]. The barriers to entering health information marketplace means that those who have access and power are able to determine almost single-handedly what is considered authorized, truthful health information [Waisbord, 2020]. Misinformation is disastrous and sows confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices [Posetti and Bontcheva, 2020]. Researchers have observed that disinformation has corrosive effect of creating misinformed citizens [Mare, 2018; Mare and Matsilele, 2020; Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2019]. Since the outbreak of the pandemic in December 2019, at least 130 celebrities worldwide, among them politicians, entertainers and athletes had tested positive to COVID-19 by August 2020 [Vulture, 2020]. Visual self-presentation on social media by celebrities who had tested positive for COVID-19 could be understood as an attempt to raise awareness and counter disinfodemic about the pandemic. The majority of them used social media, particularly, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to announce their condition and encourage their fans to practise social distancing and healthy habits that safeguards them from COVID-19 [Scott and Wray, 2020]. Since influencers can exhibit characteristics of credibility, persistence in convincing others, and drive conversations so that others can take of the topic or idea and show support, testimonies by infected celebrities have the potential to counter misinformation, proving that COVID-19 is a reality and no one is immune to the pandemic [Biran et al., 2012]. Cohen, cited in a research by West Virginia University [2020] notes that these announcements may help make people understand how far-reaching the virus is or they make people think celebrities are just like us.

Twitter and pandemic awareness: lessons from the Ebola epidemic

The Ebola outbreak was officially declared in March 2014 in Guinea, after which the disease was transmitted through human movement to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, the U.S.A., European Union countries, Senegal and Mali [World Health Organization, 2015]. WHO declared the Ebola virus disease (EVD) a global health epidemic on 8 August 2014 [Tran and Lee, 2016]. Twitter amplified awareness about the epidemic [Odlum and Yoon, 2015]. On 24 July 2014, a few days before the Ebola virus was declared a global health emergency, tweets mentioning the EVD reached 1,502,743 Twitter users and on July 26, with the announcement of the EVD

infection of an American physician, there was a 644-fold increase in disseminated tweets to 967,404,925 [Odlum and Yoon, 2015]. A study by Essoungou [2010] has revealed that Africans are participating in global conversations more and more. For example, Trevor Noah, a South Africa stand-up comedian has used his social media popularity to speak about topical issues that include the COVID-19 pandemic and #Blacklivesmatter, an American civil rights movement that gained global popularity after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on 25 May 2020. The technological boom has offered Africans an opportunity to own mobile phones and laptops which allow them to spend most of their time on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. After the official announcement of the first case in Nigeria, an increase in tweet frequency from cities was identified. Odlum and Yoon [2015] note that tweets steadily increased (6-fold in posted tweets and 20-fold in disseminated tweets) from July 24–31, the day of the CDC official Nigeria case report. In an article, 'How twitter may have helped Nigeria contain Ebola', Odlum and Yoon [2015] establish how local media personalities became instrumental in sharing accurate information about the pandemic. A dentist, Lawal Bakare, emerged as a pivotal influencer as he popularized an Ebola awareness campaign on Twitter called @EbolaAlert [Odlum and Yoon, 2015]. His message was widely received because he shared information through links to its original form, therefore dispelling the fear of misinformation associated with social media. Researchers have found that personal accounts of celebrities such as Barak Obama and Bill Gates triggered more Ebola retweets than disseminators and common users [Liang et al., 2019].

While social media has been widely credited for broadening the discursive platform around the Ebola virus, concerns have been raised about abuse of the same to peddle misinformation, blame, rumour, fear among other vices [Jin et al., 2014]. One of the widely tweeted rumours about the spread of the virus was the snake rumour. Twitter users rumoured that the Ebola virus crossed the border from Guinea to Sierra Leone via a snake in a bag. Oyeyemi, Gabarron and Wynn [2014] established that in Guinea, Liberia and Nigeria, most tweets and retweets contained misinformation, and this misinformation had a much larger potential reach than correct information. In the United States, future president Donald Trump tweeted about Ebola's threat to the Americans [Salek and Cole, 2018]. While the message could have been useful in Ebola awareness, Salek and Cole [2018] argue that social media allowed influencers like Trump to constitute an apocalyptic counterpublic where unsubstantiated claims increased public panic in the United States. A research by Brennen et al. [2020] has found that celebrities have played a key role in spreading COVID-19 misinformation on social media, thus reflecting the pitfalls of social media and celebrity influence in mediating health pandemics.

In mediating their coronavirus infection, some celebrities may have preferred to use Twitter to other social media platforms not only because of its increasing popularity but also its limited level of access to the user's personal information [Stever and Lawson, 2013]. Recent statistics reveals that there are 386 million Twitter users globally and 152 million daily users in 2020 [Clement, 2020]. For celebrities who use Twitter, the dialogue is serious, meaningful, and appears to have impact for those participating [Stever and Lawson, 2013]. One of the advantages of Twitter over other social media platforms is the emphasis on key terms used in a tweet via hashtags that enable users to collect similar tweets and their subjects according to the frequency of use and relevance. This facility allows

users to quickly and easily have insight into a wide range of tweets that are connected with specific topics [Bruns, Highfield and Lind, 2012, p. 23]. Hashtags also allow users to virtually gather and discuss trending topics and events [Bruns, Highfield and Lind, 2012, p. 24]. There is abundant research which focus on the appropriation of Twitter by celebrities to create an online image so that their audience is swayed towards a particular brand or lifestyle [Rettberg, 2017]. Very little research has been done to explore the role that celebrities can voluntarily play, capitalising on their huge following to spread health awareness during times of pandemics. This paper argues that the scope of self-presentation on social media should not just be limited to advertising, lifestyle and self -imaging but should be extended to its ability to be used to address societal challenges.

Social network theory and Twitter

This study is informed by Social Network Theory to explore how celebrities used their Twitter microblogging sites to announce their COVID-19 infection to their followers across the world. Claywell [2016] defines Social Network Theory as the study of how people, organizations or groups interact with others inside their network. Networks can be understood as neighbourhoods because they are comprised of the actors (nodes) and the relationships (ties) between those actors [Pataraiia et al., 2014]. These actors, referred to as nodes, can be individuals, organizations or companies and are the smallest single unit inside a network. To understand the efficacy of Twitter, it is important to highlight that a network consists of a set of relationships [Kadushin, 2004]. In this paper, we were concerned with the interactions between each of the members of the network on twitter. In addressing that, these questions were pertinent: Why do the individuals interact? how do they interact and what is the level of closeness or connectedness?

For this study, we considered the types of social networks: egocentric, socio-centric and open-systems then settled for one that best suited our research focus. In socio-centric network, members of the network are usually known or are easily determined because the focus is usually on a priori defined closed network [Scott, 2000]. The open-system network has no clearly defined boundaries. As Kadushin [2012] notes, a few elite class and a chain of influencers or a particular decision are found in this network, making it difficult to study. As such, data collection will require collecting enumerating all network members and administering saturation surveys to all network members. Lastly, egocentric network designs target the actor, ego and the relationship between the ego and the actors within their social network [Scott, 2000]. Out of the three types, this study employed the egocentric network. This is connected with a single node or individual, for example, all of a Twitter user's followers on Twitter [Claywell, 2016]. Each of the types can be reduced to either a strong tie or a weak tie. Strong ties are close enough to you that you probably have some personal details about these people, whereas weak ties would be surprised if you called one of them [Kadushin, 2004]. However, it does not mean the closer the tie the more valuable it is. Research reveals that the weak ties in a network are, in some ways, more valuable [Granovetter, 1973]. Granovetter [1973] further argues that weak ties play a seminal role in building trust among a social network of loosely affiliated members which is essential for rallying behind a cause such as COVID-19 awareness. Applying this understanding to a celebrity's Twitter network, people across the world are members of the network but not all

individuals are connected with the same degree of closeness. It's these varying degrees of closeness, or connectedness that determine the value of that node to the network [Kadushin, 2004]. As Anger and Kittl [2011] argue, apart from number of followers a user has, the number of retweets and mentions also reflects the potential reach of a tweet. A single tweet has the potential to reach millions of Twitter users, all connected within the network.

Operationalisation of the study

This study selected Twitter accounts of international celebrities globally who publicly revealed they had tested positive for COVID-19. Data was gathered between March 1 and 31 July 2020. From a global perspective, a sample of 100 international celebrities who tested positive for COVID-19 was selected. Out of these, our sample was narrowed down to those who used Twitter to announce their COVID-19 positive test results. We established that 25 celebrities from our sample used Twitter. We therefore, purposively selected 15 celebrity accounts, guided by the research's global focus. It should be noted that the distribution of celebrities was not even across the continents because some countries experienced more COVID-19 cases than others, therefore influencing the infection rates.

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was used to analyse data. For the purposes of the current study, the QCA method is defined as "the systematic reduction of content, analysed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data" [Roller and Lavrakas, 2015, p. 232]. Therefore, both a tweet and the responses to that message are all parts of a construction of a social reality within the online community. Celebrities who tested positive for COVID-19 took to their Twitter sites to share the new reality with their online community and this study focuses on their initial tweet(s) revealing their COVID-19 infection. In QCA, content embraces all appropriate data sources beyond the text such as images, videos, audio, graphics and symbols [Kuckartz, 2014]. Concept-driven coding of data was done manually on celebrities' initial tweet(s) on their COVID-19 infection. Coding is the process of labelling and organizing qualitative data to identify different themes and relationships between them [Medelyan, 2019]. Medelyan [2019] defines concept-driven coding, also known as deductive coding as a process where you start with predefined set of codes, then assign those codes into new qualitative data. Coding represents the gritty craftsmanship that enables artful and creative interpretation and analysis of the data [Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019]. Data was analysed, coded then the codes were categorized with coding frames. The process was carried out with the objectives of the study in mind and this helped eliminate texts that were not aligned to the research objectives.

Table 1. Celebrity tweets recorded between 1 March and 31 July 2020.

Celebrity account	No. of followers	Tweet	No. of comments	No. of retweets	No. of likes	No. of views
Tom Hanks @tomhanks 12 March American actor and filmmaker.	16.7m	Hello folks. Rita and I are down here in Australia. We felt a bit tired, like we had colds, and some body aches. Rita had some chills that came and went. Slight fever too. We were tested for Corona virus and were found to be positive	46,000	220,000	100,000	No video
Daniele Rugani @DanieleRugani 12 March Italian and Juventus Football Club star.	118,000	...I want to reassure all those who are worrying about me, I'm fine. I urge everyone to respect the rules because the virus makes no distinctions!	6,472	19,700	84,900	No video
Idris Elba @idriselba 16 March English actor, writer, producer, rapper, singer, songwriter and disk jockey.	2.9m	(Video and caption). This morning I tested positive for COVID-19. I feel ok, I have no symptoms so far but I have been isolated since I found out my possible exposure to the virus. Stay home people and be pragmatic. I will keep you updated on how I'm doing. No panic. Wash your hands and practice social distance.	48,700	307,000	1.3m	34.3m
BenMacAdams @RepBenMcAdams 19 March American Attorney and politician serving as the U.S. Representative for Utah's congressional district since 2019.	16,300	...I developed mild symptoms. ...I immediately isolated myself in my home. My symptoms got worse and I developed a fever, dry cough and laboured breathing. Today I learned I tested positive. I urge Utahns to take this seriously and follow health recommendations we're getting from the CDC and other health experts.	771	1,706	4,400	No video
Marcus Smart @smart_MS3 19 March American professional basketball player.	257,000	I was tested 5 days ago and the results came positive. I have been self-quarantined... COVID-19 must be taken with the highest seriousness.	3,510	19,600	113,000	4,1m

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Table 1. *Continued from the previous page.*

Celebrity account	No. of followers	Tweet	No. of comments	No. of retweets	No. of likes	No. of views
Linda Lusardi @lusardiofficial 19 March English actress, television presenter and former glamour model.	42,900	I want to thank you all for your good wishes. Sam and I have had COVID-19 and are in isolation so we do not spread it to anyone else.	457	240	3,544	No video
Senator Randal Paul @RandPaul 22 March American politician serving as U.S. Senator from Kentucky.	2,8m	Senator Rand Paul has tested positive for COVID-19. He is feeling fine and is in quarantine. He is asymptomatic and was tested out of abundance of caution due to his extensive travel and events.	26,100	19,400	66,000	No video
Marouane Fellaini @fellaini Moroccan-Belgian football star.	2,3m	...I have tested for coronavirus and my test result is positive...I will follow the treatment and hope to return to the game as soon as possible. Please everyone stay safe.	4,872	17,100	83,900	No video
Jason Collins @jasoncollins98 24 March American former professional basketball player.	97,200	I tested positive for COVID-19. I had my first symptoms on Wed Mar 11. Terrible headache. A few days later I had a fever and then the cough. Please stay safe and continue to social distance... Please let's try to flatten the curve...	668	2,492	12,700	No video
Boris Johnson @BorisJohnson 27 March Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.	2,7m	Over the last 24 hours I have developed mild symptoms and tested positive for coronavirus. I am now self-isolating... We will get through it by following the health measures we have heard so much about.	58,100	130,000	380 000	23,9m
Patrick McEnroe @PatrickMcEnroe 31 March American former professional tennis player and broadcaster.	147,000	Had minor symptoms and my tests came positive...good news is I feel fine. Let's get this thing, let's nail this thing... We got to stay home...	556	671	5,992	548,000

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Table 1. *Continued from the previous page.*

Celebrity account	No. of followers	Tweet	No. of comments	No. of retweets	No. of likes	No. of views
Christopher Cuomo @ChrisCuomo 21 April American television journalist.	1,7m	(Retweeted CNN interview with caption). Here's the moment @ChrisCuomo emerged out of the basement where he's been riding out coronavirus for the last several weeks. I could breath and felt exhausted...	13,400	3,000	241,000	2,4m
Amr Waked @amrwaked 11 June 2020 Egyptian film, television and stage actor.	7,1m	Thanks to God, my son was cured of Coronavirus. I will work for you soon. I will talk about my infection with the virus...I took paracetamol-Vitamin C, Thyme oil pills-Krill oil pills, 4 raw garlic cloves, one on an empty stomach (you can take garlic from the pharmacy) , Ikenacia, soothing cough and thyme drink with lemon and honey.	162	181	1,870	No video
Kiernan Forbes (AKA) @akaworldwide 10 July South African multi-award winning musician.	4,5m	(Retweeted a press statement). Multi award-winning South African musician, AKA, has tested positive for the novel COVID-19 virus. In an attempt to create awareness and to caution citizens to be more careful in their daily interactions with others, AKA has chosen to make his results public. As soon as you feel that cough coming on, that headache...weakness in your muscles, chills at night, trust me. Go test ASAP.	1,027 689	2,178 496	9,691 2,785	No video No video
Amitabh Bachchan @SrBachchan 11 July Indian film actor, film producer and television producer.	43,7m	I have tested positive for COVID-19...shifted hospital...family and staff undergone tests... All that have been in close proximity to me in the last 10 days are requested to get themselves tested!	169,000	125,000	206,000	No video

Debunking disinformation: COVID-19 is non-selective

In U.S.A. and Africa, misinformation that people of black race were immune to COVID-19 infection went viral on both digital and offline spaces. The first black American celebrity to announce COVID-19 infection on social media was Idris Elba. Idris Elba's tweet confirmed that black people are not immune to COVID-19. He posted a video informing his followers that he had tested positive to COVID-19 and called on people to be 'pragmatic' about the reality of the pandemic. Following his initial tweet, Elba announced that his wife, Sabrina was also at risk, and both would go for self-isolation in different rooms. His message can be understood as a call for people to realise that COVID-19 is not racially selective considering that he was the first black celebrity to come out to announce his infection. Other COVID-19 positive black celebrities who took to twitter are American professional basketball player, Marcus Smart and Jason Collins, a former American professional basketball player. Both celebrities alluded to testing positive for the virus but Jason Collins went further to indicate that he experienced COVID-19 symptoms, 'fever and then the cough.' The rise of death among black individuals in countries like the United States prove that black people are not immune to the new Coronavirus and not only Idris Elba's infection confirms blacks are susceptible to the disease. Despite reports of increase in COVID-19 infections, some Africans still believed that they had some form of immunity to the coronavirus [NOIPolls, 2020]. South African music celebrity, Kiernan Forbes (AKA) announced he had tested positive for COVID-19 in a press statement he shared on his Twitter account. Coming at a time when South Africa was overwhelmed with a surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths, the main thrust of AKA's tweet was to 'create awareness' among his followers, not only in South Africa but even beyond that black Africans were not immune to the global health pandemic. Like several other South African celebrities who announced their COVID-19 infection, AKA's tweet, as medical experts argue, had a potential to dispel the rumour that COVID-19 is a Eurocentric disease [Makatile, 2020].

Another wave of disinfodemic was that COVID-19 is a disease that targets the lower classes in society. Contrary to this claim, some celebrities announced they had tested positive for COVID-19. British Prime minister Boris Johnson announced on his Twitter handle that he had tested positive for COVID-19. In the video, he confirmed having 'mild symptoms' and 'self-isolating', making his persona as ordinary as any other human being and equally vulnerable to the pandemic. American politicians, Senator Rand Paul and Ben McAdams also opened up to the COVID-19 infections on Twitter. What is interesting to note in their tweets is the different traits of COVID-19 infection. For Senator Rand Paul, he was 'feeling fine' and 'asymptomatic' while for Ben McAdams, his condition was characterised by 'a fever, dry cough and laboured breathing.' Announcing his infection on Twitter, Italian and Juventus Football Club star, Daniele Rugani was more specific, advising that 'the virus makes no distinctions', thus discrediting the claim that coronavirus targeted certain groups in society. Egyptian celebrity, Amr Waked only announced his coronavirus infection after he and his son had been successfully treated, promising to talk about his infection with the virus later. The central message in his tweet was that COVID-19 targets anyone regardless of class, even children. This study concludes that the appropriation of Twitter by celebrities to announce their infection and experiences with the pandemic was a way of challenging COVID-19 disinfodemic in line with Cohen [2020]'s argument that these announcements have a potential to make people aware of the magnitude of the pandemic.

A rallying call to flatten the curve

Celebrities amplified approved health guidelines to reduce the spread of COVID-19 popularised as 'flattening the curve'. Thunström et al. [2020] define flattening the curve to mean saving lives by reducing the pace and extent of COVID-19 infections. Actors Idris Elba, Tom Hanks, Boris Johnson and Linda Lusardi generated widespread engagement when they tweeted they had tested positive for COVID-19. Central to their message was the appeal for people to practice WHO-prescribed health guidelines for those already infected and those who are not. Tom Hanks announced that he and his wife had begun following 'health protocols' and 'self-isolating.' Idris Elba pleaded with his followers to 'stay at home', 'wash your hands and practice social distancing.' The video attracted 34.3m views. British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, probably cautious not to end up misinforming his followers, avoided mentioning specific measures to flatten the curve but called on public to follow 'health measures we've heard so much about.' The tweet attracted 23.9 million views. Linda Lusardi is one of the first women celebrities to publicly announce their COVID-19 infection. She told her followers that herself and her husband, Sam had tested positive to the virus and were 'in isolation so we do not spread it to anyone else.' Her message underscored the importance of self-isolation when one is infected as a way to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. This study establishes that celebrities took advantage of the persuasive power of their popularity to amplify official health information.

How did celebrity tweets address fear of COVID-19?

During the early stages of the pandemic, one of the major challenges posed by COVID-19 disinfodemic has been the creation of fear of the pandemic. As Mertens et al. [2020] note, fear could have a negative impact, particularly on the welfare of COVID-19 patients who became vulnerable to stigma both within their families and the wider society. This study establishes that the tone in most of the celebrity tweets acknowledged that COVID-19 was a reality but indicated that the virus could be treated. Upon testing positive, Moroccan-Belgian football star, Marouane Fellaini announced he had tested positive for COVID-19 but went on to assure his followers that the disease could be defeated as he said, 'I will follow the treatment and hope to return to the game as soon as possible.' What is interesting to note in his message is the attempt to diffuse fear of death arising from the fact that COVID-19 had no known cure yet. The announcement that he was undergoing 'treatment and being optimistic to return to sport 'soon' could assure his followers that available medications were helpful in treating the virus. CNN news anchor, Chris Cuomo retweeted CNN interview as he emerged out of quarantine where he had 'been riding out coronavirus'. The image of him, emerging out of quarantine and his 'riding out' the pandemic, ushers in an aura of hope as contrasted to the fear-laden news that had been circulating online. Patrick McEnroe told his followers that after testing positive, 'he was fine' and encouraged everyone to be part of the movement to defeat the pandemic. Amr Waked's announcement was different from other celebrities in the sense that he made it after he had recovered, and 'his son was cured of the virus.' As Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio [2019] opined, humans are unique in their ability to learn from the experiences of others. Therefore, Waked's announcement was likely to make people believe that COVID-19 could be treated, thus dispelling fear associated with it. At a time when

the world was grappling with increasing cases of COVID-19, celebrities attempted to dispel fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic through their lived experiences and expression of optimism on getting cured from the virus.

Conclusion

This study has established that celebrities made a meaningful contribution in countering COVID-19 disinfodemic through use of Twitter to announce their infection. Traditionally, society looked up to celebrities to have a revolutionary impact on fashion, beauty, and lifestyle habits of the general public [Nouri, 2018]. Before the COVID-19 scourge, traditional celebrities and their interactions with their audience were mainly on their areas of specialisation. Celebrities are contracted to feature in health awareness promotions and the same has been the case with marketing promotions. This study has established a novel phenomenon where celebrities moved out of their usual commercialised tweets to share with their audiences their COVID-19 status, spreading awareness, de-stigmatising the disease and amplifying prevention strategies. Taking advantage of their huge following and influence, celebrities amplified health awareness communication spearheaded by recognised health authorities worldwide. Employing Social Network Theory to establish the effectiveness of Twitter mediation of the pandemic, this study has concluded that a successful victory over COVID-19 pandemic requires everyone to participate positively and celebrities are an influential tool in the communication process. As Stever and Lawson [2013] note, celebrities use Twitter to reach out to fans and make their relationship with them more real. This way, they assist the fight against disinfodemic on the pandemic, allowing their followers and non-followers to listen and view lived experiences from voices that they trust.

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