

Coping With the Coronavirus Crisis Through Traditional and Digital Sources of Information Among the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish Community / David Levine

Abstract

Background: At the end of February 2020, the first confirmed patient infected with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) was discovered in the State of Israel. By August 2022, over four and a half million infected people in the country had been diagnosed cumulatively, and more than eleven thousand residents have died because of the epidemic. There is evidence that the spread of the Coronavirus is different in each country, with variability even between different cities and communities. One of them is the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Community. The initial infection and spread of the virus and the rate of those diagnosed as positive for the disease among Haredi people in Israel were above the average rate found in other communities in the country.

Haredi society is characterized by adherence to the practical application of Jewish Law and obedience to the guidelines of community Rabbis and leaders. Haredim often live in closed communities that strive to protect them from the negative impact of secular modernization. As part of a culture that generally avoids exposure to secular media, ultra-Orthodox society derives much vital information, which is transmitted by the community's rabbis and leaders, through traditional sources of information, such as printed newspapers and street posters (Pashkevilim), which are situated in ultra-Orthodox enclaves.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, a partial disconnection from Israeli culture and from information disseminated by authorities through general communication and social media prevented the ultra-Orthodox community from access to essential information aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. This reality was reflected among parts of the community, through violation of medical guidelines such as the temporary closure of public institutions, social distancing, and the wearing of masks. These interventions were interpreted as issues that

interfere with community life, which is a major factor in the religious lifecycle of a Haredi individual.

As time passed from the outbreak of the epidemic, the proportion of ultra-Orthodox Jews with Internet access who were exposed to official online information and social media, in addition to information from traditional sources, increased significantly and knowledge gaps about the epidemic between the general public and the Haredi community had narrowed. At the same time, religious community leaders using traditional sources of information instructed the public to adhere to all the precautionary guidelines of the Israel Ministry of Health.

Purpose of the study: This study seeks to examine the role of various sources of information, with an emphasis on social networks, in the behavior of the ultra-Orthodox public in Israel during the Coronavirus outbreak. This study will focus on various digital information platforms, as opposed to traditional sources of information, such as ultra-Orthodox printed newspapers. The study will examine the way of coping with the COVID-19 epidemic with the help of digital means compared to traditional means, considering explanatory variables such as ‘Community Sense of Coherence’, level of Internet use, and other demographic variables.

This study was based on two theories: the ‘Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping’ developed by Lazarus and Folkman, the ‘Salutogenic Model of Health’, and the ‘Community Sense of Coherence’ during a crisis, developed by Antonovsky, and expanded by additional researchers.

In the digital age, virtual communities have become the town square where users may express an opinion, share an experience, ask for advice, and respond to statements and personal messages of other people and create a common reality that enables participants to ‘make sense’ out of common challenges. Involvement in social networks and in online forums may contribute to improving personal health and empowerment in situations of illness and crisis, through emotional support and by sharing essential information. As such, a positive experience in the digital world and social media may be linked to a sense of balance and psychological satisfaction during a crisis, even in the offline and physical dimension.

Research questions: This study comes to answer three questions:

1. Is there, and to what extent, a difference in emotional and cognitive coping with the Coronavirus crisis, between the use of social networks as a source of information and the use of traditional sources of information (such as the ultra-Orthodox printed newspapers), among Haredi individuals?
2. What are the factors that explain the level of coping with the Coronavirus crisis among Haredi people, with the help of digital information sources and social media?
3. What are the factors that explain the level of coping with the Coronavirus crisis among Haredi people, with the help of traditional sources of information (such as the ultra-Orthodox printed newspapers)?

Research method: To answer the research questions, quantitative analysis methods were selected. As part of this process, an online survey was constructed based on four validated questionnaires that were distributed among a representative sample of the ultra-Orthodox population, during the Coronavirus crisis: a demographic questionnaire, a questionnaire on the 'Community Sense of Coherence', a questionnaire on the use of the Internet for information and social needs, and a questionnaire on coping with stressful situations. The study statistically analyzed online questionnaires answered by 212 participants who identified as ultra-Orthodox, of whom 47.2% were women and 52.8% were men, and the range of the participants was between 19 and 74 years of age.

Findings: The findings of this study showed that the level of emotional and cognitive coping of ultra-Orthodox society with the Coronavirus, with the help of digital information sources and social media, is significantly better than the level of coping with the epidemic utilizing traditional information sources, such as printed Haredi newspapers. Furthermore, the higher the degree that the Internet is used for information or social needs, the more digital information sources helped to deal with the epidemic, from an emotional and cognitive point of view. On the other hand, the more a person feels that ultra-Orthodox society is seen as a significant factor that

allows one to face life's challenges (Community Sense of Coherence), the better will be the level of coping with the epidemic, with the help of traditional sources of information.

Conclusions: A Haredi individual who obtains vital or newsworthy information only from traditional information sources, is exposed to information that is in line with religious and cultural values and political party lines of the newspapers' editors and the spiritual leaders who determine the content of these publications. This type of information is updated daily, at best. However, when people choose to look at online information as well, they are exposed to a variety of opinions and perspectives presented on the Internet, with varied levels of quality and reliability, updated in real-time, and some of these opinions may be completely different from Haredi community norms. The possibility of being exposed to a variety of current opinions and data may empower an individual when the information they are exposed to reflects an understandable, manageable, and meaningful reality, and in accordance with Antonovsky's salutogenic model of health and coping.

It much be emphasized that ultra-Orthodox Jews who adhere to the spiritual leadership's policy of avoiding the Internet and only consume information from traditional sources, still enjoy significant mental resilience during a crisis. As shown in the present study, the more a person who identifies as ultra-Orthodox feels that the Haredi society is seen as a significant factor that allows them to face life challenges (Community Sense of Coherence), the better will be their level of coping with the epidemic with the help of traditional sources of information. Indeed, ultra-Orthodox society enjoys a level of mental resilience that is among the highest in the country.

The present study calls for a possible rethinking of the complex relationship between ultra-Orthodox society and the Internet. In light of the research findings, access to digital information has provided an effective tool that allowed a person to better deal with the Coronavirus crisis. If so, perhaps it is appropriate to recommend a certain flexibility in the stringent attitude of ultra-Orthodox society towards the use of digital information sources. During a crisis, at the very least, it is critical to disseminate essential, official, and up-to-date information on an ongoing situation, that will provide a more complete picture of methods dealing with the crisis, and in a way that

will not harm the feelings and values of this community. This, in a way that will reach all the members of the ultra-Orthodox community through a mixture of traditional communication publications, “Pashkevilim”, and printed leaflets alongside ultra-Orthodox websites, and WhatsApp groups.

The current study presents a new and interesting viewpoint, which has not been studied before, on the ultra-Orthodox society's coping methods with the Coronavirus epidemic, through digital versus traditional information sources. The study findings sharpen the need for making reliable and up-to-date digital information accessible to this community, especially in times of crisis, in ways that respect the culture and values of ultra-Orthodox society.

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