

## **Rural Communication in the Covid-19 Pandemic: an Empirical Analysis from Thua Thien Hue Province, Central Vietnam**

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*The world has witnessed the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic. Mainstream and social media are playing an important role in Covid-19 pandemic prevention. This research explores awareness, communication channels and effectiveness of communication in the Covid-19 pandemic in rural areas of Thua Thien Hue province, Central Vietnam. Primary information was collected from 181 respondents, who are farmers, non-farmers and students. Secondary information was collected from reports and statistical data. Television, word of mouth and local loudspeakers are the main channels of mainstream media while social media mentions the role of Facebook and Zalo to transfer Covid-19 pandemic information. Mainstream media is still the main channel of farmers and old people while non-farmers and young people tend to access information through social media. Communication has significantly contributed to improving awareness and action of rural people in the Covid-19 epidemic prevention.*

*Keyword: Covid-19 pandemic, communication, mainstream media, social media, Vietnam*

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## 1. Introduction

December of 2019 marked the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the SARS-CoV-2 virus is the cause of infectious disease, which has created many difficulties for the public health, research and medical communities (WHO, 2020a; Fauci, Lane, & Redfield, 2020). Since then, the world has witnessed the outbreak of the Covid-19 while the number of coronavirus cases reached about 206 million until the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021 (WHO, 2021b). Physical and economic issues have been becoming existentialism before impacting of Covid-19 pandemic. People are facing uncertainty, fear of infection, moral distress, grief and loneliness (Peteeet, 2020).

The emergence of new cases of Covid-19 is uncertain where and when (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). Covid-19 pandemic has become a live issue worldwide. Without fundamental therapeutic interventions, containing virus spread and increasing supportive care are two main solutions. Of which, social distancing and lockdown have applied (Yuki, Fujiogi, & Koutsogiannaki, 2020). Therefore, the demand for constant surveillance, prompt diagnosis and robust research on Covid-19 has to concentrate implementation, as well as providing effective response solutions; because the health systems can be paralysed due to the Covid-19 epidemic outbreak (Velavan & Meyer, 2020; Fauci et al., 2020).

In Vietnam, the 4<sup>th</sup> outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in April 2021 had fast spread at many areas with large scale compared to previous waves (Ministry of Health, 2021a). Together with Covid-19 disease prevention solutions, communication strategy based on mainstream and social media is playing an important role in Covid-19 pandemic prevention by focusing on sharing information and uniting people. Public health messages, morale-boosting stories and tips are quickly spread throughout a population (Sinha, Harwood, Semple, Hawcutt, Thursfield, Narayan, & Southern, 2020).

However, there is an increase in fake news and misinformation when the Covid-19 pandemic has started to spread. This can be harmful to public trust in health institutions and programmes (Diseases, 2020). The management of the Covid-19 epidemic lies in the controlling information that relates to using data from the right sources, the right way and the right time (Sinha et al., 2020). Especially in rural areas, rural people have low health knowledge awareness and weak awareness of disease prevention and control that result from a low education level, scattered living areas, limited social connection and lack of medical resources. Rather, protective materials, protective facilities, health education and medical services are not common (Yuan, Qian, Huang, Tian, Xiang, He, & Feng, 2015; Ma, Liu, Tao, Jiang, Wang, & Jiang, 2020). Meanwhile, the negative and panic mentality can be mitigated, if the public has relevant knowledge on Covid-19 pandemic, which can be achieved based on effective risk communication (Ma et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aims to explore the awareness of rural people on the Covid-19 epidemic, the communication channels employed in the Covid-19 pandemic in rural areas of Central Vietnam and their effectiveness.

## 2. Communication and Its Role during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The function and effectiveness of communication have been explored in multiple aspects, including knowledge processes, group interaction and better understanding on information content (Michailova & Sidorova, 2011; Niederdeppe, Bigman, Gonzales, & Gollust, 2013). Importantly, the role of social media lies in crisis communication strategies. It was used as a media channel to immediately provide information before reaching information from mainstream media (Hsu, Park, & Park, 2013; Cho, Jung, & Park, 2013). Undoubtedly, effective public risk communication has been proven in West Nile Virus, the SARS outbreak or avian flu. Yet effective emergency and crisis risk communication for public health needs to be improved to reach high effectiveness (Barbara & Matthew, 2005; Glik, 2007).

There are differences in the use of communication channels to receive information between countries, as well as different groups such as the general public, vulnerable populations and policymakers (Niederdeppe et al., 2013). Besides, many channels have been applied for risk communication such as media reports, warning labels, meetings or hearings (Covello, Von Winterfeldt, & Slovic, 1988). Of which, the public mainly accesses two main communication channels in preparation for crises, (i) from their government through email and toll-free information telephone lines; (ii) media channels including radio, TV, newspaper and news Websites, as well as social media (Reynolds, Galdo, Sokler, & Freimuth, 2002; Sinha et al., 2020).

Specifically, India is experiencing a high level of usage of social media platforms in the Covid-19 pandemic. The use of social media was highest during the lockdown, followed by TV news. Meanwhile, the use of newspapers, radio, and magazines tends to decline significantly (Dhanashree, Chauhan, Bhatia, Sethi, & Chauhan, 2020). Similarly in Switzerland, online searching is the dominant media source, with 92.8% users, followed by social media (75.2%). Furthermore, TV and radio are necessary sources of information about Covid-19 at 67% and 64% respectively (Liu, Shan, Delaloye, Piguet, & Glassey Balet, 2020). In Vietnam, Covid-19 information has been provided for the public in the forms of various communication products such as infographics, videos and news via such platforms as Viber, Facebook, Zalo. Vietnamese Government has determined that transparency and proactive information is a key foundation for communication (Ministry of Health, 2021b).

Undoubtedly, social media is becoming the platform of choice for public opinion, perception and attitudes towards various events or public health policies related to Covid-19 (Pérez-Escoda, Jiménez-Narros, Perlado-Lamo-de-Espinosa, & Pedrero-Esteban, 2020). Communication channels have become effective tools during the Covid-19 pandemic. Analyzing communication channels will help reveal mental health metrics. Indeed, the ease of access to health information has made the public more active in assessing health risks and managing health concerns (Tonsaker, Bartlett, & Trpkov, 2014; Roundtree, 2017).

### 3. Methodology

Quang Phu commune was selected as a case study. The commune is a typical commune in the Covid-19 epidemic prevention in the rural area of Thua Thien Hue province while there is no coronavirus case at research implementation time. Many different communication activities of the locality have significantly contributed to Covid-19 disease prevention. A survey was applied for this study. The structured questionnaire was used to collect primary information from 181 respondents, who are farmers, non-farmers and students. Respondents were identified randomly based on the residential and student list. Collected information focuses on communication channels, accessibility of people and effectiveness of communication activities. Secondary information was collected from reports and statistical data of government levels, which relate to the status of the Covid-19 epidemic at Vietnam and research site, and communication strategies.

### 4. Communication Activities in Thua Thien Hue Province

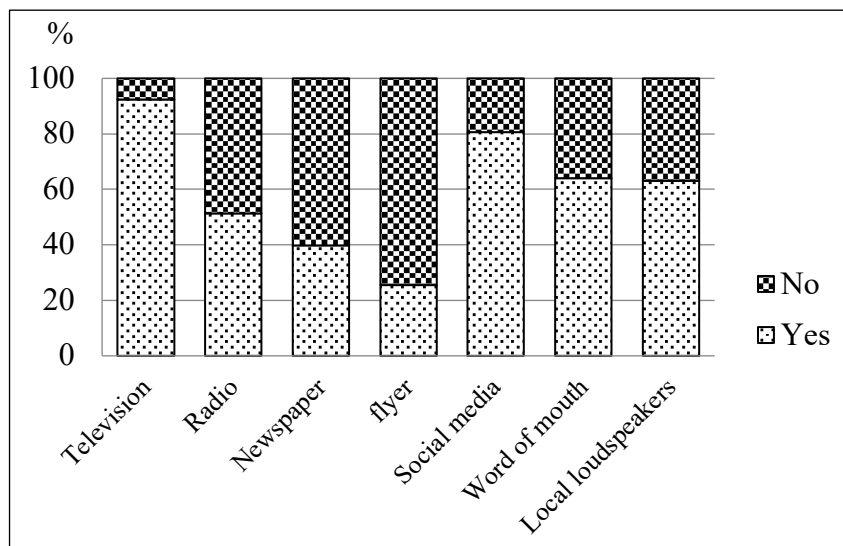
From the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic until the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 2021, Vietnam has had 302,101 coronavirus cases ranking 77 of the total 222 nations that are facing with Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 epidemic has strongly spread since the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2021 with 289,276 new cases (Ministry of Health, 2021b). Meanwhile, the outbreak of Covid-19 in Thua Thien Hue province, with 335 coronavirus cases, has only been detected from 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2021 to 17<sup>th</sup> of August 2021 (Thua Thien Hue portal, 2021).

Thua Thien Hue province is located in Central Vietnam, where it had 490.2 thousand ha of natural area and the population was 1,134 thousand people in 2020. In which, rural people and females occupied 50.4% and 50.5% respectively and the rests were the rate of urban people and males (GSO, 2022). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Provincial People Committee commands the unification in focal of communication, promoting basic information system, regularly providing news and introduction on the Covid-19 epidemic prevention. The functional units have the responsibility of preventing misinformation on the Covid-19 epidemic to ensure the information is clear, timely and accurate. District Government requires Commune Government and functional units to enhance propaganda activities. Many various activities have been conducted at locality: (i) propaganda by the mobile vehicle and local loudspeakers, (ii) setting Bluezone app, delivering face marks, spreading the message “5K” (*Khử khuẩn* – disinfection, *Khẩu Trang* – face mask, *Khoảng cách* – distance, *Không tụ tập* – do not gather, *Khai báo y tế* - health declaration).

Each commune commands reporters, communicators and grassroots medical staffs have to promote communication activities and transfer information to people. They have to monitor and update information on new coronavirus cases to immediately trace and positively give suitable solutions. Hence, rural people clearly understood the danger of SARS-CoV-2, mode of transmission and preventive solutions. Consequently, the locality has not yet had any coronavirus cases.

### 5. Effectiveness of Communication Channels at Rural Area

All respondents were aware of Covid-19 and they strongly confirm that “*coronaviruses cause respiratory tract infections that can range from mild to lethal*”. Awareness of each person tends to affect their action, and the right understanding leads to the right action. Awareness of rural people on Covid-19 epidemic is indicated in the understanding on most common symptoms of Covid-19 are fever, dry cough, and tiredness at 97.8%, 91.7% and 86.7% respectively. The high rate of rural people understanding on symptoms of Covid-19 causes by the effectiveness of communication activities at the locality. In which, mass media and propaganda activity have transferred necessary information to people and they have received information from different channels that are shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Communication channels of rural people during the Covid-19 pandemic

Information accessibility of rural people on the Covid-19 pandemic depends on seven communication channels, in which, TV (92.3%), social network (80.7%), word of mouth (64.1%) and local loudspeakers (63%) have the highest rate compared with the other channels. This result is suitable with the characteristics of rural areas as rural people often look for information from watching TV. Otherwise, community cohesion in rural area is often high, thus, rural people often share information together. Local loudspeakers are used at each village to broadcast updates on the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, social media, nowadays, is becoming increasingly popular for rural people such as Facebook, Zalo.

There is a difference between farmers and non-farmers, young people and old people in accessing the Covid-19 epidemic information. The figures below show that farmers and old people (over 60 years old) mainly access information through TV, radio and word of mouth while TV and social media are the main channels of non-farmers and young people. Thus, farmers and old people still remain traditional channels; instead, modern channels (Facebook,

Zalo) are still strange. Besides, there is not much difference between males and females in accessing information while TV, social media and word of mouth are popular channels.

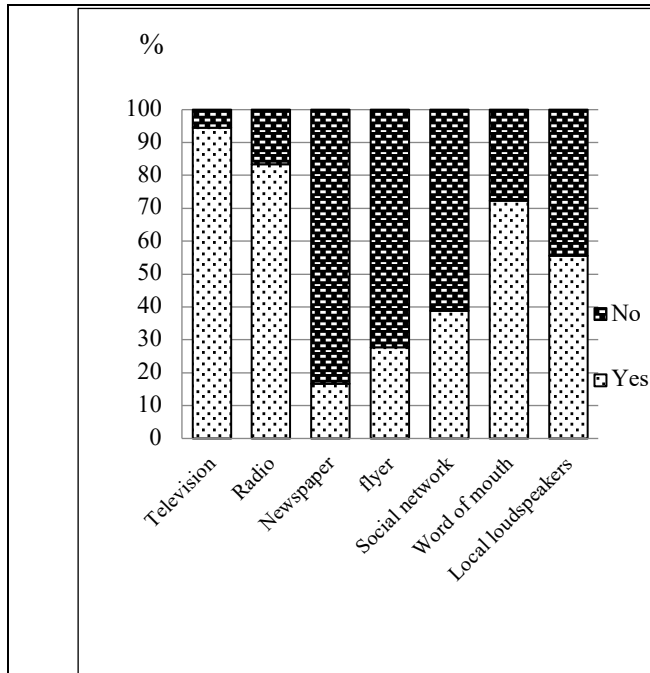


Figure 2: Farmers access information

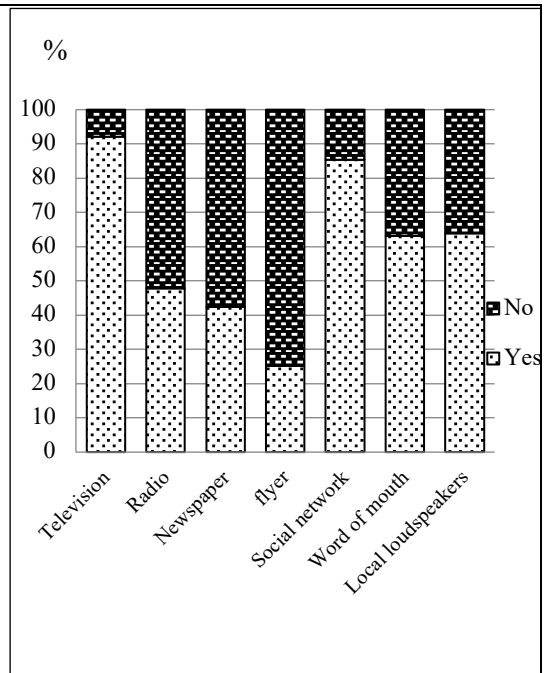


Figure 3: Non-farmers access information

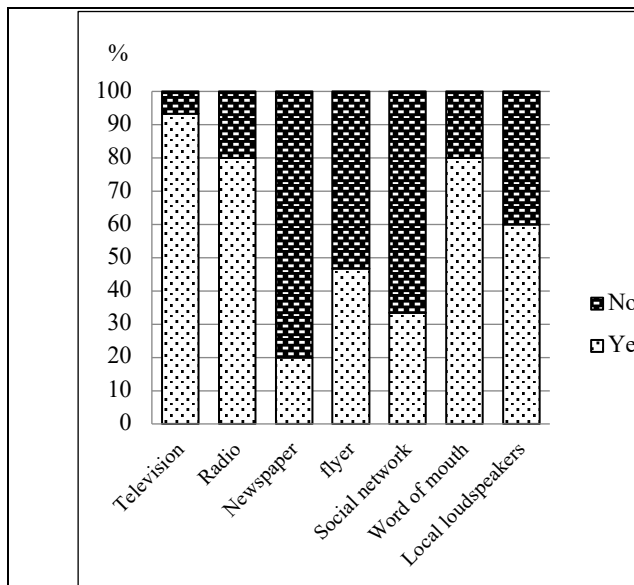


Figure 4: Old people access information

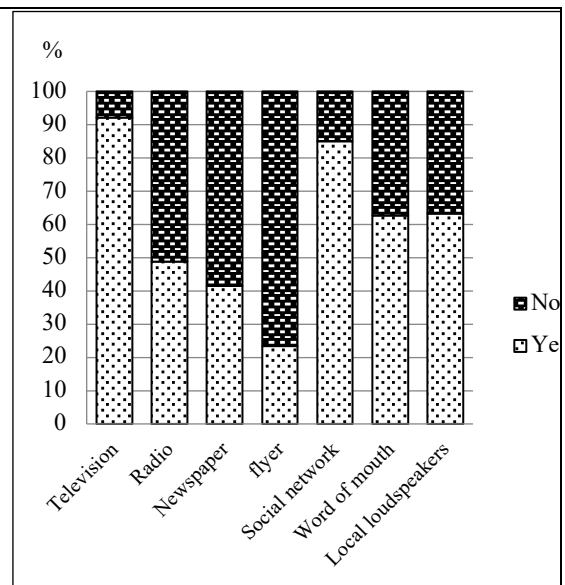
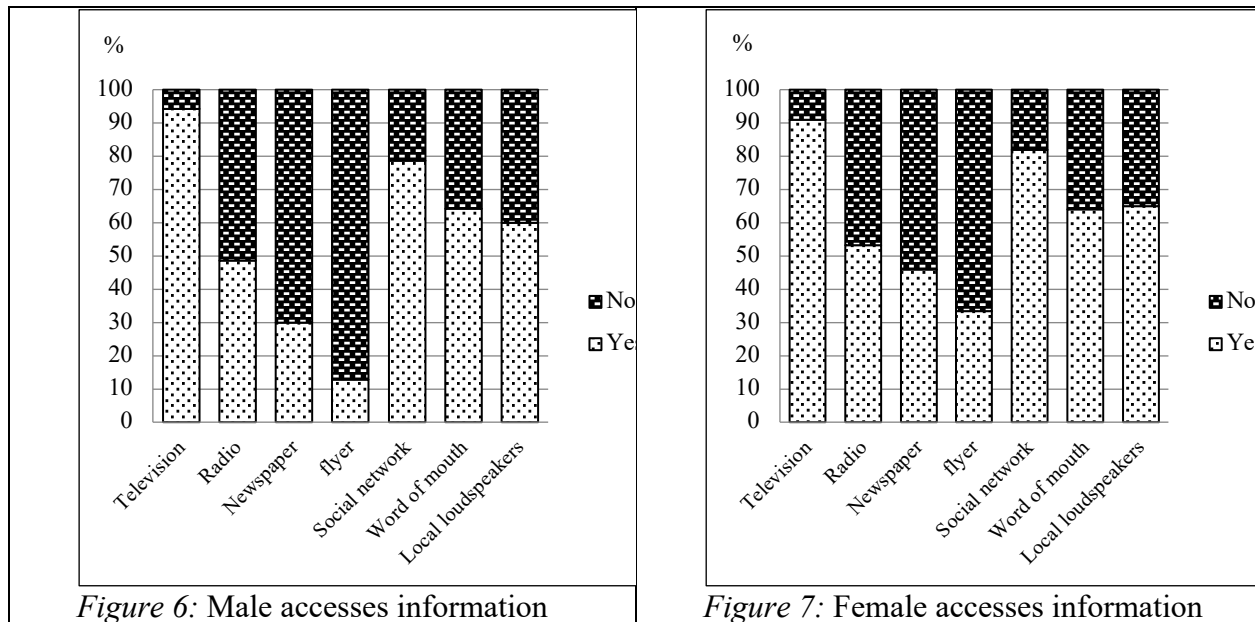


Figure 5: Young people access information



The efficiency of communication activities is also estimated by rural people through five indicators including terrible, not good, neutral, good and very good. The research illustrates that communication activities at locality have undertaken a good role when 100% rural people have positive evaluation: 24% very good, 63% good and 13% neutral. The evaluation of rural people is mainly based on criteria timely and accuracy, which support for them better understanding the Covid-19 pandemic and prevention solutions.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The role and effectiveness of communication have been proven in sharing information, improving awareness and orientating action (Cho et al., 2013; Dhanashree et al., 2020; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020). These points have become more visible in the Covid-19 pandemic when communication is considered as a solution to prevent the spread and the outbreak of the epidemic. The reason is that the success of Covid-19 epidemic prevention depends on the awareness and action of people that result from how people can access and use information. In fact, there are many different communication channels to transfer information to people that depends on the user's characteristics and communication strategies of each territory (Dhanashree et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020). The research determined that mainstream and social media have been applied in the rural areas of Thua Thien Hue province in the Covid-19 pandemic. TV, word of mouth and local loudspeakers are the main channels of mainstream media while social media strongly mentions the role of Facebook and Zalo. In which, the effectiveness of word of mouth and local loudspeakers was verified in the communication strategy of rural areas.

The impact of communication also has the difference among people groups (Niederdeppe et al., 2013). Mainstream media is still the main channel of farmers and old people while non-farmers and young people tend to access information from social media. Otherwise, males and females are quite similar in using communication channels. The selection and use of communication channels of rural people depend on timeliness and accuracy of information. Consequently, communication has proved its positive role in the Covid-19 epidemic prevention when awareness and action of rural people have changed toward public health. To enhance the effectiveness of Covid-19 pandemic prevention, the local government should apply diverse communication channels for rural people, as well as upgrade the infrastructure and information systems to guarantee timeliness and accuracy during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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