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Fear Appeal and Health Message Production in the Indonesian COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic offered valuable lessons for stakeholders responding to a globally lethal health crisis. As part of its response, the Indonesian government pursued herd immunity through a national vaccination programme, making the vaccination campaign a primary instrument of public persuasion. This study examines how persuasive health messages were designed and disseminated to secure public compliance during the 2021–2022 campaign. A qualitative descriptive case study was employed, drawing on two sources of data: thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with four members of the government public communication team, and content analysis of official posts from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology's Instagram account (@ditjenikp). Findings show that campaign messages were continuously adapted to the dynamics of the pandemic and were designed to reshape public motivation and counter misinformation. Communicators deliberately combined fear appeals with hope appeals, pairing threat-based messaging with clear, accessible solutions consistent with the Extended Parallel Process Model. The campaign's relative success rested on two factors: the delivery of well-crafted narrative messages and the cultivation of public motivation to adopt government-recommended protective behaviours. The study provides a foundation for designing adaptive, persuasive communication interventions for future public health challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19 vaccination, health communication, fear appeal, persuasive message, qualitative case study

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 disease that affected countries around the world offered valuable lessons for stakeholders responding to a globally lethal pandemic. First identified in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, the virus claimed millions of lives between 2020 and 2022, including in Indonesia. The Indonesian government responded through a series of regulatory measures, with mass vaccination positioned as the most effective strategy to reduce mortality, disease severity, and pressure on the health system.

To achieve herd immunity, the government targeted the vaccination of around 70% of the population by the end of 2021 and secured vaccine supplies through international collaboration. President Joko Widodo received the first Sinovac dose on 13 January 2021, signalling the state's commitment to the national programme. Achieving such coverage, however, depended not only on supply and logistics but also on public willingness to be vaccinated.

Public support remained ambivalent. Studies reported substantial hesitancy in Indonesia driven by religious considerations, doubts about necessity, and concerns over safety and efficacy (Arifin & Anas, 2021; Harapan et al., 2020; Sinuraya et al., 2024). Successful national vaccination therefore required not merely implementation but public compliance, that is, the affirmed willingness to be vaccinated. In communication scholarship, compliance-gaining concerns persuading audiences toward a defined behaviour within limited options and differs from persuasion in its narrower, action-oriented aim (Gass & Seiter, 2018). Persuasive vaccination messages frequently relied on fear appeals, which can raise risk perception and strengthen vaccination attitudes, especially when threat is paired with efficacy (Limbu & Huhmann, 2024; Liu et al., 2022).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The central problem of this study is how the Indonesian government designed and produced persuasive health messages that balanced fear and hope appeals to secure public compliance with vaccination amid widespread hesitancy and disinformation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study therefore asks how the government's public communication team designed and produced persuasive vaccination messages, and how fear and hope appeals were deployed across official channels to encourage public compliance.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study to examine the production and dissemination of persuasive messages during the campaign. Informants were selected

purposively based on their direct involvement in designing or coordinating government public communication throughout the 2021–2022 period. Four informants participated in in-depth interviews (Table 1). A second source of data comprised publicly available official posts from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology's Instagram account (@ditjenikp).

Data were analysed using two complementary techniques: thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to identify message strategies, and content analysis of the @ditjenikp posts to classify recurring threat and efficacy appeals. Interpretation was guided by the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM), the Persuasive Health Message framework, and the Health Belief Model. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation between the interview findings and the documented social media content.

Table 1
Profile of informants

No.	Informant	Position
1	Dilla Amran	Senior Expert Staff, Executive Office of the President
2	Basra Amru	Program Manager, Jaga Bersama
3	Natasha Sjahrir	Communication Expert, Committee for COVID-19 Handling and National Economic Recovery (KPC-PEN)
4	Niken Widiastuti	Former Secretary-General, Ministry of Communication and Informatics

Source: In-depth interviews, 21 February 2024

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basra Amru explained that the campaign was implemented in stages that tracked the evolving pandemic. The team applied the EPPM, balancing threat and efficacy, before disseminating messages across multiple channels. Dilla Amran emphasised that messages deliberately combined negative emotional appeals (fear) with positive emotional appeals (hope):

> *Kadang-kadang kita memakai pendekatan fear, semisal dengan mengatakan, nanti kalau tidak divaksin akan ada akibat tertentu. Ada juga yang memakai pendekatan hope. Nanti, kalau orang-orang tua divaksin, mereka bisa bertemu anaknya.* [At times we use a fear-based approach, for instance by saying that failure to be vaccinated will lead to certain consequences. There are also instances where we adopt a hope-based approach; for example, when elderly people are vaccinated, they can meet their children.] (Dilla, 21 February 2024)

Following the first vaccination, the public was deliberately conditioned to experience a fear of missing out (FOMO) ahead of Eid al-Fitr 2021, steering discourse toward the question of whether one had been vaccinated. Because the campaign extended over a long period, communicators worried about message fatigue and sought to renew the sense of urgency across the first dose, the second dose, and the booster:

> *Kampanye vaksinasi COVID-19 ini berlangsung lama. Jadi, tim komunikasi publik perlu memperbanyak variasi pesan ajakan vaksinasi. Diperlukan rasa fear yang baru yang lebih genuine, agar masyarakat tetap mau melanjutkan vaksinasi dosis pertama, dosis kedua, dan dosis booster.* [The COVID-19 vaccination campaign was protracted, so the public communication team needed to diversify its appeals. A renewed and more genuine sense of fear was required so that people would continue with the first dose, the second dose, and the booster.] (Basra, 21 February 2024)

Threat-based messaging was nonetheless applied cautiously to avoid panic. Natasha Sjahrir noted that the public already felt anxious, so communication emphasised urgency without amplifying fear. This caution aligns with evidence that fear appeals raise risk perception and attitudes but exert weaker, sometimes counter-productive, effects on intention when efficacy is absent (Limbu & McKinley, 2025; Witte & Allen, 2000). Consistent with EPPM (Popova, 2012), fear was therefore paired with clear, achievable solutions so that audiences pursued danger control (protective action) rather than fear control (message rejection).

Threat was also operationalised through regulation. Mandatory vaccination for users of public transport, and proof-of-vaccination requirements for air and rail travel, accelerated uptake. Niken Widiastuti described a recurring pattern of 'compliance followed by awareness': citizens initially complied to meet mobility requirements, but sustained socialisation gradually shifted motivation toward voluntary acceptance, reflected in faster uptake of the second dose.

Analysis of the official @ditjenikp account confirmed the same logic. The most frequent threat messages were evidence-based health risks. A post dated 10 September 2021 stated that 94% of COVID-19 patients who died had not been vaccinated, framing vaccination as protection against severe illness. During the Omicron wave, the account combined warning with reassurance and practical guidance ('Stay calm, get vaccinated, and wear a mask') and promoted the PeduliLindungi application. Posts also foregrounded regulatory threats affecting mobility and consistently closed with direct calls to action, such as 'Get vaccinated quickly' and travel-related vaccination requirements. The pairing of fear with social-norm and solution cues is consistent with experimental evidence that combined appeals can strengthen perceived message quality and vaccination intention

(Liu et al., 2022). Across the campaign, threat appeals were not left to instil fear alone but were converted into constructive behavioural guidance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the communication strategies used by the Indonesian government during the 2021–2022 COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Before designing campaign messages, the public communication team assessed public perceptions and familiarised health workers and officials with vaccine information, against a baseline in which only around 30% of the population initially expressed willingness to be vaccinated. Disinformation and hoaxes were a major early challenge, prompting the formation of a dedicated team to counter misinformation and to deliver accurate, repeated, evidence-based messaging.

The interview data reveal an adaptive and systematic strategy that combined fear appeals with hope appeals, scrutinising messages before dissemination and adjusting them to the dynamics of the pandemic. The content analysis of @ditjenikp confirms this pattern: threat messages emphasising mortality risk and mobility restrictions were consistently paired with hope-based framing, namely vaccines as individual protection, as a pathway to restoring socio-economic activity, and as a means to reunite with loved ones.

The Indonesian case suggests that pandemic health communication is most effective when it fosters compliance by structuring messages around risk awareness coupled with concrete, accessible solutions, consistent with the EPPM. While campaign success cannot be attributed to communication alone, the rising number of vaccinated individuals and the shift toward more positive public attitudes indicate that well-crafted, adaptive messaging contributed meaningfully. These findings offer a foundation for designing persuasive communication interventions for future public health challenges.

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