Positive Emotional Communication: A Tool for Rebuilding Public Trust in Crises

Soledad García García*[1] and Raquel Rodríguez Díaz[2]

[1,2] Department of Journalism and Corporate Communication, Rey Juan Carlos University, Camino del Molino 5, 28942 Fuenlabrada, Madrid, Spain

soledad.garciag@urjc.es

Abstract. Crises are a recurrent feature of 21st-century governance, including economic, energy, climate, health, and armed-conflict emergencies. Governments must not only make decisions under uncertainty but also lead public narratives that guide behavior and sustain confidence. This study examines emotional communication during the COVID-19 pandemic by analyzing the unmediated communication of the Government of Spain between 11 March and 27 December 2020. A quantitative content analysis was applied to 12,281 tweets from seven official accounts, with a custom GPT used as an auxiliary coder during the coding process. The results show sustained audience interest in official content and higher engagement with positively framed emotional messages, both in passive interaction (likes) and active interaction (retweets). However, inconsistent coordination across accounts, changing spokesperson roles, and declining production of crisis-specific content weakened narrative coherence. Because engagement is not a direct measure of trust, the findings identify communicative conditions that may support trust rather than demonstrating changes in trust itself.

Keywords: emotional communication, crisis communication, public trust, social media, Twitter, COVID-19.

1 Communication as an Essential Tool in Crisis Management

During a crisis, competent authorities must reduce risk by helping communities make informed decisions. To do so, sources of information need to remain accessible and reliable under uncertainty [1, 2, 3]. Crisis communication theories further frame discourse as a strategic tool. Image Repair Theory (IRT) emphasizes response strategies intended to protect or restore reputation [4], whereas Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) recommends combining instructing information with adjusting or bolstering messages when crisis responsibility and risk are salient [5]. This need is especially important when several spokespersons and channels must maintain a coherent message [6, p. 148]. Slovic [7] shows that risk perception combines emotional and cognitive processes, while prolonged exposure to unchanging information can generate fatigue and reduce involvement. The rally-round-the-flag effect is more likely to endure

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when leaders are perceived as both effective and emotionally close [8, 9]. During a public health emergency such as COVID-19, messages that appeal to shared values and emotions may facilitate voluntary compliance when communicated through an empathetic and emotionally competent style [10].

1.1 Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 emergency generated a substantial body of research. Studies in China examined social media images during a local outbreak and found that political and emotional visual content complemented institutional communication [11], while an analysis of the Chinese government's Sina Weibo accounts showed an effort to present official action positively in the online public sphere [12]. In Italy, research on the Ministry of Health's Facebook account identified its importance, but also its limitations, in countering the infodemic and false information [13]. Other studies described insufficient integration of social media into institutional communication and inefficient message management that fostered public distrust [14, 15, 16]. Leadership studies highlighted Jacinda Ardern's clear and empathetic live communication in New Zealand [17] and Giuseppe Conte's use of emotional capital, empathy, and expertise in Italy [18]. By contrast, analyses of the United States documented the politicization of the pandemic response, the delegitimization of science, and the circulation of misinformation in presidential discourse [19, 20, 21].

1.2 Social Media as a Tool for Government Communication

During the COVID-19 crisis, social media became a crucial, low-cost channel for generating, disseminating, and consuming information intended to foster citizen compliance [22, 23, 24]. Political leaders therefore adapted their communication strategies to social platforms [25], particularly Twitter, which became an important instrument of institutional communication [26]. The use of Twitter by leaders of United Nations member states expanded during the pandemic and was associated with audience growth [27, 28, 29]. At the same time, social media amplified outrage and misinformation, making transparency, honesty, empathy, and accurate information essential to sustaining credibility [30]. The Government of Spain used Twitter as a nodal platform from which content could be distributed to other channels. Such a central-node structure can improve narrative coherence and message control within a hybrid communication ecosystem [31, 32].

2 Research Design

This study examines how emotional communication was used to support public confidence and compliance during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its objectives are: (1) to identify the channels and official digital spokespersons used by the Spanish Government; (2) to examine the presence or absence of emotional and motivational messages; and (3) to measure audience interaction with this content. The hypothesis

proposes that the Government's online communication made insufficient strategic use of motivational and emotional content capable of encouraging engagement and supporting trust.

A quantitative content analysis was applied to tweets published by seven official accounts: @desdelamoncloa, @sanchezcastejon, @sanidadgob, @Defensagob, @interiorgob, @mitmagob, and @SaludPublicaEs. The study covers 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic, through 27 December 2020, when vaccination began in Spain. The period was divided into four phases: F1, crisis (11 March-20 May); F2, post-crisis (21 May-31 August); F3, reactivation (1 September-19 November); and F4, resolution (20 November-27 December), following crisis communication literature [33, 34, 35, 36, 37].

The complete corpus contained 12,281 tweets. Table 1 reports the distribution of all tweets by account and phase. A subset of 8,221 tweets identified as COVID-19-related was used for the phase-specific activity and content analysis reported in Table 2. A 25% pretest of this subset was used to refine the coding protocol. Human coders performed the analysis with a custom GPT as an auxiliary coder. The emotional/motivational variable (K) captured messages appealing to basic emotions (fear, sadness, joy, and gratitude) or social emotions (guilt, pride, shame, empathy, responsibility, and unity). Five subthemes were identified: K1, fear/alert; K2, unity/responsibility; K3, trust/credibility; K4, gratitude/hope; and K5, condolences.

Table 1. Official Spokespersons and Number of Tweets by Study Phase

Digital spokesperson	Ownership	F1	F2	F3	F4	Total
@desdelamoncloa	Government of Spain	1,117	1,202	938	410	3,667
@sanchezcastejon	President of the Government	199	284	271	119	873
@sanidadgob	Ministry of Health	725	767	556	253	2,301
@Defensagob	Ministry of Defense	234	261	255	125	875
@interiorgob	Ministry of the Interior	203	260	243	112	818
@mitmagob	Ministry of Transport	500	495	556	234	1,785
@SaludPublicaEs	Government of Spain	637	672	447	206	1,962
Total		**3,615**	**3,941**	**3,266**	**1,459**	**12,281**

3 Results

The activity rate of COVID-19-related tweets declined across the four study phases. Table 2 reports the number of days, tweets, tweets per day, and percentage change for the 8,221-tweet COVID-19 subset. These totals differ from Table 1 because Table 1 includes the complete corpus, whereas Table 2 includes only tweets coded as COVID-19-related.

Table 2. Activity Rate of COVID-19-Related Tweets by Study Phase

Phase	Period	Days	COVID-19 tweets	Tweets/day	Change (%)
F1	11 Mar-20 May 2020	71	3,398	47.86	-

Phase	Period	Days	COVID-19 tweets	Tweets/day	Change (%)
F2	21 May-31 Aug 2020	103	2,498	24.25	-49.3
F3	1 Sep-19 Nov 2020	80	1,617	20.21	-16.7
F4	20 Nov-27 Dec 2020	38	708	18.63	-7.8
Total		**292**	**8,221**		

F1 was characterized by communicative hyperabundance under an alarm-consensus and fear-unity logic. In F2, COVID-19-related activity fell by 49.3%, and the accounts of the Ministries of Defense, the Interior, and Transport ceased to play a central role in crisis communication, while the Ministry of Health gained prominence. In F3, epidemiological reactivation was not matched by a communicative rebound: campaigns were reused with limited innovation and incomplete coordination. F4 consolidated the decline in activity and narrative coherence. Positive emotional frames such as unity, trust, and gratitude nevertheless retained engagement capacity, although they were not institutionalized as a consistent strategy.

Table 3. Informative and Pedagogical Content by Spokesperson and Phase

Spokesperson	F1 I/P (%)	F2 I/P (%)	F3 I/P (%)	F4 I/P (%)
@desdelamoncloa	74.4 / 25.6	78.3 / 21.7	73.8 / 26.2	75.9 / 24.1
@sanchezcastejon	34.7 / 65.3	41.3 / 58.7	35.4 / 64.6	35.4 / 64.6
@sanidadgob	46.8 / 53.2	59.4 / 40.6	65.7 / 34.3	60.4 / 39.6
@Defensagob	37.4 / 62.6	-	78.7 / 21.3	-
@interiorgob	63.0 / 37.0	-	-	-
@mitmagob	69.2 / 30.8	-	-	-
@SaludPublicaEs	55.4 / 44.6	26.9 / 73.1	67.1 / 32.9	40.2 / 59.8

Note. I = informative; P = pedagogical; - = no data reported.

The Spanish case shows a partial distribution of narrative functions across accounts. F1 displayed the greatest coordination, F2 strengthened the informational role of the main accounts, and F4 moved toward a more balanced exit narrative. @sanchezcastejon and @SaludPublicaEs used frames of calm and collective responsibility that oriented communication toward empathy. The presidential accounts acted as the principal institutional spokespersons: @desdelamoncloa focused on measures and used a predominantly neutral institutional tone, whereas @sanchezcastejon combined policy communication with messages of unity, responsibility, and gratitude. The health accounts @sanidadgob and @SaludPublicaEs disseminated recommendations and epidemiological data, often using fear and alert frames to encourage compliance. Gratitude and condolences also produced high interaction, particularly in content from @interiorgob.

Audience engagement with emotional and motivational topics during F1 is summarized in Figure 1. The figure compares average likes and retweets by emotional theme and plots the number of tweets to provide context for the interaction averages.

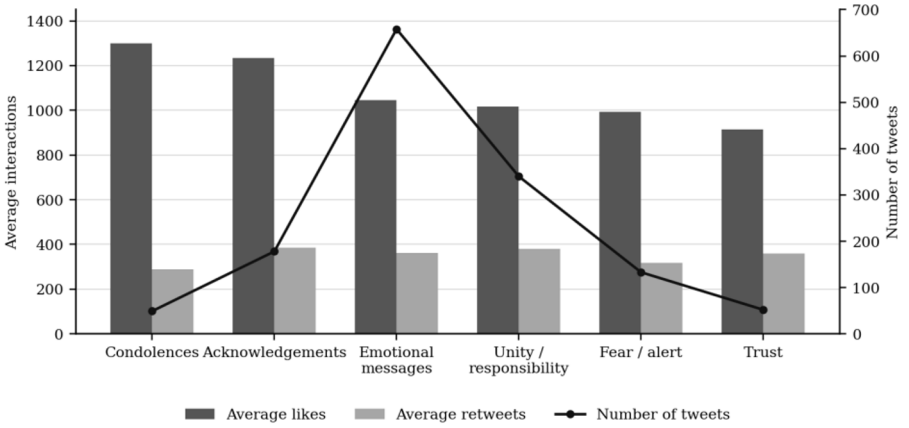


Fig. 1. Average Likes, Retweets, and Number of Tweets for Emotional/Motivational Topics in F1 (11 March-20 May 2020).

During F1, emotional/motivational tweets averaged 1,046.32 likes and 362.67 retweets. Condolences (1,300.63 likes; 288.92 retweets) and acknowledgements (1,232.99 likes; 384.28 retweets) received high average interaction despite their lower number of publications. In F2, the same pattern was observed: condolences (1,119.1 likes; 340.2 retweets) and acknowledgements (1,115.0 likes; 288.3 retweets) continued to attract high interaction, whereas fear/alert content (174.8 likes; 108.8 retweets) performed comparatively less strongly. In F3, trust (2,011.4 likes; 530.9 retweets) and unity/responsibility (679.5 likes; 218.3 retweets) again outperformed fear/alert content (250.3 likes; 168.4 retweets). In F4, trust (1,321.0 likes; 227.6 retweets) and acknowledgements (1,017.5 likes; 227.2 retweets) remained the themes with the highest interaction, while fear/alert content (60.2 likes; 37.5 retweets) received relatively low interaction despite its frequency. This pattern may be consistent with information fatigue.

Logistic regression results reinforced the association between emotional themes and interaction in likes and retweets ($p < 0.001$). In F2, emotional messages were positively associated with the outcome ($B = 2.062$; $Exp(B) = 7.864$), whereas health recommendations ($B = -2.887$; $Exp(B) = 0.056$) and information on measures ($B = -1.224$; $Exp(B) = 0.294$) were negatively associated. Interpreted as an odds ratio, $Exp(B) = 7.864$ indicates approximately 7.86 times higher odds of the modeled interaction outcome for emotional messages, not a multiplication of probability itself.

4 Conclusions and Discussion

The Spanish Government's online communication during COVID-19 did not display a coherent strategic distribution across accounts; instead, it combined several discursive styles with limited coordination, declining production of crisis-specific content, and changes in spokesperson roles. Audience growth and interaction demonstrate sustained demand for official information but do not, by themselves, establish changes in public

trust. The results therefore support conclusions about engagement and narrative coherence rather than direct claims about trust restoration.

Positive emotional and motivational messages achieved the strongest engagement, particularly those based on trust, unity, gratitude, and condolences. Such messages can position listeners and connect with them beyond the presentation of data [38]. Nevertheless, their use was sporadic rather than part of an integrated strategy. The account @sanchezcastejon was the only official spokesperson to increase motivational content consistently, in line with research showing that political leaders used empathetic and simplified messages at peaks of contagion to retain engagement [39]. The imbalance across accounts may have limited the ability of technical spokespersons such as @sanidadgob and @SaludPublicaEs to sustain interaction at decisive moments.

The study has three important limitations. First, engagement metrics are indicators of attention and diffusion, not direct measures of trust. Second, the observational content analysis cannot establish that emotional framing caused higher interaction. Third, the available description of the AI-assisted coding procedure does not specify the model version, prompt protocol, validation procedure, or an intercoder-reliability coefficient. Future reporting should document these elements to improve reproducibility. Within these limits, the findings indicate a robust association between positive emotional framing and engagement and underscore the importance of coordinated, empathetic, and methodologically transparent crisis communication.

AI use statement. A custom GPT was used as an auxiliary coder during the content-analysis process.

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