

Building False Trust During COVID-19: How Health Information is Circulating Differently in the South

During COVID-19, African Americans in the United States have seen hospitalization rates 3x higher than the national average (Kulke, 2020; Burton, 2020; Soucheray, 2020). Furthermore, African American communities tend to rely heavily on social media sites such as Twitter for health information, (Brown, 2019) carrying this trend into the COVID-19 pandemic. While Twitter has potential to reach diverse audiences through its state and health organizations, it also has potential to spread misinformation regarding important health matters (Hope, 2020; Kouzy et al., 2020; Walwema, 2020). For example, Twitter contains “personalized ecosystems” that African American communities have created to circulate information of personal relevance about COVID-19. Although helpful in theory, they often lack higher organizational resources.

This study examines how strategies for spreading health information differ between Twitter accounts of African American organizations and state health organizations located in the south. We conduct three 5-8 person African American male focus groups and a data analysis on over 4,626 Tweets from select Twitter accounts to analyze how they are building trust and engagement about preventative health behaviors during COVID-19. Two rounds of preliminary coding have already shown that public health organizations do not fully understand the needs of minorities, while minority organizations find it hard to continually provide content. This study makes a unique contribution to the topic of social media in health communication by focusing on an underserved demographic living in an overlooked region and the depths to which change can occur in communication to directly benefit them during a global pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, African American, state health organizations, Twitter accounts, building trust, engagement, social media, health communication