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Global sentiments towards Covid-19 shifts from fear to anger

The study, published in the journal JMIR Public Health & Surveillance, observed that tweets reflecting fear, while dominant at the start of the outbreak due to the uncertainty surrounding the Covid-19, have tapered off over the course of the pandemic.

IANS • July 17, 2020, 17:25 IST

SINGAPORE: The people's feelings towards Covid-19 around the world have shifted from fear to anger as the pandemic developed, say researchers.

The study, published in the journal JMIR Public Health & Surveillance, observed that tweets reflecting fear, while dominant at the start of the outbreak due to the uncertainty surrounding the Covid-19, have tapered off over the course of the pandemic.

The findings also revealed that xenophobia was a common theme among anger-related tweets, which progressively increased, peaking on March 12 -- a day after the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic.

The anger then evolved to reflect feelings arising from isolation and social seclusion.

Accompanying this later shift is the emergence of tweets that show joy, which the researchers say suggested a sense of pride, gratitude, hope, and happiness.

Tweets that reflected sadness doubled, although they remain proportionally lower than the other emotions.

"Worldwide, strong negative sentiments of fear were detected in the early phases of a pandemic but by early April, these emotions have gradually been replaced by anger," said study researcher May O. Lwin from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

"Our findings suggest that collective issues driven by emotions, such as shared

experiences of the distress of the Covid-19 pandemic, including large scale social isolation and the loss of human lives, are developing," Lwin added.

To identify trends in the expression of the four basic emotions -- fear, anger, sadness and joy -- and examine the narratives underlying those emotions, the research team first collected 20,325,929 tweets in English containing the keywords 'Wuhan', 'corona', 'nCov', and 'covid'.

"Although the data looks at only public tweets surrounding the four selected keywords, the results are sufficient to start a conversation about possible issues arising from the pandemic at present," said Lwin.

Upon analysing the results, the team found that xenophobia was also reflected at the start of the pandemic when the disease was predominantly contained in China and Asia, as indicated by words such as 'racist' and 'Chinese people'.

As the pandemic escalated, fears around shortages of Covid-19 diagnostic tests and medical supplies emerged, as suggested by words such as 'test shortages' and 'uncounted'.

Anger then shifted to discourses around the isolation fatigue that can occur from social seclusion, indicated by words such as "stay home" and several swear words, the study said.

But, tweets that were collected and analysed from early April to mid-June also showed that these positive sentiments exceeded fear postings on social media, the study noted.