LIVING WITH COVID-19

Virus mood swings
captured in tweets:
From fear to anger
and then joy amid
a 'glimmer of hope'
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Global sentiments on coronavirus evolved from fear to anger to joy: NTU study

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When news of Covid-19 broke at the start of the year, the world was gripped by fear.

As the virus steadily spread, anger took hold, with a significant number on social media voicing xenophobic sentiment at a time when China was the epicentre of the outbreak.

A study led by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) analysing tweets found that global sentiments surrounding Covid-19 evolved rapidly.

The work is funded by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) and the National Research Foundation Singapore.

An algorithm called CrystalFeel, developed by A*Star, was used to identify joy, sadness, fear and anger based on words or phrases.

Researchers analysed more than 20 million tweets from January to April, posted by more than seven million users from more than 170 countries.

The study, published in May, found that fear was the dominant emotion from late January to early March.

Anger started to grow and on March 12, a day after the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic, angry sentiments peaked.

Then, from late March to early April, a more joyful sentiment emerged as many countries saw national pride and community spirit, which researchers said offered a "glimmer of hope".

The lead researcher, Professor May O. Lwin, chair of the NTU Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, warned that volatile emotions like fear and anger needed to be addressed by the authorities.

"If such overbearing public emotions are not addressed through clear and decisive communication by authorities, citizen groups and social media stakeholders, there is potential for the emergence of issues such as breeding mistrust in the handling of the disease, and a belief in online falsehoods that could hinder the ongoing control of the disease."

NEXT PHASE

The study is now into its next phase, as the data is split by country to derive unique variations and trends for each nation.

Preliminary findings suggest that Singaporeans are able to see the silver lining in situations, said Prof Lwin, who revealed that a more balanced sentiment was found here, compared with strong negative sentiments in other countries, "likely due to Singapore public's trust in the authorities and the healthcare system, as well as clear government communication which help raise the population's optimism and confidence in the face of crisis".

She added that aside from government intervention, it was the community that could decide whether it wanted to come together or stay isolated and angry.

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