

Thailand's Fight Against COVID-19: A Framing Analysis of Press Releases from the Ministry of Public Health

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Abstract

During a pandemic, the organization's ability to effectively communicate with the public plays a critical role in preparing them for the health crisis. This study analyzes the digital press releases issued by Thailand's Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand to identify the dominant frames. The results from the qualitative media analysis revealed the MOPH used five dominant frames in their press releases: status update, reassurance of Thailand's capabilities, Thailand's fight against COVID-19, preventive action, and risks. As the first wave of the pandemic unfolded, the MOPH adapted their use of frames and information to align with the phase of the pandemic. The findings suggest that the MOPH used the appropriate frames during each phase to help the public fully understand and be prepared for COVID-19.

Keywords: Pandemic, Public Relations, Crisis Communication, Risk Communication, Framing, Qualitative Media Analysis, Press Releases

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic as the reported number of cases coronavirus illnesses continued to rapidly increase and spread to countries all over the world (Ducharme, 2020). Although not officially labeled as a pandemic until March 2020, COVID-19 posed as a threat to Thailand on January 13, 2020 with the first reported case when a tourist from Wuhan, China was confirmed to be infected with the novel coronavirus after reporting a fever and sore throat (“Novel Coronavirus,” 2020). Although Thailand was the first country to report an infection outside of China, the country was successful in controlling the spread of COVID-19 with less than 3,600 reported cases of infection and 59 deaths (Kendall, 2020). Thailand’s response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and ability to maintain the low spread of infection was praised by both WHO and the United Nations (“Who Praises Thailand,” 2020) and identified as a success model in responding to the pandemic along with New Zealand (“Novel Coronavirus,” 2020). Thailand’s success during the first wave has been attributed to a variety of factors, including the public’s cooperation, the country’s strong healthcare system, and the government’s immediate response to the crisis, specifically their clear and consistent messaging on how to avoid the transmission of COVID-19 (Kendall, 2020).

After reports of the first exported case of COVID-19 in Thailand, the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) in Thailand released more than 200 digital press releases, providing the public with daily updates related to the spread of COVID-19 in the country. According to Lee and Basnyat (2013), an

important way the government and health agencies can respond to the pandemic is through effective communication. The communication efforts of government and health agencies “helps direct the public to adopt appropriate actions to contain an outbreak, limit exposure, and reduce morbidity and mortality (Lee & Basnyat, 2013, p. 119). During a crisis situation, such as a pandemic, press releases are used by public relations practitioners in health agencies to reach journalists to shape how the crisis or health issue is framed in the subsequent media coverage (Avery & Kim, 2009; Park & Reber, 2010). Additionally, the examination of press releases can provide insight into how health agencies present the threat of a health crisis, prepare the public for the threat, and represent their crisis response (Avery & Kim, 2009). Avery and Kim (2009) also argues the analysis of press releases “is a necessary first step to reveal the ultimate success of public health campaigns” (p. 188). Press releases are not just solely intended for journalists but they also provide information to the general public as they are accessible through the organization’s official website (Murphree, Reber, & Blevens, 2009).

To help understand the success of Thailand’s response to the first wave of COVID-19, this study seeks to understand how Thailand’s Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) framed the COVID-19 pandemic in their digital press releases. Unlike previous studies, this research focuses only on the MOPH’s viewpoint and uses qualitative media analysis to identify the frames and themes used to depict the threat of COVID-19 in Thailand, present prevention measures, and communicate their response efforts to the public.

Framing and Public Relations

During a health crisis, such as a pandemic, the organizations' ability to effectively communicate with the public and persuade them to adopt the proposed preventive measures can make a difference between life and death (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). Organizations, such as health agencies, government officials, and the media use frames to tell their version of the story and to define which issues should be deemed as important by the public (Menashe & Siegel, 1998). Entman (1993) defines the concept of framing as "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). When a frame increases the salience of specific information, Entman (1993) suggests the information becomes "more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences" (p. 53). According to Hallahan (1999), framing involves the selection of key themes or ideas as the focus of the message and the use of narrative techniques to help support the central themes of the message. Frames can be constructed by highlighting, excluding, and emphasizing specific aspects of the story or issue (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A, 1984). Frames can emerge in a communication text, such as a news story and press release, through the "presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). According to Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano (2009), a frame in a

communication text will continuously bring up the same item or attribute through repetition of identical or similar words and symbols in a series of communications issued during a specific period of time. (Hallahan (1999) argued that framing is important for the construction of reality as it affects the perspective in which people view the world.

Framing has commonly been used to examine how journalists "identify and classify information and, in turn, package information in an efficient way to relay such information to their audiences" (Kott & Limaye, 2016, p. 43). Journalists can influence the audience's interpretation and opinion of an event or issue through the selection and organization of the frames used to construct the story (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Hallahan, 1999). Although, much of the research involving framing focuses on the media and journalists, framing also plays an important role in public relations (Hallahan, 1999). According to Zoch and Molleda (2006), "public relations practitioners who act as sources, whether or not they are public information officers or policy actors, also contribute to the framing of a story presented to the media" (p. 283). Similar to journalists, public relations practitioners construct frames by highlighting or omitting specific information related to the issue or event (Zoch & Molleda, 2006).

Acknowledging how framing is an essential tool for public relations practitioners, Hallahan (1999, p. 210-228) identified seven types of framing that are applicable for public relations: situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. When framing situations, public relations practitioners identify the most appropriate structure for organizations to communicate with the public.

The framing of attributes involves practitioners emphasizing specific aspects of the object, event, or person to gain favorable impressions. For framing of choices, practitioners present options in terms of gain or loss in an effort to have the public decide to take risks in an uncertain situation. Framing of actions involves practitioners presenting the proposed actions in a favorable manner to increase the probability of adoption. When it comes to framing of issues, practitioners will portray the issue as being either significant or insignificant, consequently influencing how the public should perceive the issue. Practitioners can also assign the level of responsibility through acceptance or denial for an event through framing of responsibility. Lastly, for framing of news, practitioners engage in shaping the news content by promoting specific frames through the usage of themes and framing devices.

Public Relations, Framing, and Health Crises

As stated by Lee and Basnyat (2013), effective communication is an important aspect of pandemic responses for government and health agencies. According to Fung and Cairncross (2006), communication that encourages the public to adopt specific health behaviors during an infectious disease outbreak can help contain the spread of the disease. Although the mass media are recognized as being the primary channel of information for audiences during a health crisis, numerous studies have also focused their attention on examining the public relations efforts of government and health agencies (Avery & Kim; 2009; Liu & Kim, 2011; Kott & Limaye, 2016; Lee and Basnyat; 2013; Mebane, Temin, & Parvanta, 2003). Lee and Basnyat (2013)

examined the construction of frames in press releases issued by the Singapore public health agency during the 2009 H1N1 A influenza pandemic. Their analysis of the press releases revealed the dominant frames consisted of information updates along with preventive information, such as avoiding crowds and ways to maintain personal hygiene. In Liu's and Kim's (2011) study of how government organizations, such as WHO and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), used frames in their traditional and social media responses to the 2009 pandemic flu crisis, the researchers found that the government organizations frequently used disaster, health crisis, and general health issues frames in their traditional media compared with social media. As suggested by Lui and Kim (2011), by evaluating how organizations frame a pandemic, can help indicate how the government agencies want the public to understand the health crisis.

Due to the uncertain nature of pandemics, specifically how the health crisis unfolds over a long period of time and in multiple waves, Reynolds and Quinn (2008) emphasized that information needs and communication strategies will change based on the phase of the pandemic, which includes precrisis, initial, maintenance, resolution, and evaluation. During each phase, the media and the general public will require a specific set of information to assist them to make the correct decisions to protect themselves during the pandemic. Lee and Basnyat (2013) suggested that during a pandemic, communications from public health agencies will focus on providing situation updates and preventive actions while focusing less attention on treatment due to uncertainties related to producing vaccines. Therefore, in addition to examining how public

health agencies frame a pandemic, it is also important to examine how the frames change as the pandemic unfolds.

Based on the literature regarding framing, public relations, and health crises, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: How did the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) in Thailand frame the first wave of COVID-19 in their press releases?

RQ2: Did the Ministry of Public Health's (MOPH) frames change as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded?

Method

This study used a qualitative media analysis to identify the frames in the press releases issued by Thailand's Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The MOPH was selected as the focus of this study because this agency was the primary organization leading the efforts to battle the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand. The sample for this study included all press releases available on the agency's official website between January 13, 2020 to August 23, 2020. On January 13, 2020, the MOPH issued its first press release after confirming the first case of COVID-19 in Thailand. On August 23, 2020, the MOPH stopped issuing press releases after the country reported zero local transmissions for several weeks. The agency created a page on their official website dedicated to COVID-19, providing recommendations, knowledge, situation updates, and press releases to the public. However, for the purpose of this study, the sample only included the press releases issued by the MOPH. A total of 209

press releases were retrieved from the agency's official website for analysis.

To help understand how the MOPH is constructing the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and framing their responses to the health crisis through their press releases, a qualitative media analysis was conducted to identify the frames and themes. According to Altheide (2000), the primary focus of this type of methodology is "on discovery and description, including search for underlying meanings, patterns, and processes, rather than mere quantity or numerical relationships between two or more variables (p. 290). At the beginning of the process, the researcher would need to review a selected sample of the documents to identify themes, frames and patterns that would be used to develop a protocol. Upon completing the protocol, the researcher would then conduct a systematic analysis which involves "constant comparisons to clarify themes, frames, and discourse" (Altheide, 2000, p. 291).

Findings

RQ1: How did the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) in Thailand frame the first wave of COVID-19 in their press releases?

The findings from the qualitative media analysis revealed the MOPH used five dominant frames in their press releases issued during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic: status update, reassurance of Thailand's capabilities, Thailand's fight against COVID-19, preventive action, and risks.

Status update. One of the most common frames that emerged in the press releases issued by the MOPH was the status update, which included the number of confirmed cases, recovered patients,

fatality cases, people in quarantine, along with the number of patients under investigation (PUI). The press releases not only focused on providing status updates domestically but also provided the number of confirmed cases internationally, focusing on countries with high numbers of infections, such as China and the United States. The most common terms and phrases used in this frame were: “confirmed cases,” “treated in hospitals,” “patients under investigation,” “cases recovered,” and “detected.” In addition, the press releases also informed the readers of any relevant announcements from WHO, including travel restrictions and how the organization is responding to the pandemic. Almost all press releases began with a status update and the current situation in the country:

There are currently 18 confirmed cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) being treated in hospitals, 31 cases who returned to their homes and 1 death, which brings the total number of coronavirus infection cases detected in Thailand to 50 (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Reassurance of Thailand’s capabilities.
The reassurance of Thailand’s capabilities frame focused on reassuring the public that Thailand has the medical capability to handle the pandemic. This frame addressed the concerns and fears of the public by detailing the various reasons why the public should trust and have faith in the government’s ability to protect the public during these uncertain times. The frame emerged through the repetition of phrases such as “assured all Thai people,” “public can be confident “strong surveillance system,” and “effective measures.” Typically, many of MOPH’s press releases requested

for the public’s confidence and cooperation with the government’s response to the health crisis:

Most importantly, to confront the current situation, Thailand has high capacities among medical personnel and volunteers who are able to dedicate and sacrifice for the health of the population. Please be confident, give them encouragement and be willing to cooperate with Thailand as well (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

To help increase the public’s confidence in the government and reduce their fear of the pandemic, the press releases highlighted the highly experienced medical professionals, the well-equipped hospitals with enough ventilators and ICU beds, and the infection prevention measures that aligned with international standards set by WHO. As the country began to see a decrease in the number of infected patients in May, many press releases attributed the success to the decisions of the MOPH and the government:

The current COVID-19 situation is getting better as shown from the incident case reports. Today, Thailand has the 68th most cumulative cases in the world. This is due to the government and the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) releasing measures to prevent the spread of the disease, such as the establishment of state quarantine to observe people who returned from abroad and implementing active case finding in risk communities (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

A common theme that appeared within the reassurance of Thailand’s capabilities frame was do

not panic. Many press releases addressed key events that were of high concern for the public regarding the potential spread of COVID-19, such as the decision to allow the cruise ship to dock in Thailand, allowing Thais to return from Wuhan, China, and Thai workers returning from Korea. In the press releases, the health agency continuously reassured the public and called for people to remain confident the spread of the COVID-19 would be contained. The health agency also urged the public to not panic about these events:

The public should not panic because this group of passengers are not patients. This ship embarks as part of the usual shipping route and the ship has notified the point of entry correctly following the protocol (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

The second common theme that appeared within the reassurance of Thailand's capabilities frame was upholding Thailand as a role model. To offer more reasons for the public to trust in the government, numerous press releases praised Thailand for its efforts in its management of COVID-19, specifically emphasizing the acclaims from WHO and the global community along with the international rankings for recovery. For example, on February 5, 2020, the press release discussed the effectiveness of the country's health system:

Thailand has been widely praised by the WHO and many countries regarding the strong and effective public health system which helps elevate the quality of disease prevention and control above the normal standard (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Numerous press releases also emphasized how Thailand was the first country to detect the first confirmed case outside of China because "*Thailand is the first country to start screening at the airport for direct flights from transmission areas*" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Thailand's fight against COVID-19. Majority of the press releases issued by the MOPH used the Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame to provide details to the public about the responses and actions being taken to stop the spread of the virus in the country. This frame outlined the disease prevention measures, such as surveillance measures, screening of tourists at airports, implementation of the Communicable Disease Act, distribution of surgical masks to the public, and actively finding patients in high risk areas. Press releases that incorporated this frame commonly used phrases and keywords such as "implementing," "arranged," "distributed," "will focus" and "will/has prepared." The purpose of this frame was to inform and continuously update the public regarding the government's actions during the pandemic. For example, in the press release issued on April 23, 2020, the health agency explained their next steps for controlling the spread of COVID-19:

The Ministry of Public Health will focus on active findings for patients within targeted groups including people in crowded communities and risky areas to forecast information and will prepare a prevention plan which will be more targeted than widespread screening (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

The Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame also contained explanations of the different phases of the lockdown, providing audiences with an understanding of what businesses would be opened or closed along with what type of activities are restricted. Another key aspect of this frame was providing details into the implementation and procedure of state quarantine. Similar to the reassurance frame, many press releases discussing the health agencies actions were in response to issues of concern for the public, such as the cross-border travel of Chinese citizens in the Tak province (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). Many of the press releases when discussing the responses and measures used against COVID-19, were supported with the benefits of these actions, frequently emphasizing how the country "has strict surveillance to slow down the country from entering a widespread epidemic" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Preventive Action. The preventive action frame was an instructional frame that focused on giving the public medical recommendations and precautionary measures to help reduce the possibility of infection, such as wearing a mask in public, washing hands, social distancing, self-quarantining at home, and checking in through the Thai Cha Na, an application created to help monitor the public's movement. This frame emerged in the press releases through phrases such as "recommendation for preventing COVID-19," "general public should comply with," "to protect themselves from the disease" and "needs the cooperation from the public." A majority of the press releases issued by the MOPH using this frame was dedicated to informing and educating the

public on how to protect themselves from COVID 19:

For the general public, it is recommended to protect themselves from the disease by frequently washing hands with soap or alcohol gel, and wearing a mask when visiting crowded places (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

The preventive action frame directly addresses the general public and provided specific information to increase the public's ability to perform personal protective health behaviors to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

In an effort to promote the adoption of precautionary measures, the MOPH also launched numerous slogans, such as "eating cooked food, using serving spoons and washing hands" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). This slogan was continuously emphasized in the press releases as a daily reminder for the public, urging the public to make this a normal practice in their lifestyle. When there was a decrease in the number of reported infections, the MOPH emphasized in the press releases the need to "don't let your guard down":

Measures that are currently being implemented are just slowing the increase in the number of new cases of COVID-19. To decrease the cases as much as possible, we all must never let our guard down, so we are requesting all of you to only leave your residence when necessary and avoid social gatherings (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Two common themes that emerged when using the preventive action frame was the call for public's cooperation and fighting COVID-19 together. In addition to providing the medical

recommendations to the public, the MOPH continuously called for the cooperation of the public to follow the preventive measures to decrease the spread of the disease: "The Ministry of Public Health needs the cooperation from the public to follow its recommendations. With the public's cooperation, the situation will improve" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). The press releases emphasized that the severity of the outbreak depends on the public's willingness to cooperate with the government.

In addition to requesting for cooperation from the public, the press releases also emphasized the need to work together as a country to fight the spread of COVID-19 along with importance of social responsibility. Many press releases associated the adoption of preventive measures, such as self-monitoring after travelling and wearing masks, with "social responsibility." (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). The press releases commonly used "we" and "the nation" to highlight everyone's responsibility to protecting the country against COVID-19. For example, on March 28, 2020, the MOPH issued a press release calling for the public to practice social distancing: "The MOPH strongly requested at-risk people to implement social-distancing "Stay home- Stop spreading- For the nation" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). In addition to stressing the need to fulfill one's social responsibility, the MOPH also noted the importance of "working together" to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in the country. On March 12, 2020, the MOPH stated in their press release: "Everyone needs to work together; this is a disease that involves all of us; safety and health of the public is our top priority" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Risks. The final frame that emerged in the press releases issued by the MOPH was the risk frame, which focused on explaining to the public the risks associated with COVID-19, such as "complications from pneumonia progressing to severe or fatal outcomes" and the "consequences of transmitting the infection to family members, close contacts, and their colleagues (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). Press releases using the risks frame frequently repeated phrases such as "risk of spreading the virus," "negative consequences," "virus widely spreading," and "cannot be controlled."

To communicate the risks of COVID-19, numerous press releases stressed the "danger" of continuing certain behaviors, such as not practicing social distancing and vising crowded places:

These kind of actions can bring the virus to close contacts, including family members and close friends. Above all, COVID-19 can be dangerous, especially for the elderly, infants, and people with underlying diseases. If the situation still goes on like this in the future, there might be local transmission so widespread within the country, that it cannot be controlled (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

When using the risk frame, press releases often framed the risk in terms of either gain appeal or loss appeal for the public. Press releases that highlighted the risks in terms of gain appeal, highlighted the benefits of adopting actions, such as not withholding information from the doctor:

It is important to have public cooperation and to provide true and complete information so that the doctor

can give an accurate and timely diagnosis. It can reduce your risk of developing severe pneumonia; reduce the spread of infection to your family members and also protects medical personnel while providing care to other people as well (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Whereas press releases that adopted the loss appeal discussed the cost and negative consequences of not practicing the proposed health behavior. For example, the press release issued on March 30, 2020, used loss appeal in response to the cluster of infections from the boxing stadium and religious gatherings in Malaysia:

Above all, if this group of close contacts fails to properly implement their self-quarantine, the virus will be transmitted to many other people and it will increase the number of people in the subsequent generations of close contacts that need to be monitored and under

surveillance for 14 days. The actions of people not complying with the MOPH recommendations will lead to the virus widely spreading to further generations (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

RQ2: Did the Ministry of Public Health's (MOPH) frames change as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded?

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in Thailand, the findings revealed the MOPH continuously used all five frames to help construct the public's understanding of the pandemic and the health agencies' response (refer to Table 1). However, although the press releases used the five dominant frames, it appeared the MOPH provided different information and emphasized different aspects of the dominant frames depending on the phase of the pandemic.

Table 1. Frames used during each phase of the COVID-19 pandemic

Month	Phase of the Pandemic	Key Events	Frames used in Press Releases
January 2020	Initial Stage	Identified first case of COVID-19 in Thailand; First case outside China	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action
February 2020	Initial Stage	First case of local transmission in Thailand	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action
March 2020	Initial Stage Maintenance Stage	Rapid increase of infections linked to boxing stadiums and entertainment venues	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action
April 2020	Maintenance Stage	Thailand announces nationwide curfew and lockdown	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action Risks
May 2020	Resolution Stage	Locally transmitted infection numbers decrease	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action Risks
June 2020	Resolution Stage	Thailand ends nationwide curfew	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action Risks

Table 1. Frames used during each phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Continued)

July 2020	Resolution Stage	Thailand reports two new infected cases of COVID-19	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action Risks
August 2020	Resolution Stage	Thailand extends Emergency Decree	Status updates Reassurance of Thailand's capabilities Thailand's fight Against COVID-19 Preventive action Risks

During the initial stage of the pandemic, the MOPH issued its first press release in response to identifying the first case of COVID-19 in Thailand outside of Wuhan, China. The press releases issued in January used the status update frame to provide the public with a detailed description of the first COVID-19 case along with the diagnosis process. Additionally, the MOPH provided the number of passengers being screened at the various airports in Thailand along with the number of patients under investigation. As the initial stage progressed into February and March, the MOPH continued to provide status updates that also included background information on how patients were infected along with the number of patients that recovered after receiving treatment.

Analysis of the press releases revealed that the MOPH also used the reassurance of Thailand's capabilities frame during the initial stage of the pandemic. Many press releases issued during the initial stage, from January to mid-March, urged the public to be confident in the government's

management of COVID-19 because the country is equipped to handle the spread of the disease. During the initial press releases, the MOPH reassured the public that at this point there was no human transmission in Thailand. However, this changed on January 31, 2020, when the press release announced the first local transmission, after a Thai taxi driver was diagnosed with COVID-19. After reports of the first local transmission, the MOPH emphasized confidence in the screening of international passengers, the process of identifying infected patients, and the country's medical system for treatment. Press releases also urged the public to not panic.

Throughout the initial stage of the pandemic, the press releases utilized Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame, specifically emphasizing the screening procedure and surveillance at all international airports throughout the country. The press releases used terms such as "strengthening" and "scaling up" to describe their efforts dedicated to screening all passengers

entering the country. On January 22, 2020, the MOPH issued a press release announcing the “MOPH Scales up Surveillance of Novel Coronavirus 2019 during the Chinese New Year Festival” (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). During this stage of the pandemic, the MOPH also used the preventive action frame in almost every press release. The MOPH educated the public on the symptoms of COVID-19 along with recommending actions that can help reduce the transmission of the disease, such as wearing masks when going out in public. During the initial stage of the pandemic, the MOPH emphasized the importance of not believing “all of the circulating rumors from different sources” and to “check before you share” information online (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). The MOPH encouraged the public to only follow the news issued by them along with providing the various communication channels.

During the maintenance stage of the pandemic, after experiencing a dramatic increase in the number of infections and declaring a national lockdown, the MOPH continued to use the reassurance of Thailand’s capabilities frame with an emphasis on making sure the public does not panic while also remaining aware of their surroundings. Numerous press releases urged the public to be confident in the country’s ability to effectively control the spread of the pandemic and reassuring the country’s medical system can handle the incoming patients, due to sufficient number of hospital beds and ventilators. To provide additional reasons for the public to continue to be confident in the country, the press releases also utilized the frame, Thailand’s fight against COVID-19. Many press releases discussed in detail how the country was

actively finding infected cases, the implementation of the Communicable Disease Act, and the process of state quarantine.

The press releases issued during the maintenance stage, from mid-March to the end of April, frequently used the status updates. The press releases continuously updated the number of infected patients and provided details on the symptoms the patients were experiencing along with their travel history. In April, due to the rapid increase of reported infection in the country, many of the press releases only used the status update frame. As a response to the rising number of infections, the MOPH relied heavily on both the preventive action frame and risks frame. To ensure the public truly understood the dangers of the spread of COVID-19 in the country, many press releases emphasized the risks associated with not following the instructions of the government. The MOPH began to incorporate the risk frame in their press releases after the number of infections dramatically increased in March due to people not abiding by social distancing measures:

Individuals still traveled to risk areas, visited crowded places, attended social activities, did not keep distance between other people, and did not strictly implement self-quarantine while developing symptoms. These kind of actions can bring the virus to close contacts including family members and close friends. Above all, COVID-19 can be dangerous, especially for the elderly, infants and people with underlying diseases. If the situation still goes on like this in the future, there might be local

transmission so widespread within the country, that it cannot be controlled (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

The press releases focused on the loss appeal by pointing out the risky behavior of young people and the negative consequences it would bring to the vulnerable population. After explaining the risks of COVID-19, the press releases also provided the public with preventive actions, such as wearing a mask, not returning home during the Songkran holidays, and the importance of social distancing. During the maintenance period, specifically after the dramatic increase of infections, a noticeable shift in the tone of the MOPH was evident, with increasing use of the phrases “strictly follow” and “strongly request” when using the preventive action frame. Additionally, the MOPH used phrases such as “COVID-19 can be dangerous” and “false sense of security that you are free from the disease.”

Beginning in May to August, which can be considered the resolution stage of the pandemic, the MOPH continued to use all five frames. The press releases continued to provide the public with status updates, focusing on the infected cases in state quarantine while also emphasizing the fact there were no more local transmissions reported in the country. The press releases attributed Thailand’s ability to control the spread of the disease to the public’s cooperation and compliance with the measures created by the government and the MOPH. During the resolution stage, the MOPH used the reassurance of Thailand’s capabilities frame by highlighting the global recognition the country has received for its response to the pandemic: “The GCI Global Advisory has placed

Thailand as number one out of 184 countries for the country with the best recovery during the COVID-19 outbreak” (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). Although the press releases acknowledged there are no local transmissions, the MOPH used the Thailand’s fight against COVID-19 frame and detailed the government’s actions to prepare for the second wave.

In the press releases issued during the resolution stage, although there was a decrease in the number of infections, but the MOPH continuously used the preventive action frame and the risks frame. The MOPH stressed the importance of the public not to let their guard down by not wearing masks and practicing social distancing. The press releases emphasized how the public’s decision to resume normal behavior increases the risk of bringing on the second wave of the COVID-19 infections. Despite the government’s decision to relax the imposed measures, the MOPH urged the public continue to comply with the preventive behaviors to help diminish the probability of a second wave. In addition to providing preventive behaviors to the general public, the MOPH also discussed specific actions for businesses, schools, the meat industry, and even temples, can adopt to help reduce the risk. Many press releases also emphasized the importance of becoming used to “new normal behaviors”, such as continuously wearing masks in public and using the “Thai Cha Na” check-in platform when entering restaurants and malls. Lastly, when using the preventive action frame, the MOPH urged to the public to work together to help stop the spread of COVID-19: “If all sectors join together, starting with the individuals and expanding to families, communities, society, it

will keep Thailand safe, and prevent and limit the COVID-19 outbreak if Thailand has local transmission cases again" (Ministry of Public Health, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

According to Holmes (2008), a majority of the research related to infectious disease communication believes that the focus is on delivering the "facts" to the public in an effort to make sure the public does not panic and adopts the behavior advised by experts. Roche and Muskavitch (2003) stated that communications regarding infectious diseases must provide the following information to the public: "magnitude of the described threat, the symptoms of the threat, and measures that can reduce the chance of being affected by the threat" (Roche & Muskavitch, 2003, p. 355). Roche and Muskavitch (2003) argued that just providing a few sentences about these three categories would be enough to address the needs of the public for essential information. The findings from the qualitative analysis suggest the MOPH provided the audience with the necessary information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of the status update frame, risks frame, and preventive action frame. Each press release provided a daily status update on the number of infections, both domestically and sometimes internationally. The use of the status update frame allowed the public to have a better understanding of the magnitude of COVID-19 by seeing the number of people infected and deaths caused by the pandemic.

The use of risks frame and preventive action frame in the press releases suggest the MOPH also

provided the public with essential information concerning the pandemic, such as how to identify the symptoms related to COVID-19 and specific measures to reduce spread of the disease, as proposed by Roche and Muskavitch (2003). After reports of the first domestic infection in Thailand, the press releases issued by the MOPH clearly outlined the symptoms associated with COVID-19, such as a high fever, sore throat, and a cough. Additionally, the press releases repeatedly stressed the importance of seeking immediate medical attention if the public begin experiencing these symptoms:

If people should develop a fever a suspect COVID-19 disease, please seek medical attention immediately, they should not conceal or withhold any information, as it has an effect on diagnosis and treatment.

The MOPH frequently paired together the risks frame and preventive action frame in the press releases. The findings suggested the MOPH informed the public of the risks related to COVID-19, including specific behaviors such as not complying with social distancing and wearing masks. To diminish the risk of being infected by COVID-19 and promote self-efficacy, the MOPH also focused on describing ways of disease prevention in the press releases. Examples of disease prevention information included "wear a mask/cloth mask when leaving the residence" and "keep space between others." The inclusion of these self-efficacy messages along with the risk frames in the press releases help the public reduce their feeling of helplessness and panic caused by the pandemic.

Given the high level of uncertainty surrounding a pandemic and the public's increasing anxiety, Holmes (2008) acknowledged that it may not be sufficient to only provide facts or the steps to protect oneself when communicating during a pandemic. Rather communications released during a pandemic should establish a sense of trust and solidarity among the community, especially since fighting the infectious disease requires the cooperation of everyone (Holmes, 2008; Kotalik, 2005). Covello, Peters, Wojtecki and Hyde (2001) noted it is critical for the public to have trust in the health agencies and experts responding to the health crisis. The MOPH appeared to recognize the importance of building a level of trust with the public through their continuous use of the reassurance of Thailand's capabilities frame and Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame. Many of the press releases focused on reassuring and directly addressed the public in the press releases to trust the measures implemented by the government to control the spread of COVID-19. This was evident through the continuous use of statements such "please be confident in Thailand's prevention and control measures" and "the health security of Thai people is most important." To strengthen the request for the public to have confidence in the government, the MOPH used the Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame to clearly outline the government's current actions and intended future plans to keep the country safe from the pandemic.

The findings from this study not only focused on identifying the frames used by the MOPH in their press releases but it also examined the changes in the use frames as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. The findings revealed the MOPH adapted the frames

and information to align with the needs and requirements of each phase of the pandemic. As suggested by Reynolds and Quinn (2008), "it is vital to know that every emergency, disaster, or crisis evolves in the phases of precrisis, initial, maintenance, resolution and evaluation and that the communication must evolve in tandem" (p. 155). The MOPH began to issue press releases during the initial stage of the pandemic, in response to the reports of the first case of COVID-19 in Thailand. During this stage, Reynolds and Seeger (2005) stated the communication to the general public needs to reduce uncertainty brought on by the crisis, promote self-efficacy, and reassure the public. In the press releases, the MOPH appeared to reduce uncertainty related to the emergence of COVID-19 in Thailand by providing detailed status updates, including how the first reported case appeared in the country and how the patient was being treated. To promote self-efficacy, the press releases used the preventive action frame to highlight the symptoms and described how the public can protect themselves. The use of reassurance of Thailand's capabilities frame and Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame in the press releases helped build confidence in the country's response to the unfolding pandemic.

As the pandemic continues to unfold, Reynolds and Seeger (2005) described the maintenance stage as a time when the communication needs to continue to reduce uncertainty, promote self-efficacy and reassurance. The MOPH continued to use the status updates, especially when the infection rate rapidly increased, which would help to decrease the publics' uncertainty surrounding the spread of the virus. The press releases also utilized both the use of

reassurance of Thailand's capabilities frame and Thailand's fight against COVID-19 frame to maintain the public's confidence in the government. Lastly, the MOPH employed the preventive action frame and risk frame to constantly reiterate the important behaviors that individuals can adopt to help stop the spread of the disease.

The press releases issued during the resolution stage fulfilled the communication requirements as outlined by Reynolds and Seeger (2005), which includes providing updates on the resolution of the health crisis along with helping the public to understand the new risks. The MOPH addressed these communication requirements by using the frame Thailand's fight against COVID-19 to detail how the government was relaxing the lockdown measures but still maintain surveillance measures to continue to protect the country. During this stage of the health crisis, the press releases utilized the risks frame to acknowledge the new threat of a second wave and used the preventive action frame to help the public understand the actions to help avoid a second wave in the country. This analysis suggests that the MOPH used the appropriate frames during each phase in their press releases to help the public fully understand the threat of COVID-19 while also preparing the public by reiterating the preventive actions.

Limitation and Future Research

There are a few limitations to this study. First, this study only examined the press releases available on the MOPH's website dedicated to the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Thailand. However, the health agency also had other types of communication available on the website, such as situation reports and

recommendations for the general public. Future research should conduct a framing analysis of the communications available on the MOPH's website to have a better understanding of how the health agency is constructing the pandemic and preparing the public. Second, since this study is only limited to the MOPH's press releases, the qualitative media analysis does not provide insight into whether these frames were being used by journalists in subsequent news coverage of the pandemic. Therefore, future research could compare the frames being used in the press releases issued by the MOPH and the news coverage to determine how the pandemic is being framed. Lastly, the study did not evaluate the public's reception of the health agencies' communication to determine whether these frames affected audience's attitudes and behavior during COVID-19. Future studies should conduct a survey with audiences to identify the level of influence these frames have on audience's perception of risk and adoption of preventive measures.

The current findings from this study have practical and useful implications for public health agencies when dealing with future pandemics or health crisis, especially given the fact that Thailand was recognized by WHO and the United Nations in their ability to control the spread of COVID-19. During a pandemic, a time when uncertainty is at its highest, public health communicators should focus on reducing the level of uncertainty by framing the message in the appropriate way that aligns with the needs of the audience. It is vital for communicators to use frames that not only reassures the public but also promotes a strong sense of self efficacy and creates awareness of the potential risks associated with the pandemic.

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